



CALIFORNIA STYLE

Lauren Hutton

The Fashion Icon and Natural Beauty in Her Venice Garden

ANIMAL INSTINCT

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE WITH FALL'S EXOTIC BAGS, BAUBLES & SHOES

Style By Design

CRAFTSMAN JOHN KAPEL'S WOODSIDE WONDERLAND * THE CHICEST "SHOPPE" IN NAPA * MARY McDONALD'S GLAMOROUS L.A. INTERIORS

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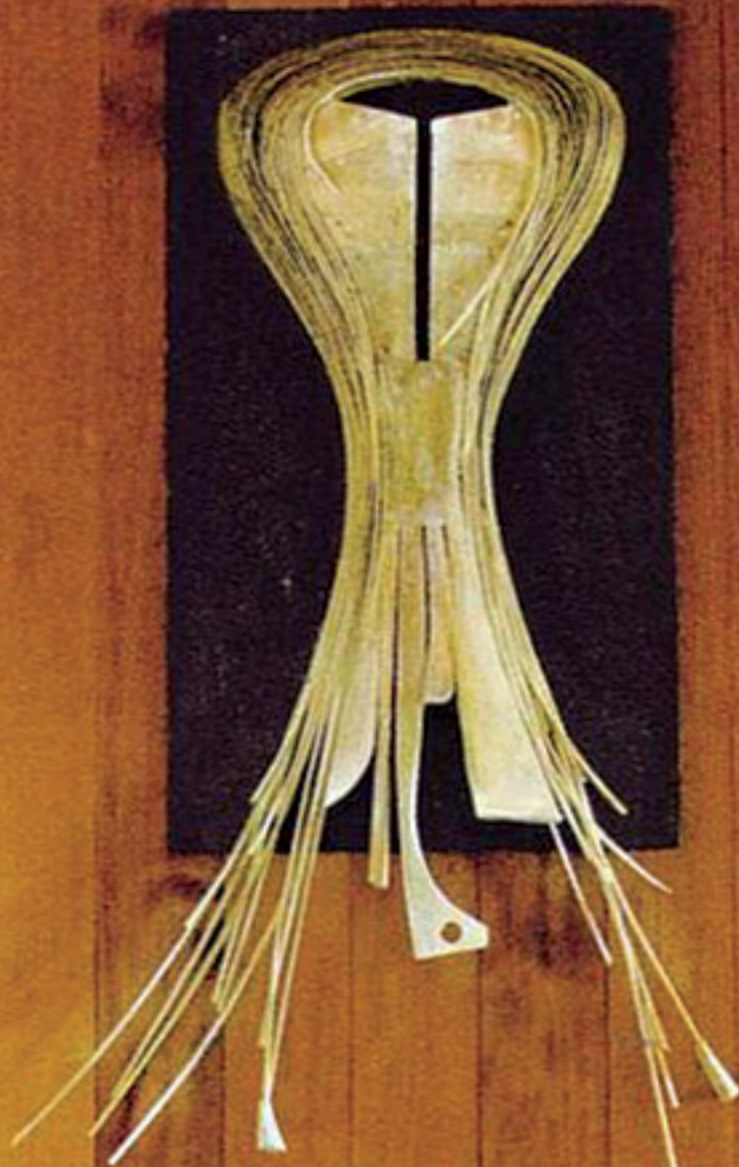


