

A Revolution in Wood

The Bresler Collection

A Revolution in Wood celebrates the gift of sixty-six pieces of turned and carved wood to the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum by the distinguished collectors Fleur and Charles Bresler. Their gift is one of the most significant in the Renwick's history and one of the largest of wood art to any American museum, establishing at the gallery one of the preeminent public collections of the medium in the United States.

“Wood turning” describes the act of shaping a block of wood with hand-held tools as it spins on a lathe. The technique has been employed in carpentry for centuries, but has only been investigated as a means for producing unique works of art in this country since about the 1940s. Interest in the technique increased dramatically during the early 1970s when many in craft questioned how to maintain individual creative expression in a field experiencing rapid institutionalization. The lack of aesthetic or technical preconceptions about wood art and the relative accessibility of the process made the medium attractive to a legion of makers that continues to grow unabated.

The Bresler collection illustrates the scope of their success. Through works by the country's best-known wood artists, this exhibition highlights the growing sophistication of American craft's youngest medium and the expressive capacity of its most organic material.

All gifts unless otherwise noted were given to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by Fleur and Charles Bresler in honor of Kenneth R. Trapp, curator-in-charge of the Renwick Gallery (1995–2003).

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THE LATHE

The lathe spins an object---typically a block of wood or piece of metal---so that it can be shaped with hand-held tools, such as a gouge. The technology dates as far back as the Bronze Age and has been called the first machine tool. Variants of the lathe---including strap, bow, treadle, great-wheel, and pole-powered models---developed independently in several European and Asiatic cultures. Pole and great-wheel varieties were powered, respectively, by a treadle and a crank and predominated as the models of choice for early-American furniture makers and turners, who employed them in the manufacture of bowls, spindles, and minor architectural elements.

Wood turning was standardized during the Industrial Revolution and was overlooked as a medium appropriate for personal expression until well into the twentieth century, when a handful of artists, designers, and hobbyists began to experiment with shaping household wares on the lathe. Yet the technology's association with mass-production stigmatized it in the eyes of many, and turning was largely ignored as a viable medium during the postwar boom years of the studio craft movement.

A growing number of inquisitive makers took up wood turning during the early 1970s 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 and objects turned inspired a fledgling community of American artists to become woodturners.

The Bresler collection illustrates evolving techniques and aesthetics in the field, including the incorporation of secondary materials and a strong focus on carving, that have led to increased use of the term "wood art" rather than "wood turning" to describe the medium. But the field's foundational tool is here to stay. Artist Michael Hosaluk comments: "Although the lathe is often the simplest tool we use, and we may use it only sparingly, none of us would be here today without it."

WOOD

Artists, hobbyists, and collectors are united by their mutual admiration for the material that defines contemporary wood art. How to find it, treat it, shape it, and display each wood's innate qualities is a subject of personal exploration for each artist and of relentless discussion in the field.

Since the industrialization of wood turning, manufacturers have prized uniformity in stock for a consistent product---a priority that served only to hinder the perception of wood turning as a medium appropriate for inclusion in studio craft's developmental push following World War II. The Bresler collection demonstrates how far wood art has moved past that hurdle and the phenomenal range of visual character inherent in craft's most organic material.

Many artists represented in this exhibition locate wood for their work and scavenge stock from their immediate surroundings. Loggers near Michelle Holzapfel's Vermont studio collect cherry and maple burls for her to carve. David Ellsworth scours his Pennsylvania property for fallen maple, ash, and oak. Hawaii's Derek Bencomo and California's Bruce Mitchell turn Norfolk Island pine and redwood, respectively, imbuing their work with a pronounced regionalism.

Exotic woods have also grown increasingly popular with American artists as they have become available. The collection includes works made from mahogany, ebony, pink ivorywood, kingwood, rosewood, bloodwood, madrone, purpleheart, and African blackwood. Woods previously considered inferior or inappropriate for turning have also been "rehabilitated" through the determination of the most dedicated wood artists. Perhaps most notably, Melvin Lindquist pioneered the turning of spalted (partially decomposed) stock through the development of special tools.

