

Keynote Address: “A View of Ourselves” ...by David Ellsworth.

Presented on the occasion of the 4th Annual Conference of the Collectors of Wood Art, plus “Turning Wood Into Art”, the Arthur & Jane Mason Collection that opened at the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, 19 May 2000, Charlotte, N.C., Mark Leach, Director.

Good morning, and welcome! This is the fourth gathering of the Collectors of Wood Art that began with another remarkable event that was conceived and finely crafted by Robyn and John Horn at their home in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1997. It occurred to me that, not unlike the beginnings of the American Association of Woodturners; “When you think you have a good idea, you to try to create a ‘comfort zone’ by surrounding yourself with people who also think you have a good idea. And in order to do this, you must first find out who those people really are.”

Well, this is a unique group, because in attendance today are representatives of virtually all the styles and types of individuals who make up the “World of Wood Art” as we know it today. In effect, they are first the Makers, namely the artists and craftspersons whose works have provided the inspiration for these events. Then we have the Disseminators, meaning the gallery owners, museum curators, critics, writers and editors. And we have the Acquisitioners, which, of course, are the buyers and collectors. Now I only make a distinction between a ‘buyer’ and a ‘collector’, because it’s common knowledge among us Makers that a ‘collector’ becomes a ‘collector’ only after the acquisition of their 2nd work of turned wood art. Best yet, we have a distinguished group of invited guests who, as personal friends of Jane and Arthur Mason, might even be called the Visionaries of our group. You see, they have come here - whether they knew it or not - to see what all this excitement is about, and to become so inspired that they might be encouraged to join the previous category...first as buyers, and possibly by the end of the weekend, even as collectors.

Now, if any of you might question the impact of events like these, I can only reflect on a ‘letter to the editor’ that I read a few years ago in American Woodworker magazine. A woman wrote in saying, “I gave my husband a birthday present of going to a woodturning weekend...and he never returned!”

So part of my job here today, is to help create that 'comfort zone' by helping us...through my own personal experiences and totally unbiased opinions...to learn a bit more about who we are, and how the field of wood art has evolved up to this point.

First...The MAKERS:

In an effort to help discover who we are, I'd like to begin by looking at the Makers. And to do that, I'd like to go back to what life was like in the early 1970's, when I became a full-time studio woodturner.

Let me say that there was barely a handful of full-time woodturners in the US who were surviving at this craft in the early-70's, and even fewer galleries who were brave enough to handle their work. Most of the turners were scattered around the country, some didn't even know that the other's existed, and almost none of them had ever met one another.

Of the turners whose works have had the greatest influence on the field of contemporary turning today, I will begin with **James Prestini**.

....Prestini basically defined the term 'Modern' design in woodturning with his exceptionally beautiful, 'pure forms' (as they were called at the time) that he made from 1933-1953.

When I first met him in 1977, he was working in sculpture, had already retired as a professor in the design department at UC Berkeley and hadn't turned a bowl in over 20 years. But he was very much a vitally alert and inspiringly creative individual. He also had a great love for fine wines...so, of course, I was forced to sample his latest acquisition whenever I visited his home in Berkeley.

...Next is **Rude Osolnik** who was teaching woodworking at Berea College in Kentucky by day and turning the rest of the day and most of the night. Rude had a large stash of wood, and along with his one-of-a-kind pieces, he was also one of the greatest production turners of the era. He was also a savvy horse trader, and it was common for me to leave a few of my finished pieces in trade for some of his finer chunks of rosewood. And he would drink just about anything you put in front of him. His great love was moonshine, so, of course, I was forced to sample his latest acquisition whenever I visited his home in Berea.

...**Ed Moulthrop** was a well known architect in Atlanta before he started developing the techniques to turn his large bowl forms...most of this involved learning how to control the use of polyethylene glycol, plus those harpoon-length hooked tools that tended to want to throw him up and over his home-made lathe. You probably remember that he photographed his kids inside of the bowls to give them some scale – the bowls that is - and I once asked him if they really liked to play inside of them, or had he actually sent them in there to do his sanding!

...**Bob Stocksdale** was turning bowls in his basement in Berkeley that had a ceiling that was not much taller than himself, and happily blowing dust into his neighbor's yard. In 1978, I made a special trip to his home to introduce myself and when he met me at the door he said, "Come on in and meet my wife, Kay. She's the famous one." We soon went to his basement to look at wood and that's where I watched him turn with the gouge for the first time...which was one of the reasons I went there. I left with a lovely bowl made of Ceylon ebony that cost me only \$125, and it was the best lesson I ever paid for. The year before I had seen one of his Lignum Vitae bowls for sale in Frazer's department store in downtown Berkeley that was only \$49.95 retail. Unfortunately, I didn't buy it, but I later reminded myself of the phrase that, "The price of art goes up". And that was the second lesson I learned that day.

