

Furniture City Mural by Ed Wong-Ligda

Furniture City is an allegory of furniture history and social change in western Michigan for a permanent exhibition about the furniture industry in the Grand Rapids area. It is divided into five sections, each representing a group of people significant to the industry within a specific time period. Each figure represents a category or kind of person, not an actual historical figure. Triangular items recur throughout the mural reflecting shifts within the community. The composition is made up of multiple triangles overlaid by two opposing fan structures. The apexes of the fans being the dog and the Furniture Goddess. Because of its placement on the right side of the entrance to the exhibition space, the narrative runs from right to left. The first group, (early to mid eighteenth hundreds) represents the settlers who established Grand Rapids as a center of commerce. The first three groups are lit from the right symbolizing traditional wood furniture's links to the past.

Because of the early settlers' strong Christian values, the family in the foreground is grouped in a typical adoration scene. It is a tight knit circular composition, each family member looking at and caring about another. The mother sits upon William Haldane's mythical first chair created in Grand Rapids. The hand with the gift represents the gift of life and the promise of a vital and rewarding future. Behind the arm a curtain opens on the "first act" of Grand Rapids.

The standing figure depicts an early craftsman. He is a virtuous, stern, hard working man with his carving tools in one hand and his Dutch Bible in the other. Divine inspiration is being provided by an angel who is whispering, "furniture" into his ear.

Behind the figures to the right is a scene of the early settlement on the banks of the Grand. Dawn rises behind one of the first churches in Grand Rapids, Saint Marks. An architectural trefoil from Saint Marks representing the trinity floats to the right of the angel's hand. Next to the trefoil is Da Vinci's Renaissance man denoting the furniture industry's secular design links to a romantic past. A few logs float down the river signaling the beginning of the industrialization of Michigan's natural resources. On the near side of the river native Americans watch the settler's dawn while contemplating their own culture's sunset.

Between the angel and the craftsman the river is jammed with logs signaling the height of, and foreshadowing the decline of the wood based furniture industry in Grand Rapids. To the immediate left of the first group downtown Grand Rapids takes shape with its commercial buildings and factories. The heavy smoke of progress pours into the air, clouding the future, while logs on the river dwindle down to just a few.

The second group of figures depicts artisans from the late 1800's to the turn of the century. The man in the foreground is a carver working on a typical chair leg, the woman is a decorator painting a typical commode, and the standing man is designing a Berkey and Gay headboard exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. He is the first figure to look towards the future. The chair in the foreground is a Centennial Renaissance Revival parlor chair also exhibited in Philadelphia. Behind them the city gets denser and darker as the furniture industry hits its height, then declines.

The third group shows aspects of Market in the twenties. The woman holding the Furniture City flag is the Furniture Goddess, used off and on to market Grand Rapids furniture. To her right floats a Grand Rapids Made emblem. In contrast to the goddess is the maid standing just to her left. The maid, not an idealized icon, but a low wage worker serving the industry looks towards future generations for hope. The man in the tuxedo is serving up furniture to a buyer who has just arrived at Market. Although the seated figure studies the pieces of traditional wood furniture, he unwittingly introduces the future by sitting on an American Seating folding chair. The dog, from one of the hunting lodges, where the more important clients were sometimes taken, represents the traditional values of obedience and predictability. The dog stares at the furniture samples rather than the tray of hors d'oeuvres, instinctively realizing the universal appeal of G. R. furniture. Behind this grouping, to the left, is a curtain signaling the end of an era and the beginning of the second act.

The fourth group pictures a more diverse work force from the forties and fifties. They are painted in brighter and lighter colors, and are the first group to be lit from the left, (the future). Three workers excited about the future are set around a Steelcase Multiple Fifteen table. A Herman Miller Eames Molded Plywood Chair is being touted to them by a slightly more contemporary man. The girl leaning on the desk holds a toy school bus representing integration. She pays respect to her ancestors by looking back. The cat represents the change in society from obedience and predictability towards independence and capriciousness. In the foreground orders for traditional furniture are dropping into the wastebasket, joined by carved details of traditional wood furniture. The background shows an increasingly modern downtown. In the sky to the right are three gliders manufactured in Grand Rapids during World War II.

The fifth group represents the industry from the seventies through the mid-nineties. The man and woman are designers looking towards the future with anticipation and anxiety. The woman asks, just as the exhibition asks, "What must the furniture industry do to stay vital into the next century?" The angel answers by signing, "create / innovate." The man, woman, and child are a reconfiguration of the family at the beginning of the mural. In these fractured times though, they no longer look towards each other. The husband and wife are busy pursuing their careers while the child walks into the future alone.

Above them is an ergonomics icon, the contemporary transformation of Da Vinci's Renaissance man. Sitting below the icon is the Steelcase pyramid bringing the landscape full circle back to a rural setting where the mural began. The third curtain, more chaotic than the first two, announces the next act.