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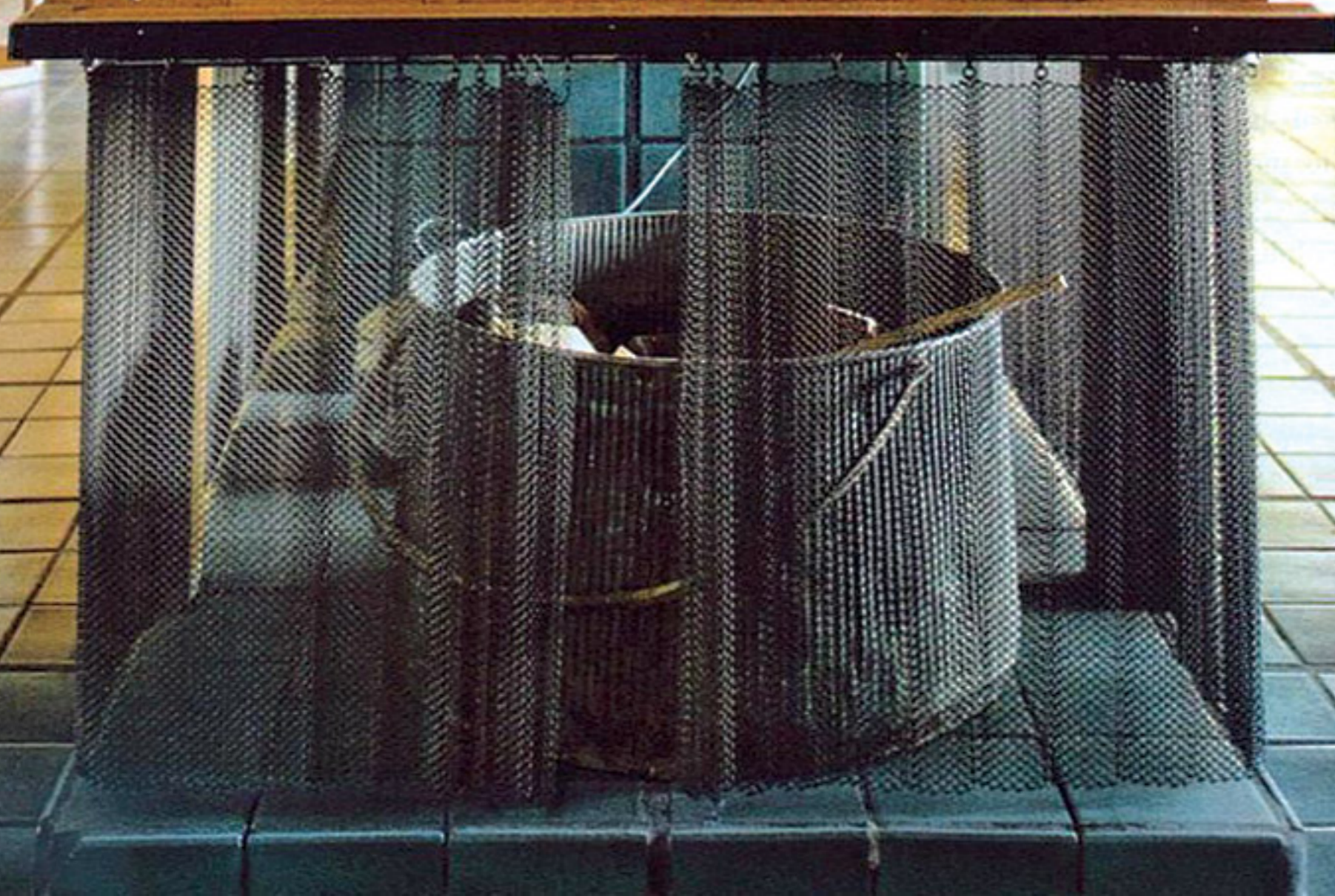
The exterior of John Kapel's San Mateo County home. OPPOSITE The cantilevered fireplace divides the dining room from the living room and the entry hall, creating a focal point for the house. The sculpture is one of Kapel's.