Ultimately, each wood responds differently to being shaped on the lathe, and it is a point of pride among wood artists to understand the physical properties of their materials. Indeed, the rise of wood art in the second half of the twentieth century has led many practitioners to become amateur arborists.

FUNCTION VS. SCULPTURE

Contemporary wood art's roots lay in the history of making things for use. Spindles, banisters, chair legs, and bowls were all staples of the preindustrial turner's craft. The lathe's long-term association with function continued through the modern era's early years of experimentation. James Prestini, Bob Stocksdale, and Rude Osolnik focused their efforts on turning basic household items such as bowls, platters, and candlesticks, some of which gained early attention from the commercial design community. When wood turning's following grew in the 1970s, a major draw was the relative ease of producing basic, functional items that could be sold for a measure of financial independence.

The evolution of the field toward a more sculptural aesthetic occurred gradually and was driven by an innovative group of artists. Mark Lindquist increasingly bold style jolted many into seeing wood through a different lens. Frank Cummings, J. Paul Fennell, and William Hunter pierced their vessels, negating function. Other artists 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 twenty 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 Michael Lee, Janel Jacobson, and Norm Sartorius exists strictly for contemplation and exhibits a preciousness typically reserved for objets d'art. Many of the extraordinary carved works of Ron Fleming and Michelle Holzapfel may resemble functional forms but are pure sculpture.

THE VESSEL

The vessel is one of the earliest forms of material culture. As long as we have known how to shape basic environmental elements, such as stone, grass, and wood, we have made vessels to carry water and food. Usually in the form of a bowl, the vessel was a frequent object of production by preindustrial woodturners, who met an avid market for household wares that were more affordable than comparable forms in ceramic, glass, or metal.

When at the middle of the twentieth century a handful of artists reapproached the lathe as a tool for individualized production, the vessel provided a natural form for them to explore. Rude Osolnik's turned bowls exemplify the simple but graceful aesthetic favored during this period.

The widely divergent tactics that David Ellsworth and Mark Lindquist employed to create their works illustrate the vessel's suitability as a canvas for technical experimentation. Ellsworth's introduction of "blind-turning," in which vessels are hollowed out through a small opening, and Lindquist's aggressively hewn works helped inspire a generation of makers to approach the burgeoning medium through the vessel's classic form---and to challenge it. The field's shift toward sculpture is most striking in objects whose overall design is rooted in function, such as the expansive but punctured bowl by Derek Bencomo or the pierced latticework vase by J. Paul Fennell. Uncomplicated forms by Galen Carpenter and Mike Shuler that use unusual materials suggest the vessel will continue to serve as a vehicle for testing the limits of wood art. That the vessel is the most common form in the Bresler collection reflects the tastes of the collector, but also its inherent versatility and role as the foundational muse of contemporary wood art.

LATHE DEMONSTRATIONS

Tuesdays, September–January, 12–1 p.m.

Second Saturdays, September–January, 2–4 p.m.

Join members of the Capital Area Woodturners, Chesapeake Woodturners, and Montgomery County Woodturners as they demonstrate how artists created the unique objects seen in *A Revolution in Wood*.

Derek A. Bencomo
born Torrance, CA 1962; resides Maui, HI
Hana Valley, First View, from the "Peaks and Valleys Series," 1995--1997
milo
2003.60.2

Derek Bencomo moved from his native California to Hawaii in 1984 to pursue a quieter lifestyle. He became interested in wood turning after being exposed to native woods and the history of island craftsmanship. This work is turned and carved from a century-old section of milo, a wood traditionally used for making vessels and canoes. Its flared edge evokes the rugged landscape of Maui, his home, as well as the curling waves he loves to surf.

M. Dale Chase
born Grand Rapids, MI 1934--died Penn Valley, CA 2007
First Gold Box, about 1996
14k gold
2003.60.6a-b

A vascular surgeon, Dale Chase acquired a Holtzapffel lathe in 1974 and retired from medicine almost twenty years later to pursue ornamental turning full time. The title of this work marks the artist's long "sabbatical" from wood, when he turned gold, silver, steel, jade, and quartz boxes. Chase estimates that he made twenty practice pieces before executing the engraving, or guilloche, on this box.

