

# MAKING CONNECTIONS

The craftsmanship of Sam Maloof lends something special to the Scott Galleries of American Art

By Joyce Lovelace

**N**ot long ago, at a reception for the Los Angeles arts community held in the home of a collector in Santa Monica, guests entering the living room were greeted with a delightful sight: Sam Maloof, the most celebrated American woodworker of our time, sitting serenely in one of his own iconic rockers, chatting and taking in the scene. It was an unforgettable image of the master and his work, in his element—which is to say, among friends.

**HE WAS THE QUINTESSENTIAL AMERICAN**

**DESIGNER-CRAFTSMAN, A CLASSIC**

**CALIFORNIA MODERNIST AND BELOVED**

**LOCAL FIGURE, ROOTED IN CENTURIES-OLD**

**TRADITIONS, YET VIBRANTLY CONTEMPORARY.**

Maloof, who died on May 21 at the age of 93, had a stature in the world of fine craft and design that is hard to overstate. During his lifetime he was feted and filmed, the subject of scholarly books and major museum retrospectives, and honored with countless awards—a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” the American Craft Council Gold Medal, and designation as a Living Treasure of California, to name just a few. Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton all have owned his chairs. Beautiful wood, graceful lines, sculptural contours, peerless craftsmanship, and perfect function are the hallmarks of his furniture. But it was his generous spirit and extraordinary capacity for friendship—connecting each piece of work to the individuals who commissioned them—that gave his work its deeper shade of soul.

A native Californian and self-taught woodworker, Maloof made custom furniture by hand for 60 years. Along the way he received countless offers to mass produce his designs, and turned down all of them. The personal relationships involved in each commission were, he always emphasized, his greatest inspiration and reward. One such example is now on view at The Huntington.

For display in the dramatically expanded and reconfigured Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art, Maloof lent





Sam Maloof remained active well past his 90th birthday. Photos (above and on previous page) by Gene Sasse from the book *Maloof Beyond 90*, copyright 2008.

his *Double Music Stand and Musician's Chair*, made of Brazilian rosewood in 1972. These handsome pieces tell the story of his deep and abiding friendship with the late Jan Hlinka, the principal violist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, who commissioned the work. The same spirit of fellowship and connection informed Maloof's own collecting. He was passionate about ceramics, glass, wood, and other art forms, interested in both the objects and their makers, many of whom he knew personally. The Huntington borrowed some of these pieces from him as well. The new installation highlights many of the relationships among works in a variety of media.

Maloof reminisced in January about Hlinka's initial visit to his studio. "One day he drove up and walked in and told me who he was. He was very outgoing. We hit it off, right off the bat." The violist wanted a stand with two racks, far enough apart to accommodate two musicians, and in the middle, a little bowl where rosin and extra strings could be kept within easy reach. Maloof had done music stands before, though never a double one. Hlinka also asked for a practice chair that would provide good back support, with plenty of legroom

and no armrests, "so that when he played he wouldn't crack his elbow," explained Maloof, who came up with a unique design based on a metal folding chair, with curved legs configured in a triangular fashion. Apart from how well it functioned, the chair was special in other ways. It was one of the first Maloof crafted entirely of wood (as opposed to their having upholstered seats), and a rare instance, for him, of a one-of-a-kind design.

"I designed that chair just for Jan," Maloof said, adding that the musician made him promise never to replicate it. "We became very, very good friends. Oh, he was just like a brother to me. We were about the same age. But he died too young, when he was only 74 years old." After Hlinka's death, his widow, recognizing the historical importance of the pieces, returned them to their maker.