WOODSIDE WONDERLAND

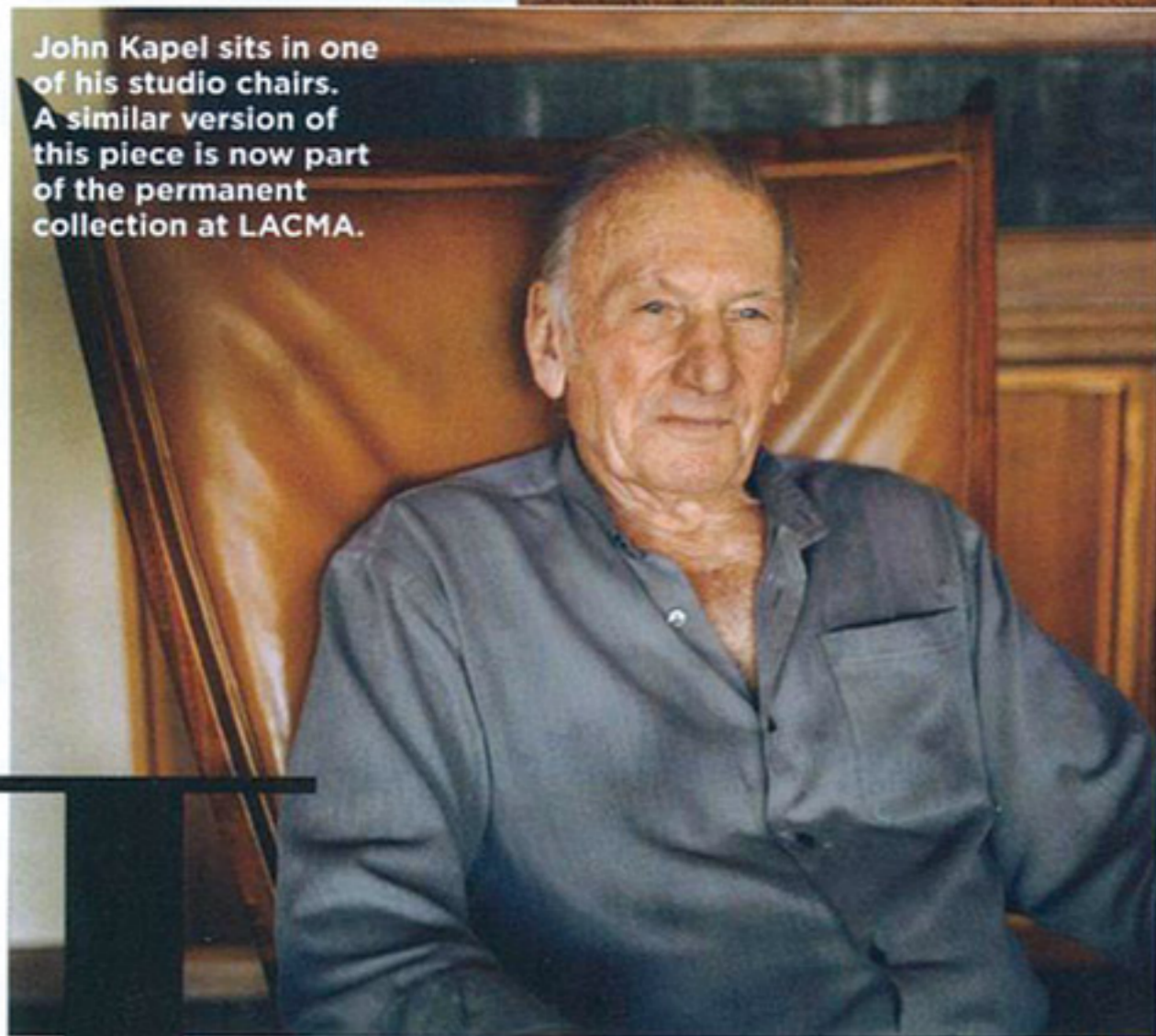


Designer John Kapel's
dream house is a masterpiece
of artful craftsmanship

By Cat Doran Photographed by Lisa Eisner



John Kapel sits in one of his studio chairs. A similar version of this piece is now part of the permanent collection at LACMA.