Ornamental turning is a subfield of contemporary wood art in which specialized lathes are employed to carve intricate geometric patterns at diminutive scale on the surface of wood and other materials. It is practiced by only a few hundred dedicated individuals, in part because the lathes and accompanying tools of choice were manufactured during the nineteenth century and are exceedingly rare.

David Ellsworth
born Iowa City, IA 1944; resides Quakertown, PA
Patan, from the "Solstice Series," 1991
ash and metallic fabric paint
2003.60.10

The "Solstice Series" was David Ellsworth's first foray into applying color to the surface of his work and has been referred to as his "Dylan-goes-electric" moment because of the initial reactions it elicited (since softened) from the wood-turning community. The charred and painted exteriors evoke the tumultuous political climate at the inception of the series, while the string of holes dramatically reveals the interior of the piece, often inaccessible in his work.

Ron Fleming
born Oklahoma City, OK 1937; resides Tulsa, OK
Red Fern, 1995
box elder
2003.60.15

Perhaps more than any other wood artist working today, Ron Fleming demonstrates that carving can enhance the organic aesthetic so highly desired in wood turning. A graphic illustrator, he often sketches a completed vessel, transfers the design to the surface of the wood, then carves along the figure, or grain, in deference to the wood's inherent design. Inspiration for his floral vessels came from his wife's garden. Patti Fleming was a frequent collaborator in the creation of his work.

Michelle Holzapfel
born Woonsocket, RI 1951; resides Marlboro, VT
Table Bracelet: Promenade Suite, 1997
maple, birch, cherry, and brass
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Fleur Bresler, 1999.8a-j

In 1997 Michelle Holzapfel conducted an "exercise in scale" by creating jewelry for the home rather than the body. Her wall-mounted, seven-by-eleven-foot Spiral Necklace was followed by Table Bracelet, a flexible centerpiece composed of three bowls, two candleholders, three vases, and two "clasps." Perhaps more than any other object in the Bresler collection, Table Bracelet reflects the rapid evolution of wood art away from the conservative forms favored by earlier turners. In spite of this, and its only tangential relationship to the lathe, the Bracelet remains highly functional.

William Hunter
born Long Beach, CA 1947; reside Rancho Palos Verdes, CA
Marianne Hunter
born Los Angeles, CA 1949; resides Rancho Palos Verdes, CA
Africa, 1990
satinwood, ebony, 24k gold, sterling silver, fine silver, enamel, and rutilated quartz
2003.60.27a-c

Much of William Hunter's work in the 1980s occupied a middle ground between ornamental and full-scale turning. Exquisite pieces in amber and ivory were followed by diminutive wooden vessels, decorated with enamels, precious metals, and stones by his wife, Marianne. Their uncommon preciousness appealed to Fleur Bresler, whose family operated a jewelry store. She acknowledges Evening Blossom as the first serious purchase of the collection.

Mark Lindquist
born Oakland, CA 1949; resides Quincy, FL
Ascending Bowl #1, 1992
walnut
2003.60.34

The decision to begin the “Ascending Bowl Series” in 1979 was a difficult one. Mark Lindquist would later reflect, “I had to turn my back on what was traditionally expected of a woodturner and face the apparent surrounding darkness.” Indeed the large scale and dramatic texturing were an anathema to many in the field when basic, functional vessels still predominated. The haphazard cuts made by a chain saw refer not only to Lindquist’s favored mingei, or folk art, aesthetic but also to the “mistakes” of his earliest turning efforts. That this series influenced wood turning’s shift toward sculpture suggests the initial risk has paid off.

