

SILAS SEANDEL: DESIGNING IN METAL

This Manhattan sculptor and craftsperson has worked quietly for decades, perfecting his art and proving that sculptured furniture, as he says, is another way of introducing art into your life.

BY JAMES ROPER

It's the summer of 1962 and Silas Seandel, at the invitation of a friend, has arrived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, for a vacation to escape the heat of the New York City summer. His friend is late, so Seandel decides to take a walk to pass the time. Within minutes he discovers what he wants to do with the rest of his life.

JAMES ROPER: As one of those seemingly rare people who actually were born in New York City, do you think that environment encouraged your creativity?

SILAS SEANDEL: Growing up in the city—I was born in Brooklyn and my family later moved to Queens—certainly exposes you to all cultures. That aspect of it always lies on the surface and you can't help but be influenced by it. And it does have a positive effect. But it wasn't until later in life that I became interested in art, especially as a career.

JR: Not many sculptors can say they have a B.S. in economics from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. How did that come about?

SS: A counselor suggested that if I didn't know what to study in college, I could not go wrong with a business education. After graduation, I moved into a tenement apartment in Greenwich Village—again, at the time I was not thinking about becoming an artist, but the Village was just an exciting place to live. The closest I had come to art was building model airplanes when I was a kid. The apartment—a sixth-floor walk-up—was two blocks from the White Horse Tavern.

And my rent was only \$19 a month. I was going to law school at night, and business school during the day.

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Then the Berlin Crisis of 1961 intervened and Seandel, an Army reservist, found himself at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, taking on projects like making office signage in the Army's excellent shop facilities. He discovered he had a talent for construction—he also realized he was not the least bit interested in making a career of business or law. Back in Manhattan a year later, he was, in his words, “really at loose ends.” So he joined the training program at B. Altman & Co.

JR: Do you remember the moment you decided to be a sculptor?

SS: When I arrived in Provincetown for that visit and my friend was late, I started wandering around and found my way to the Chrysler Museum of Art. Now you have to understand that I never visited a museum unless I had a term paper to finish or a girlfriend to impress. It was like being hit by a lightning bolt—I had wandered into an exhibit called “Sculptors of the 1950s.” I couldn't wait to get back to New



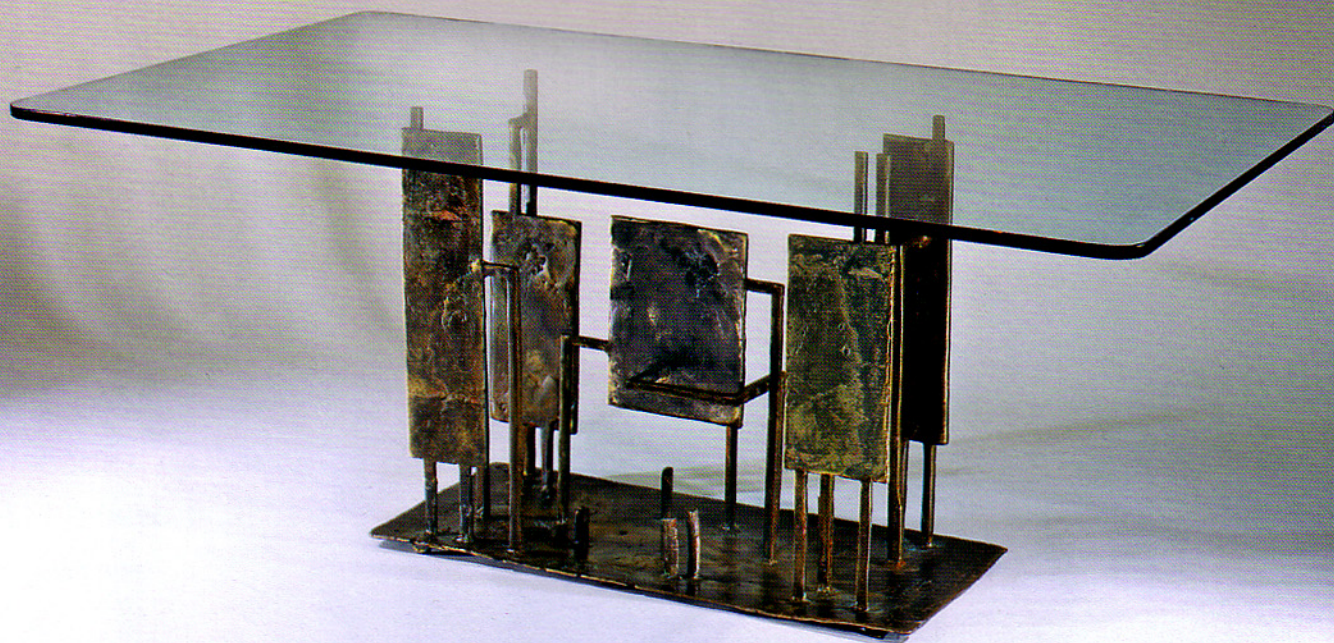
Top: Silas Seandel's two-piece cocktail table, *Bronzeforms III*, is made of stainless steel with a mirror finish. Both sections are set on casters so they can be moved about easily. **Above:** Seandel at work in his downtown Manhattan studio in the Chelsea district.