If you believe the story the way 89-year-old design master John Kapel tells it, then his life has been but a series of happy accidents. Listen to him closely, though, and you might begin to question the serendipitous nature of events. Simply put, he's too good an artist to chalk his successes up to fate.

One of his most fortunate "accidents," if you will, was choosing Woodside, CA as the location for building his dream home in 1961. Just a quick drive up a steep hill from Palo Alto, the town gets

its name from the magnificent redwoods dominating the landscape. At the time the Kapel house was under construction, Woodside was really nothing more than a forest. These days, however, it's home to the biggest names in Silicon Valley, including Apple's co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs, and Oracle's Larry Ellison.

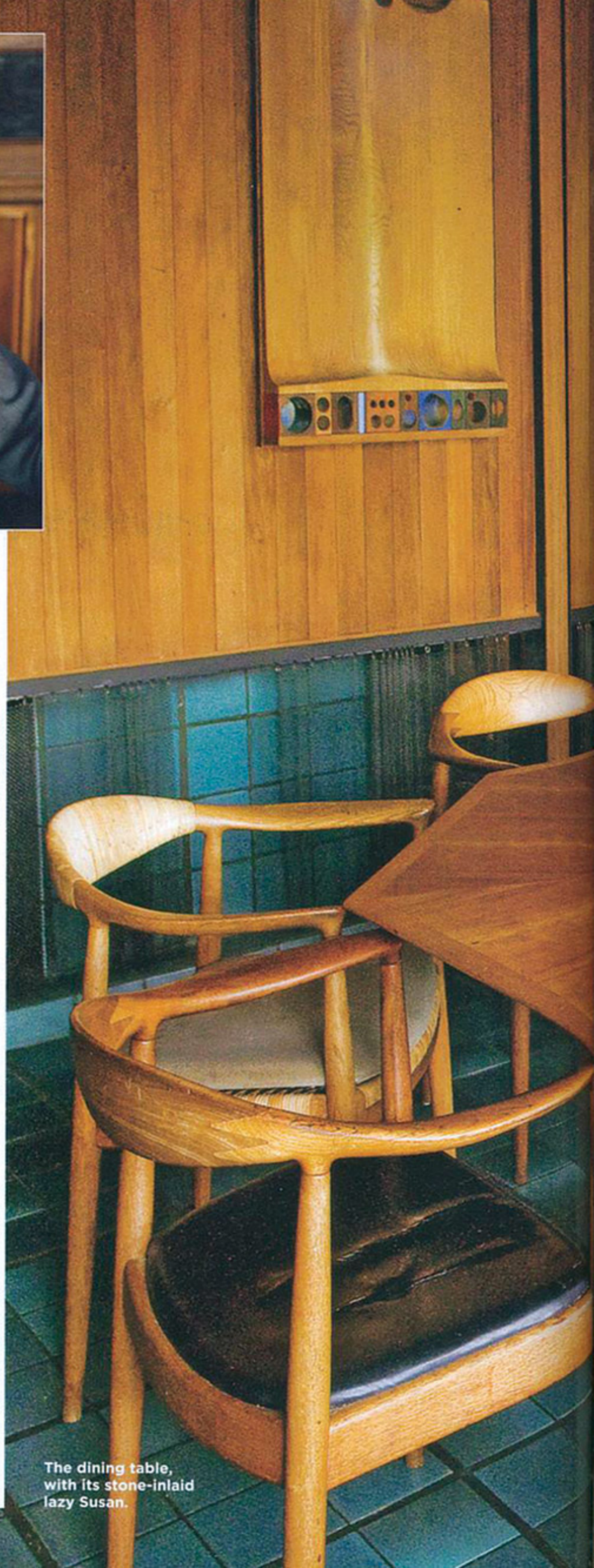
The house was designed by Kapel and architect Jerry Weiss. With its clerestory windows and the release you feel when you walk through its front door, the dwelling feels a little Frank Lloyd Wrightian. The space opens up from a low point at the entryway into something voluminous.

