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An Under-Appreciated Artist

How Scott Burton changed sculpture



The sculptor Scott Burton, photographed by Harry Roseman for Burton's 1990 *New York Times* obituary. © Harry Roseman (1973) from harryroseman-achronicle.com

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In the 1970s and 1980s [Scott Burton](#) was widely recognized as one of the most important artists of his generation. Like [Donald Judd](#), he was first known for his art writing, which established him as one of the most critically informed voices of the time. His performances of the early 1970s are legendary both in the histories of body art and sculpture.

His breakthrough came in 1975, when he exhibited his first static sculpture, a work that was as stylish as it was radical—even in a period rife with artists radically rethinking the nature of sculpture: from the industrialized forms of Donald Judd; to the flattened metal floor pieces of [Carl Andre](#); the permanent instability of [Richard Serra](#)'s process and prop works; the videos of [Bruce Nauman](#) (and others), where the artist's moving body became the material with which sculpture was

made.



Scott Burton, *Bronze Chair* (1972). Currently held in The Chicago Art Institute's collection. Photo: Alamy

In 1975 Burton took a mass-produced Queen Anne-style chair which had been left by a previous tenant in his apartment and cast it in bronze. *Bronze Chair* was probably the only radical sculpture of the time that looked like something emphatically of another time, that depicted the functional and decorative and yet was neither, formed in the most traditional medium for sculpture.

The chair was a dare to rethink the object, and the place of the figure in art. It was one of the most significant vanguard works to pave the path from the formal and conceptual to the figurative: the chair became both a surrogate performer in the form of a permanent sculpture and a representation of the figure, absent from the eye but ever present in the mind. The many furniture works that followed until the artist's death from AIDS in 1989 are a rich and today under-appreciated corpus of work.

In the year of his death Burton was the first artist invited to curate what would become a series of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, titled "*Artist's Choice*", in which an artist re-examined works in the museum's collection. Burton staged a brilliant exhibition of the bases of Constantin Brancusi's sculptures, which began an art historical revolution of sorts by rethinking sculpture, the base and the nature of supports.

Prior to this, bases were principally viewed as secondary to the object they supported, and were often discarded. Burton showed them as sculptures in their own right, and thereafter no one would ever again see Brancusi's bases as simply that: they were as much a part of the sculpture as the form on top—in a sense the body not physically present but conceptually implied, as with Burton's *Bronze Chair*.