York because I finally knew what I wanted to do with my life—I wanted to be a sculptor. I started teaching myself welding from a how-to book. I spent more than a year learning the basics and I made many mistakes in the process. It never occurred to me to take a course. But, interestingly, my mistakes led me to discover techniques that only I can do.

JR: What was your first important commission?

SS: When I worked in the furniture department at Altman's, I met a lot of interior designers. Everyone knew I wanted to be an artist, so when one designer had a commission to redo a country club dining room in Purchase, New York, he explained that they needed a wall decoration. I designed a wall-mounted relief showing four golfers using different swings. It was a huge success. Later, I designed some small flowers made of copper and brass. When I showed them to buyers at Saks Fifth Avenue, they were so enthusiastic they fronted me a few hundred dollars to continue to make them. Soon I was showing my work at stores like Marshall Field in Chicago and Neiman Marcus in Dallas.

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A turning point for Seandel occurred in the mid-Sixties when the D & D Building opened in Manhattan. It was the first of its kind—a wholesale site for interior decorators. Seandel scraped together the \$30,000 needed for a showroom and became one of its original tenants. He opened his space in 1967 and remained a tenant for the next 35 years, selling his sculptured metal furniture to architects and designers.

JR: Do you regard this work as art or home furnishings? Or both? How do artist and craftsperson “divide responsibilities,” so to speak?

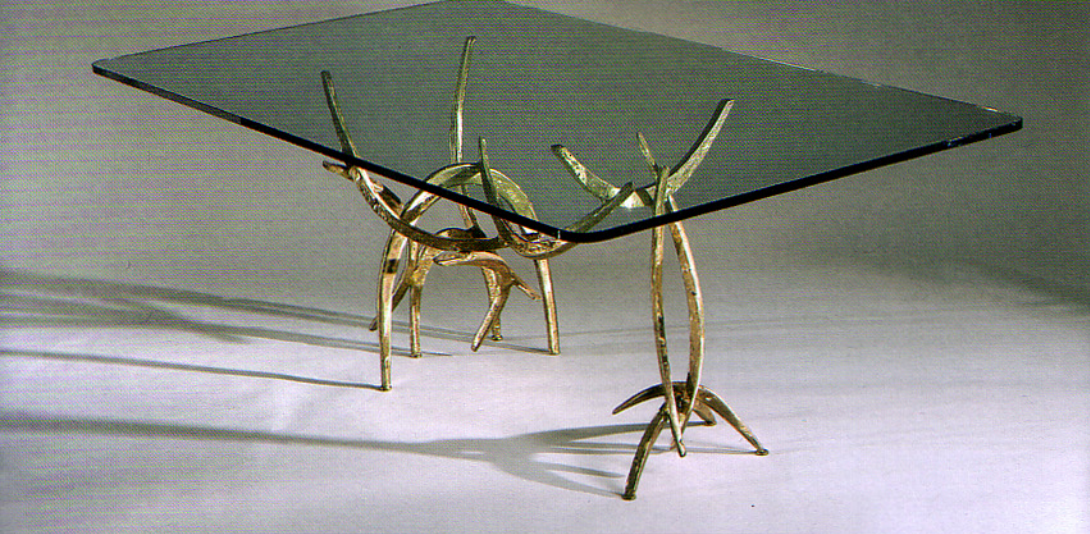
SS: For me, it's all sculpture, whether it's functional or decorative. I don't make that distinction. It's always been about what I liked—and the pricing was affordable. You see, I was worried about not having enough money to buy supplies. In the art world, there's been an ongoing debate over what's craft and what's art. But now it's merging, and there's a huge surge of interest in functional art created by artists. So, in other words, yes, it can be a beautiful piece of sculpture and it also can be your coffee table.