Kapel says, "This is a small house—only 1,750 square feet—but it feels big because nothing is pressing in on you. What counts for me are the things you look at on a daily basis."

The wooden dining table, with its stone-inlaid lazy Susan; the central cantilevered fireplace; his wood-and-metal sculptures hanging on the walls; the hand-built furniture; the exquisite blue-tile floor—it all feels completely at home on this hillside looking out over the massive trees.

Kapel graduated from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, MI (other noted alums include Harry Bertoia, Charles and Ray Eames, and Eero Saarinen). After a short stint training in Yugoslavia, he moved to New York to work with George Nelson (chief designer of Herman Miller Furniture Company), who hired him as a general designer. At a studio with only 17 employees, the young Kapel was exposed to all aspects of industrial and furniture design.

After two years at George Nelson & Associates, Kapel



The dining table, with its stone-inlaid lazy Susan.





Three handcrafted chairs in Kapel's downstairs woodshop. OPPOSITE Artisan pottery and crafts are lovingly displayed in the living room.

headed westward to California and landed in what was then the farmland of Los Gatos. Because he had no tools of his own, his great friend and fellow craftsman, the late Sam Maloof, took him to an auction to buy a workbench. In order to get the one he wanted, Kapel had to purchase a lot of five benches from a local school. Within a month, he'd sold four of them, making enough of a profit to start crafting furniture on the fifth. He still uses it to this day.

Kapel saw how Maloof struggled to make a living off custom, hand-hewn furniture. "Sammy hated to do stuff for manufacturers because there are constrictions associated with that kind of work, but I don't like to make the same thing twice."

What intrigued Kapel was the challenge of creating a design that could then be produced in a factory. He had seen how George Nelson & Associates earned royalties off its popular designs. To Kapel, that was much more appealing than hand-making every single stick of furniture his mind could dream up. He made some prototypes and piled them into his station wagon, journeying from Los Gatos to Los Angeles, where he knocked on factory doors. The first he tried was Glenn of California. After showing his samples to owner Ike Baron and striking a mutually satisfying agreement, the two embarked on a partnership that would last more than 20 years—with only a handshake binding their deal.

This didn't mean Kapel wasn't interested in making studio one-offs. Far from it; at the same time he was designing for a

manufacturer, he was also turning out beautiful and unique pieces in his own workshop. This dual focus was highly unusual; at the time, either you were a craftsman or you designed for large-scale fabrication. No one did both—except Kapel. He explains, "My fellow craftsmen sure thought I was tainted. They thought of me as a sell-out. I didn't care. I wanted to have a nice house, and designing for a manufacturer allowed me to do that." (Kapel did design and build a home for himself and his family in Los Gatos, but he eventually sold it in order to construct his Woodside abode, where he still lives and works.)