Thereafter the stand and chair remained at Maloof's home and studio in Alta Loma, today a nonprofit cultural center called the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation for Arts and Crafts. A spectacular complex of unique buildings nestled in a lemon grove near the base of the San Gabriel mountains, the place is, like Maloof's work, a harmonious blend of humanity

and nature, a testament to a life filled with love, friendship, and steadfast devotion to an artistic vision. The heart of the six-acre property is the rambling, rustic, two-story redwood house he designed and built in stages starting in the 1950s, where he and Alfreda, his wife of 52 years, raised their family and lived until her death in 1998. (Miraculously, in the early '90s, the home was successfully moved from its original site a few miles away to make room for an extension of the Foothill Freeway.) Replete with his original handcrafted details and endless collections of art and craft objects, it is today listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is open to the public for tours. Adjoining it is the woodshop where, to the end, Maloof worked every day, in collaboration with a team of three assistants he affectionately called "the boys," all of whom were with him for decades. Just down the hill is the newer house he shared with his second wife, Beverly, designer of magnificent water-wise gardens that have become an added attraction of the site (even she was an old friend and customer; Maloof first made a table for her in 1957). Also new are a public space for events (such as the scholarly symposium on craft the foundation recently presented in conjunction with the Getty Research Institute) and a gallery to showcase

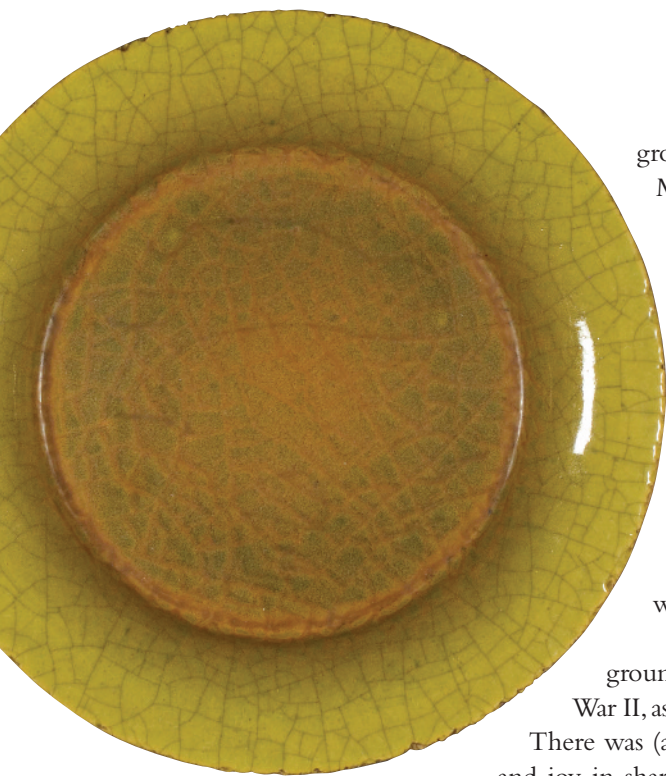
the work of young and emerging talent in the field, which Maloof avidly followed and collected.

In 2008, three Huntington curators—Jessica Todd Smith, Kevin Murphy, and Harold Nelson—made the half-hour drive from San Marino to Alta Loma for a tour of the landmark residence and a visit with Maloof. Under the direction of Smith, who is Virginia Steele Scott Curator of American Art at The Huntington, they were in the midst of organizing the sweeping survey of American art that would inaugurate the newly expanded Scott Galleries. "The collection had grown to a point where we could create a historical context for works of art through the dynamic grouping of objects," said Smith. The curators envisioned the 15 galleries as a series of thoughtful juxtapositions of paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts that would showcase the scope and strength of The Huntington's treasures and present a narrative of American art from the colonial period to the mid-20th century. Where appropriate, works would be borrowed from other institutional and private collections, both to complement The Huntington's holdings in key areas and, in some cases, to reach out and shed new light on seldom-seen pieces (such as examples from an outstanding but rarely displayed

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group of 18th-century American glass belonging to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art). Maloof was not yet represented in The Huntington's collection, but would make a fine addition to the Scott installation, the curators agreed. He was, after all, the quintessential American designer-craftsman, a classic California modernist and beloved local figure, rooted in centuries-old traditions, yet vibrantly contemporary, and actively engaged in supporting the development of his field.

When they saw the Hlinka music stand and chair on display at the house, they experienced a collective “Eureka!” moment. “It seemed the perfect way to represent him in the installation,” recalled Nelson, guest curator of decorative arts for the project and an authority on contemporary studio craft. “What struck me first was just their beauty—that elegant, luscious form. And then knowing a bit about the history. They so epitomized what Sam was about. What the craft community is about, in a way.”

