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Exhibition of Recent Gifts of Wood Art from the Bresler Collection Opens at the Renwick Gallery Sept. 24

“A Revolution in Wood: The Bresler Collection” opens at the Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s branch museum for craft and decorative arts, Sept. 24 and closes Jan. 30, 2011.

“A Revolution in Wood” celebrates the gift of 66 pieces of turned and carved wood to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by the noted collectors Fleur and Charles Bresler. The collection includes masterpieces that highlight the expressive capacity of craft’s most organic material by some of the best-known wood artists in the United States. Nearly half of the artworks in the exhibition will be on public display for the first time. The Bresler’s gift, one of the largest of wood art to any American museum, establishes at the museum’s Renwick Gallery one of the preeminent public collections of the medium in the United States. The exhibition is organized by Nicholas R. Bell, curator at the Renwick Gallery.

“We are honored that Fleur and Charles Bresler chose to give their deeply personal collection to the museum and look forward to sharing these beautiful works with audiences now and for generations to come,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

“Contemporary wood art’s relative youth in comparison to other craft media, and its development at the grass roots level make it an exciting medium to watch,” said Bell. “The Breslers’ extraordinary gift has provided us with the rare opportunity to examine recent developments in the field through the finest examples.”

Wood turning describes the act of shaping a block of wood with handheld tools as it spins on a lathe, the medium’s foundational tool. The technique, though used in carpentry for centuries, has only been employed by artists in United States since about the 1940s. During the early 1970s, a growing number of inquisitive makers took up wood turning as a means of exploring new modes of artistic

expression and working outside a craft establishment that many perceived as confining. The lathe's ease of use and the relative speed with which basic skills could be mastered inspired a fledgling community of American artists to become wood turners. Works in the exhibition, from the 1980s and 1990s, display the movement's growing sophistication.

The evolution of wood turning toward a more sculptural aesthetic occurred gradually and was driven by an innovative group of artists. Objects by David Ellsworth, Mark and Melvin Lindquist, Edward Moulthrop and Rude Osolnik demonstrate the extraordinary range of expression achievable on the lathe. Recent works by Ron Fleming, Michelle Holzapfel, Hugh McKay, Mark Sfirri and others reveal the advent of new techniques, including multi-axis turning, the incorporation of secondary materials and a strong focus on carving. The Bresler collection illustrates these evolving techniques and aesthetics, which has led to increased use of the term "wood art" rather than "wood turning" to describe the medium.

Mark Lindquist's increasingly bold style transformed how many artists saw wood as a material. Frank Cummings, J. Paul Fennell and William Hunter pierced their vessels, removing the functionality of the objects. Other artists, such as Derek Bencomo and Bruce Mitchell, moved the field away from the conservative forms of the past, emphasizing instead wood's natural edge and complex figure.

The most dramatic shift in the last 20 years has been the advent of carving, which is enjoying a renewed energy as a result of wood turning's recent popularity. The work of artists Janel Jacobson, Michael Lee and Norm Sartorius exists strictly for contemplation and exhibits a preciousness typically reserved for objets d'art. Many of the extraordinary carved works of Fleming and Holzapfel may resemble functional forms but are pure sculpture.

All 66 objects in the exhibition will be available in a slide show on the museum's website. The exhibition will travel to several museums in the United States beginning in 2012; information about confirmed venues will be available online at americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/index.cfm#traveling.

Publication

A catalog, published by the museum and distributed by Random House, is written by Bell with a foreword by Broun and an interview with Fleur Bresler by Kenneth R. Trapp, former curator-in-charge at the Renwick Gallery. Bell's essay examines contemporary wood art's historical roots and its rapid growth since the 1970s, with a focus on how its development outside the studio craft movement shaped the current field. Bresler's interview offers a window on the collector's passion and highlights her 25-year dedication to wood and the artists she considers family. The section

“Wood Art at the Renwick Gallery” illustrates in color more than 200 objects by more than 100 artists in the museum’s wood-art collection, marking the first time this premier public collection is available in print. *A Revolution in Wood* will be available for \$45 (hardcover) in the museum store, online through the museum’s website and at book stores nationwide.

Film

The museum has produced a five-minute film, with VideoArt Productions, which will be shown continuously in the exhibition galleries. It features interviews with Fleur Bresler, Trapp and artists Ellsworth and Sfirri. The video also will be available online through YouTube, ArtBabble, iTunes and Vimeo as well as on the museum’s website.

Public Programs

Several free public programs are planned in conjunction with the exhibition this fall, including “Shop Talk,” a roundtable discussion moderated by Bell with Fleur Bresler and artists Holzapfel, Mark Lindquist and Sartorius, Sept. 24, at noon; a gallery talk with Fleur Bresler, Oct. 6 and Dec. 1, at noon; and an artist talk and book signing with Ellsworth, Nov. 10, at noon.

Members of the Capital Area Woodturners, Chesapeake Woodturners and Montgomery County Woodturners will participate in lathe demonstrations Tuesdays, from noon to 1 p.m., and the second Saturday of the month, from 2 to 4 p.m., Sept. 28 through Jan. 30. Complete program descriptions are available online at americanart.si.edu.

Credit

“A Revolution in Wood: The Bresler Collection” is organized and circulated by the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Windgate Charitable Foundation generously supported the publication. The James Renwick Alliance contributed generously to the film, exhibition and public programs. The Collectors of Wood Art provided funding for the exhibition.

About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its Renwick Gallery, located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W., is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Website: americanart.si.edu.

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