JR: While you're known for sculptured furniture, you are also an accomplished architectural sculptor. Tell us about one of your recent works.

SS: I was asked to design a 9/11 memorial for the grounds of Greenwich Hospital in Connecticut. Many people from Greenwich perished that day, so the hospital decided to commission the memorial. The sculpture, which is about 8 feet high, is in stainless steel and bronze; it depicts the two towers emerging from the rubble.

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Today, in his Chelsea studio and showroom, Seandel continues to produce one-of-a-kind pieces in solid metals such as copper, bronze, brass, and steel. His schedule always seems full, whether he's designing a new piece for a client or personally directing the installation of one. He explains that in the last 20 years, sculptured furniture by artists has become an important part of the art scene, but adds that he doesn't pay much attention when his own work may command higher prices at auction. Seandel says he tells people that instead of buying as an investment, “they should buy a piece only because they love it and they want to use it.”



Facing page: The Primitive 2 Dining Table features a bronze sculptural base with a polychrome patina; it's also available as a cocktail table or console. This page, top: The Ortago Table, one of Seandel's three new table designs in cast bronze with glass. It's shown here as a dining table, but it can be adapted as an end or occasional table. Below: The artist's new Jools Cocktail Table is fashioned from bronze, with a base featuring a natural finish; the glass surface is juxtaposed against the solid base.



The list of his architectural commissions is lengthy and includes designs for such companies as Bell Telephone, Lipton, Ford, and Shell Oil, to name only a few.

The former editor of *Interior Design* magazine, Sherman Emery, once described Seandel as "one of the finest artist-craftsmen on the American scene today." Needless to say, he is not inclined to undermine his standing in the art community by mass-producing his work.

JR: How would you describe your design philosophy?

SS: It's about the artist's vision and the client's requirements. Many sculptors who create furnishings make variations on a particular vision—the cocktail table or the end table. But I keep changing and using different approaches. So while there's continuity in the way I work—the technique, the materials—there is not necessarily continuity in the design. For instance, I've made many variations on the Ortago table since

I first designed it in 1963, so it's never exactly the same. And while the aesthetics are important, it also has to be functional.

JR: The Manhattan of the 1960s must have been an exciting place for an artist. But is the city the artistic center it once was? How has your own neighborhood changed?

SS: It's almost impossible for an artist, especially a sculptor who works in metal, to get started here today. There are the physical requirements to consider—the machinery, the noise, the fire hazard. Chelsea in the 1970s was a very gritty place. But today there are approximately 300 art galleries within walking distance of my studio. And some of my closest neighbors are the Balenciaga and Comme des Garçons showrooms. So, yes, the neighborhood has changed. ♦

For more information about Silas Seandel's work, contact: The Silas Seandel Studio and Gallery, 551-3 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011; 212.645.5286; Fax 212.741.9627; www.silasseandel.com; email: silas551@nyc.rr.com

James Roper is a freelance writer and editor who covers design and architecture.