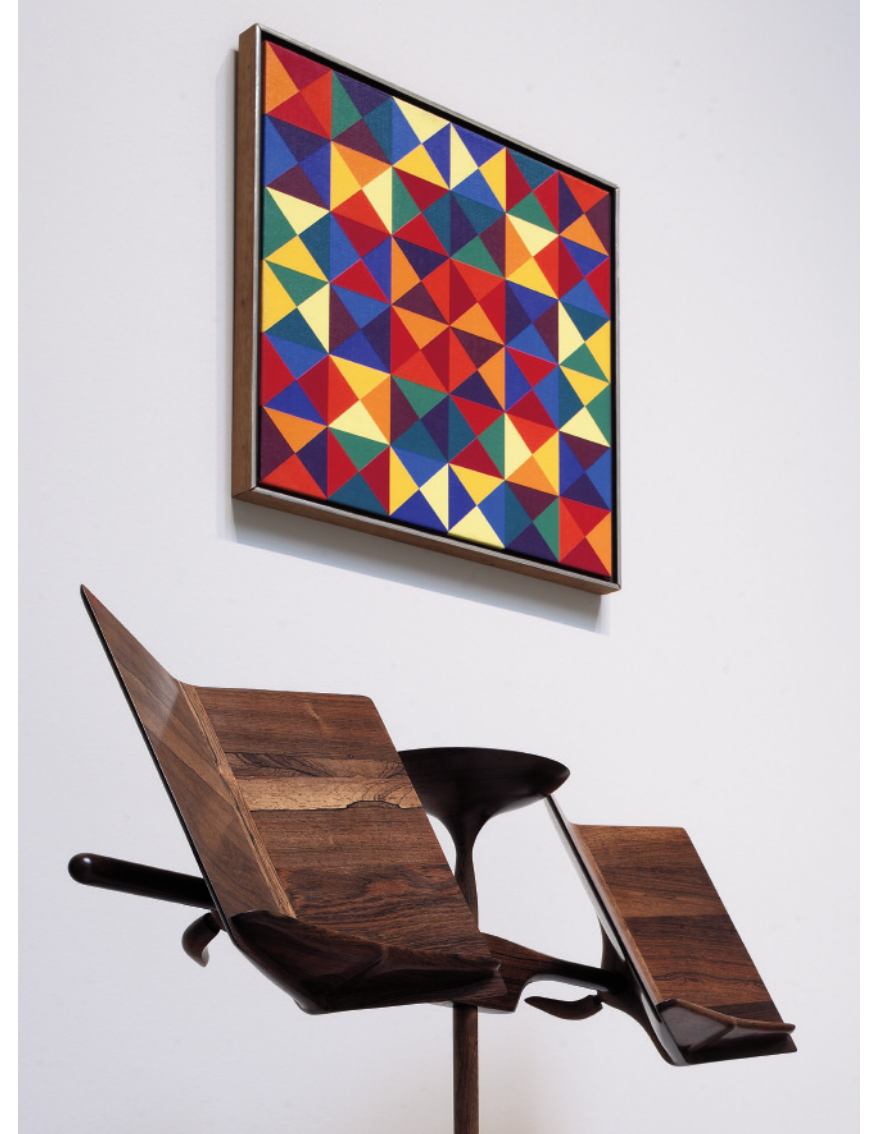
The open, creative environment of Southern California provided fertile ground for the studio craft movement that flourished in the years following World War II, as artists explored new expressive possibilities in the making of objects by hand. There was (and remains to this day) a strong collegial spirit among craft artists, a pride and joy in sharing ideas and information. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, many of the leaders in the field lived in and around Los Angeles and regularly socialized, mixing freely with painters, sculptors, architects, and photographers as well. Naturally, they often ended up owning each others' work. As The Huntington's curators wandered through room after room filled with splendid pieces the Maloofs had acquired over the years—by the now-famous potters, woodworkers, glassblowers, metalsmiths, and weavers who made up their circle—a bigger picture took shape.