...**Stephen Hogbin** was scouring junkyards in Canada to find truck axles large enough to turn his laminated sculptural furniture. He'd recently been featured on the cover of the Woodcraft Supply catalog, which was about the best exposure one could get in those days. I didn't realize until I met him in 1980 that he was such a brilliant designer, or that the impact of his work would have such a profound influence on much of the work done today, both here and in Australia. In fact, when he submitted one of his pieces from the "Walking Bowl" series to a show I was jurying, I gave him a call and swept it up before the show even opened.

...**Melvin Lindquist** worked as an engineer for GE in Schenectady, NY, but spent most of his off time trying to figure out what to do with all that rotten wood laying around in the forests of the Northeast before his son, **Mark**, could sneak it away to make salad bowls with bark inclusions that leaked salad oil...and then astounding everyone by calling them "art" and actually trying to sell them for real money. Most people don't realize that Mel turned

spalted wood for twenty-five years on a Shopsmith lathe in a room with no ventilation; or that at 89, he's still turning at their current home in Quincy, Florida; and that he's still trying to keep Mark from telling him what he should and shouldn't do when designing a piece. And what no one knows, is that I once spent a few days working at their home in Henniker, New Hampshire, just after Mark had finished building his new studio. Unfortunately, because I was turning pieces of wet wood, I left a large streak of moisture up the walls and across his freshly painted ceiling above his lathe...which is probably the reason he didn't get out of bed the next morning to say good-bye when I left.

...**Mark** would of course go on to develop a variety of innovative techniques involving complex and highly controlled surface textures using a chain saw. And he is probably best noted for his extensive design developments through the use of spalted wood, natural-edge burl bowls, totemic sculpture, and most recently, the use of robotics...which basically means that Mel no longer has to hold the bowls while Mark is cutting with the chain saw!

Let me emphasize that this gang of characters were by no means the only turners doing exciting work during this era, but that they were the early innovators who helped re-shape traditional woodturning by bringing it into the Modern Movement of Craft. In fact, by 1982, the primary design elements that make up this movement had already been established. They are: bowls, vessels, hollow forms, spindles, furniture and sculpture...and everything being done today relates in some way to those six primary design elements.

The question is, how did we get from then to now. Part of the answer is the impact of Fine Woodworking magazine, which began in 1975, and was the only national showcase magazine at the time for what was happening in the field of woodworking. Second would be the Rhinebeck, San Francisco and Baltimore craft shows that were sponsored by the American Craft Enterprises. It was at these shows that turners had a chance to meet artists from all the other media fields, make contacts with gallery owners whom we hoped would display our work, and, of course, try to sell enough work to pay for our trip home. And third would be the Woodturning Symposiums that were organized by Albert and Alan LeCoff, and Palmer Sharpless and held at the George School in Newtown, Pennsylvania, north of Philadelphia. These symposiums were held twice each year from 1976 to 1981. They were the first formal teaching venues held in the country, and they became the stimulus for all the teaching forums that have occurred since.

It was at these symposiums that students had a chance to meet all the big named turners, as well as people who were new to the field, and who would become known over the years not only for their works, but also their teaching skills. And it was also here that we established the, “If you don’t want to share your ideas, don’t bother to come” philosophy that has become a hallmark of woodturning instruction ever since.

As an outgrowth of these symposiums, Dale Nish, of Provo, Utah, began a series of annual conferences at Brigham Young University that he would steward for twenty years. The combination of these events and his three excellent books on woodturning techniques were instrumental in helping galvanize the entire field. I might also say that in the late ‘70’s, I used to drive the eight hours across the mountains from my cabin in Colorado to get wood from him, which wasn’t easy since he was as good a horse trader as Rude, and both were better than me. But Dale has a generous heart. In fact, I would stash a small bottle of whiskey in his kitchen cupboard, just in case I forgot to pick some up when I crossed the state line into Utah. Noreen obviously didn’t mind, because it was always there when I returned. Then, when he came to my cabin in 1981 to interview me for his third book, *Master Woodturners*, he brought his own stash: In this case, two six-packs of Coca-Cola and the biggest box of chocolate cream-filled Oreo cookies you ever saw.

The next step in this legacy of learning was to establish week-long classes at multi-media craft schools like Penland, Haystack, the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Peter’s Valley and, of course, Arrowmont. We also organized a series of conferences at Berea College, the College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, BYU in Provo, and again, at Arrowmont in 1985...which is where the American Association of Woodturners was formed. We then have the formation of the Wood Turning Center in 1986, and, finally, a number of private tutoring opportunities that began with Russ Zimmerman’s classes at his home in Putney, Vermont, and that now include schools run by John Jordan, Bonnie Klein and myself.

While this has certainly been an ambitious 25 year period, there is something missing from this picture. What’s missing is that unlike the media fields of ceramics, glass, jewelry, fiber and wood working, there isn’t a single university in the western world that offers an advanced degree program focused specifically on woodturning. And without these programs, our field has been limited in its ability to excel on an equal plane with the other

media fields when it comes to understanding the basics of design, aesthetics, problem solving and personal creative development.