Hugh E. McKay
born Long Beach, CA 1951; resides Port Orford, OR
Morata, 1997
madrone burl and pipestone
2003.60.39

Hugh McKay is a master of multi-axis turning whose work often seems to exist just beyond the assumed range of what can be achieved on a lathe. Morata exhibits this virtuosity and the almost violent aesthetic he attributes to nature’s “chaotic character,” which he considers a “higher order of reality.” McKay has long experimented with materials, both by casting wood sculptures in glass and bronze and by incorporating glass, metal, and stone into his turned pieces. The pipestone mantel adorning Morata complements the black madrone and provides a focal point amid the turmoil.

Rude Osolnik
born Dawson, NM 1915 -died Berea, KY 2001
Five Candlesticks, 1988
macassar ebony
2003.60.44a-e

Rude Osolnik claimed to have turned more than one hundred fifty thousand candlesticks in his career, a form that achieved widespread commercial popularity through its purely modern aesthetic and obvious functionality. Deployed in homes across the country, the candlesticks helped educate the American public about the benefits of a previously neglected art. In 1955 they received the Award of Good Design from the Furniture Association of America.

Norm Sartorius
born Salisbury, MD 1947; resides Parkersburg, WV
Algerita Family, 1998
algerita burl
2003.60.48a-c

Norm Sartorius was drifting through life as a “disenchanted social worker” when he was rescued by the offer to apprentice at a Baltimore woodshop in the early 1970s. He quickly fell into small-scale production work and nurtured an early and uncommon interest in spoons, which he considers just another category, similar to “bowl,” “plate,” or “teapot.” Spurred by the interest and encouragement of others, Sartorius gradually developed his spoons into objects more appropriate for contemplation than everyday use. The unique design of each spoon is governed by the individual properties of its stock. The appeal of his work derives from its tactility and the inherent value of its function.

Lincoln Seitzman
born New York City 1923; resides West Long Branch, NJ
Petrified Hopi Basket Second Mesa, 1993
guatambu, wenge, bloodwood, and lacewood
2003.60.53

Lincoln Seitzman earned a degree in aeronautical engineering and operated his family’s textile manufacturing business for thirty-five years before pursuing turning as an avocation. This unique background prepared him to create some of the most complex works in contemporary wood art. Seitzman meticulously drafts each basket “illusion” on paper before constructing it from as many as five thousand segments. The results are not meant to fool in the tradition of trompe l’oeil, but to celebrate the sophistication of fiber art in diverse cultures through an unexpectedly complementary medium.

Mark Sfirri
born Chester, PA 1952; resides New Hope, PA
Glancing Figure, 1997
walnut
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Fleur and Charles Bresler, 1998.137

Mark Sfirri studied furniture making at the Rhode Island School of Design under the influential woodworker Tage Frid, who encouraged him to use the department’s lathe. Sfirri now teaches at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania, which offers the rare opportunity to turn wood in an academic environment. Turned from walnut, a wood popular in early Pennsylvania furniture, Glancing Figure unfurls from a traditional eighteenth-century table leg with a padfoot to a figural form, capturing the evolution of wood turning from functional craft to sculptural medium.

Mark Sfirri

born Chester, PA 1952; resides New Hope, PA

Rejects from the Bat Factory, 1996

mahogany, curly maple, cherry, zebrawood, cocobolo, and
lacewood

2003.60.56a-f

Mark Sfirri's interest in multi-axis turning grew after observing the technique employed in the manufacture of seventeenth-century chairs. After his son requested a home-turned bat for little-league games, the artist realized that the classic American form offered the perfect vehicle for experimenting with multi-axis techniques.

Mike Shuler

born Trenton, NJ 1950; resides Santa Cruz, CA

Monterey Pinecone Vase #602, 1991

Monterey pine with epoxy resin

2003.60.59

Mike Shuler's series of vases called "Organica" explores the turning properties of unusual materials, unlikely to have met the lathe before. Monterey Pinecone Vase follows his natural predilection to use every part of the tree to a logical, yet surprising, conclusion. With Protea Blossom Vase, he goes further, crafting a simple vessel from a material that is anything but simple—a flower blossom encased in resin. This work begs the question if future proponents of the lathe will not only question the term "turning" to describe their medium, but the word "wood" as well.