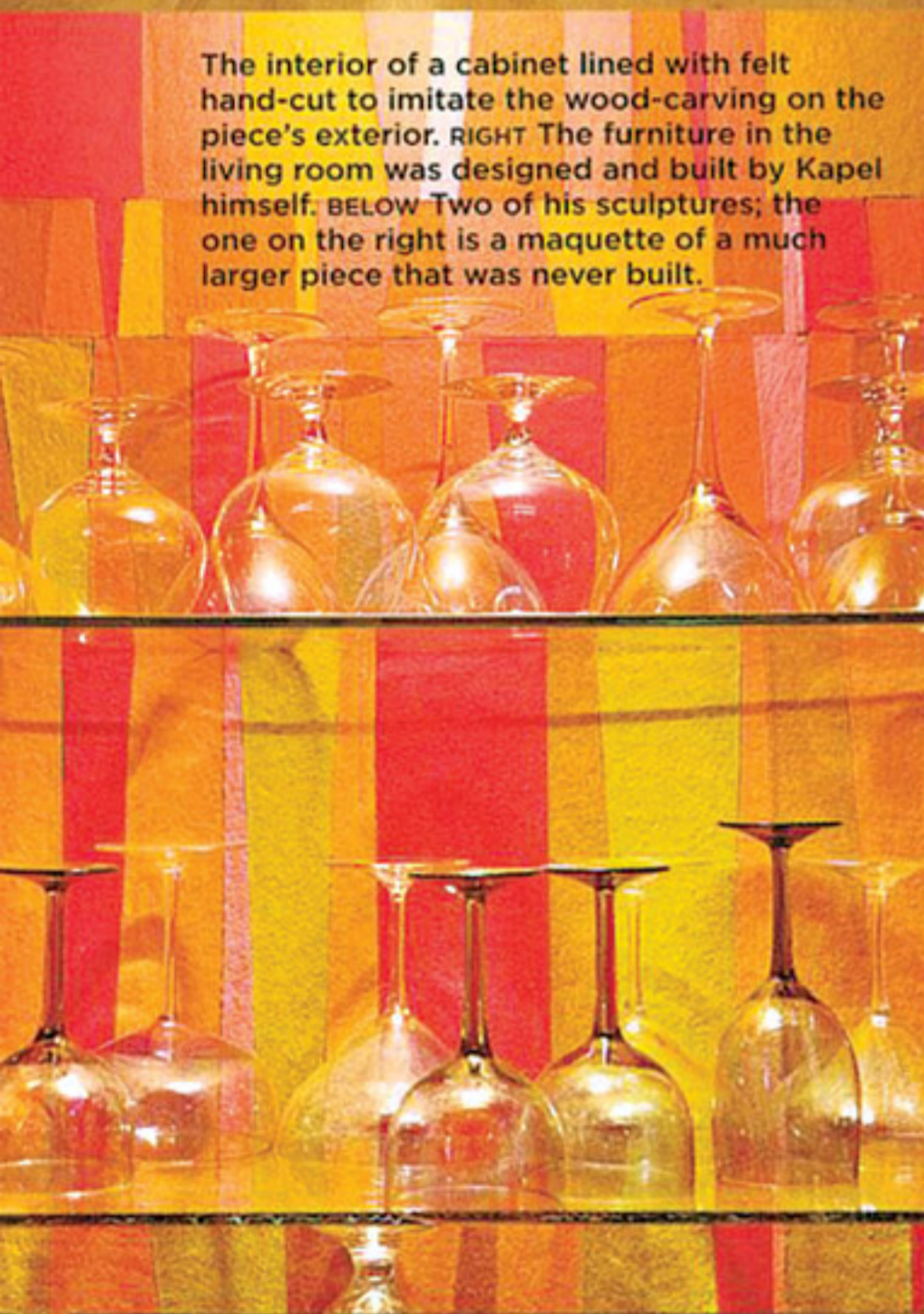
California Crafts expert and owner of Reform Gallery in Los Angeles, Gerard O'Brien precipitated one of the latest Kapellian "accidents" a few years ago. He saw a chair on 1st Dibs that was billed as Scandinavian, but he recognized it as a Kapel. O'Brien sent the designer an e-mail with the words, "Is it yours?" then bought the chair. Turns out Kapel had crafted the piece in 1958. O'Brien later sold it to LACMA, where it now lives in a collection alongside four other pieces of the master's studio work.

Kapel says with a great deal of pride in his voice, "I wasn't famous, and I'm still not. But I don't care. [Curator of Decorative Arts] Wendy Kaplan at LACMA told me I'm a studio craftsman. That's OK with me. I don't care what I design—as long as it's good." ●





Kapel has also designed jewelry, shown here on the dining table. RIGHT He built his home in 1961.



The interior of a cabinet lined with felt hand-cut to imitate the wood-carving on the piece's exterior. RIGHT The furniture in the living room was designed and built by Kapel himself. BELOW Two of his sculptures; the one on the right is a maquette of a much larger piece that was never built.



