

## Antiques: Made in Pa., Gehry's sleek Tuyomyo bench

By Karla Klein Albertson  
Inquirer Antiques Columnist

Today in New York, Sotheby's will offer for sale the gleaming and sinuous Tuyomyo bench by Frank Gehry, the most important design for interior space ever created by the famous architect. The bench was fabricated at Emeco in Hanover, Pa., perhaps the only firm capable of executing Gehry's vision in aluminum.

"Frank O. Gehry: Design Process and the Lewis House," an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, gave viewers a chance to relate Gehry's architectural work to his furniture and decorative arts. The show closed in April, but the museum holds major examples of the architect's furniture and lighting in its permanent collection.

These range from his early works in corrugated cardboard for the Easy Edges series of the early 1970s to the recently acquired Red Beaver armchair and ottoman from 1986.

"We do have a lot of Gehry furniture and a lot of it just recently came into the collection because of the Gehry exhibition in the Collab Gallery in the Perelman building," said Diane Minnite, collections and research assistant at the museum.

The Tuyomyo bench up for sale differs substantially from these previous works in terms of design and material. Rather than wood, plastic or paper, this one-of-a-kind creation is tempered aluminum.

"It's impressive and very Gehry, the curves are much more reminiscent of his architecture," Minnite said of the design. "It is a beautiful thing, and I'm hopeful that it will find a buyer."

Gregg Buchbinder, president of Emeco, discussed the Hanover firm's collaboration with Gehry. "I know it wasn't his intention to make it look like architecture - it just sort of happened that way. You can sit on it - it turned out the design ends up being for two people." The name "Tuyomyo" means "yours and mine."

In fact, a photo of Gehry and Buchbinder's young daughter seated on the bench can be found at [www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com) in the online catalog for the Important 20th Century Design auction. The proceeds from the sale of this lot, estimated at \$250,000 to \$350,000, will benefit a medical research fund named for Gehry's late daughter Leslie.

Gehry and Emeco had previously collaborated on the Superlight chair that won many design awards in 2004. In the catalog at [www.emeco.net](http://www.emeco.net), the company explains, "We make chairs. That's what we do. Handmade from 80 percent recycled aluminum. It's not easy. In fact, it takes 77 steps to get there. Designed to last for 150 years. Now that's sustainability."

Gehry became a confirmed fan when he ordered 150 of Emeco's Hudson swivel chairs, designed by Philippe Starck, for his office in Los Angeles. The architect cited as the reason, "Hot glue guns and Exacto knives. Every chair we get has been destroyed; this chair is indestructible."

At a talk by Gehry, Buchbinder met another fan: "I ended up talking to Brad Pitt for a while, and he collects furniture, and he likes aluminum furniture, and he has Emeco chairs in his house. He's just a really nice guy and a very knowledgeable person about furniture."

One of Emeco's most enduring aluminum creations is the Navy chair, a design now more than 60 years old. You can spot the shiny metal office chair on many movie sets, including the Brangelina film *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005).

"It was originally done for Navy ships," Buchbinder says. "They need something really lightweight. Aluminum was the answer." Not only does the Navy chair weigh only 7 pounds, it is fireproof, nonmagnetic, and impervious to corrosion.

Aluminum brings the same magical properties to Gehry's sleek bench. "The bench is amazingly light," says the company president. "It looks like a very heavy sculptural piece but two people can easily pick the bench up. It weighs around 125 pounds."

Buchbinder explains how the aluminum sheet for the bench was transformed from a soft material to a temper level of T-6, comparable to a mountain bike frame: "The desire is not only to have something that visually creates the design, but also is structurally very strong. Where the ends of the bench cantilever out, you can sit on it - it will no longer bend."

Sotheby's would seem the perfect place to offer the piece.

"There really is this tradition of Pennsylvania midcentury and postwar mass-produced furniture," said James Zemaitis, Sotheby's head of 20th Century Design. "I have been a fan of Emeco's furniture for years; I have a set of four aluminum bar stools that are made by Emeco."

Sotheby's sold many important pieces of Gehry furniture in the past. "There are three phases to Gehry furniture," Zemaitis explained. "When he did Easy Edges, it was successful enough to scare him, in a sense, from doing more furniture because he was trying to establish himself at that time as an architect. He hadn't had many buildings completed at that point."

"He revisited that line in the early 1980s with what's called the Experimental Edges line, more cardboard in a more baroque fashion. Then, he took time off from furniture, and in the late 1980s, he did a series of mostly lamps that were done in limited editions, the Fish series."

Zemaitis continued, "Those Fish lamps are very valuable and have been really where the auction records for Gehry furniture have been set up to this point." Sotheby's sold a 1983 Fish lamp from the David Whitney estate in 2006 for \$180,000.

The Tuyomyo bench is different from all past creations because there is only one. Zemaitis calls it the "Bilbao" of his furniture, comparing it to Gehry's famous design for the 1997 Guggenheim museum in Spain.

He concludes, "This is a unique work, a prototype for a long-range vision that Gehry and Emeco have about working with aluminum. It also has deep personal significance to Gehry in terms of his late daughter and raising money for the foundation. It's an honor for us to be part of the process of bringing this bench from one person to another."