And so, a year later, Maloof's music stand and chair remain among friends (figuratively speaking) at The Huntington, in a large room devoted to mid-20th-century art within the Scott Galleries. Entering the space, one's eye goes immediately to an enormous abstract painting by the Los Angeles artist Sam Francis, a recent acquisition. The *Double Music Stand and Musician's Chair* are nearby, and above them hangs a small, colorful, geometric painting by Karl Benjamin of Claremont, from the permanent collection. A wall case contains a group of early and important works by California craft masters on loan from the Maloof Foundation: ceramics by Gertrud and Otto Natzler, Harrison McIntosh, Laura Andreson, and Paul Soldner; a turned wood bowl by Bob Stocksdaile; and a glass plate by Glen Lukens (along with two Lukens ceramic vessels from The Huntington's holdings). Completing that group is a stunning early Peter Voulkos vase on loan from the collector Frank Lloyd. Another case holds hand-wrought functional wares by Allan Adler, “silversmith to the stars,” also from the Huntington trove. To be sure, there are artists represented in the gallery from other parts of the country—Helen Frankenthaler, Joseph Cornell, Louise Nevelson, and Robert Motherwell among them—but the sense of California camaraderie is strong.

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“It's a manifestation of connection among people—in Sam's case, the artist and the musician who commissioned the piece—but even more than that, the community of artists and craftsmen in Southern California who all were aware of one another's work,” observed Nelson. For years a group of Claremont artists, including Maloof, Harrison McIntosh, and Karl Benjamin, would get together on Wednesdays for breakfast or lunch. “When you go into Karl Benjamin's house, you see ceramics by all of these people,” Nelson said. “You see Maloof furniture. It represents and embodies their friendship and association. You come to understand how compatible their thinking was, and how much they were influenced by one another.” Nelson even sees a sort of visual affinity at play among the Californians in the modern gallery: there is a materiality to the thick pigment of the Francis canvas that reverberates in the ceramics in a “gutsy, physical, visceral” way, and a rhythmic flow to the painting's underlying grid structure “that some of the lines of Sam's furniture pick up,” he noted. “And there are interesting connections between the diagonals in the Maloof music stand and Karl Benjamin's painting above it. Even when you look at the Allan Adler silver, the sleek, flowing lines of those forms perfectly echo the beautiful curvilinear lines of the Maloof pieces.”

As thoroughly modern as they are, and as richly as they evoke their own time and place, the work of Maloof and other contemporary designer-craftsmen belongs to a long tradition of decorative arts that dates back to the founding of the nation. In 18th-century American furniture, for example, a strength of The Huntington's collection, one sees the practice of commissioning work, just as Maloof made pieces for specific patrons. Even his longtime team of craftsmen echoes old traditions of apprenticeship. The same ideals of fine handwork and integrity of design that serve as the foundation for today's best and most innovative work in craft media



The new installation of the Scott Galleries of American Art highlights relationships among paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts. Above, Maloof's music stand is displayed with a painting by Karl Benjamin (b. 1925): *Number 4*, 1968, oil on canvas, gift of Donald M. Treiman, in memory of his mother, Joyce Treiman. Also on view (opposite) are an art pottery bowl (earthenware with crackle glaze), ca. late 1940s, by Glen Lukens (1887–1967), Huntington Art Collections; and a vase (stoneware with glazes), 1954, by Peter Voulkos (1924–2002), collection of Frank Lloyd. Photos by John Sullivan.

resonate at The Huntington in objects from the past: in furniture by Greene and Greene, Gustav Stickley, and Frank Lloyd Wright; in glass by Tiffany and Steuben; in Arts and Crafts pottery; in silver by Gorham and Pasadena's own Clemens Friedell.

“It's always interesting to connect disparate moments, to find the continuous threads and strands that interweave and make a full fabric,” Nelson said of the Scott installation, which is designed to invite just that kind of contemplation. The enduring, shared legacy of Sam Maloof, his peers, and his predecessors is on radiant display, telling a richly textured story of American life. ☞

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