Another casualty of not having academic support in woodturning has been our almost total neglect of the importance of the history of objects from other cultures, and of other media that would have helped provide a much-needed level of perspective for the development of our work. In fact, all of the vessel shapes being produced today are derived from objects made in ceramics and basketry, some dating back several thousand years. Similarly, woodturners have virtually no access to the history of contemporary woodturning outside of word-of-mouth associations and back issues of our techno- magazines. It's no wonder that so many turners are reduced to cloning themselves, when their primary source of inspiration comes from the color-glossy photographs of objects that were copied from color-glossy photographs of other copied objects!

Thanks to the archives of the Wood Turning Center, much of this historical reference material is available. And thanks to a collaborative effort by the Yale University Art Gallery and the Wood Turning Center, a history of contemporary woodturning is being compiled. Turners do have an insatiable desire to learn, but I think we who are the teachers of woodturning also have a responsibility to provide our students with a broader perspective on what it means to be a complete "student" of our craft.

Question: How do we help our teachers to explore the aesthetic dimensions of their own creative growth so that they, in turn, can pass this knowledge on to their students? In other words, if we wish to experience the benefits of a field that is art-full, then we need to expand the dimensions of our current learning programs to include art-related topics.

I believe this can be done in the same manner as when we impressed upon our students in the '80's and '90's that the importance of good design was a natural extension of the process of making, rather than something to be feared. It can be done by using the mechanisms of education we already have, namely, our conferences and workshops, and possibly in a collaborative effort between the American Association of Woodturners, the Wood Turning Center and the Collectors of Wood Art. And the results of these efforts could be published in our respective journals. Obviously this will take time to develop and many years to see the results of our efforts.

Now...The DISSEMINATORS:

The anthropologist, Joseph Campbell, in one of his PBS interviews with Bill Moyers, reflected – and I'm paraphrasing here - that 'artists are the gods of society, for they bring us the ideas that ask us to reach beyond ourselves'. Art is often seen as a reflection of society, both in its grandeur and its ugliness, but it can also project changes upon society. So important is the influence of art on culture, that when we look for clues into the cultures of antiquity, what we value most was their art, architecture, and literature.

Museums, of course, have become the repositories for the objects produced in our culture, and museum curators have become the stewards of these collections. Artists have always relied heavily on having their works included in museum collections, for beyond the hype and the whims of any given period in an artist's career, we all need some foundation of credibility to acknowledge our life's work and to accurately establish its place in history. Placing objects of Craft next to paintings and sculpture within our museums, has always been a curious problem, which was only partially solved with the invention of the term "decorative arts".

Fortunately, as the Modern Movement of Craft gained strength, the traditional academic divisions between art and craft began to thaw. Certainly one reason is that by the early '80's, excellence in both aesthetics and conceptual development of Craft had reached such a high level that curators could no longer deny that serious artistic statements were being made. A second reason for this re-defining of old standards, in my opinion, may have been that there just wasn't much happening in painting and sculpture over the past few decades that was worth getting excited about. Craft, on the other hand, established itself with both vibrancy and excitement, and it was readily accessible to the general public. And third, as we can see from the effort Mark Leach has invested here at the Mint Museum, we have a new breed of museum curator; namely, people who have become tired of defending the dusty old dungeons of academic traditions and more interested in investing time, space and money into the artwork of the 'here' and 'now'.

Our museum curators have always relied on the progressive efforts of artists, and I especially recall a lecture given by Tom Buechner of the Corning Museum of Glass in 1987, when he

said that the most valuable thing that artists can do for themselves is to continue to do good work.

The role of the gallery has, of course, been critical to the survival of the arts, because the galleries are not only the distributors of artwork, they also function as the eyes and ears to museum curators. Basically, galleries and artists are in the same business, each depending on the reputation and the credibility of the other in an effort to succeed. But being in the gallery business is a tough row to hoe. It's extremely competitive, the costs of advertising and overhead are high, and sales are dependent primarily on the public's discretionary income that is, in turn, a reflection of the health of our economy.

Another one of the great unknowns in marketing artwork, comes through the Internet. Web pages seem to be an excellent way of exposing one's work to the marketplace, especially for those who don't yet have gallery representation. And there are now on-line galleries, some of which handle a selected stable of artists, and some that will accept everything from sculpture to straw dolls. Marketing through the Internet is an exciting concept, including the potential for secondary market sales. But at the moment, it's still too early to know what this potential really is. What we do know is that direct sales on the Internet are also a direct threat to the survival of the galleries. And if accurate records of these sales are not kept, as will likely be the case, the history and provenance of these objects will be lost. No gallery wants to compete with their own artists who are making direct sales, so it seems prudent for artists and galleries to use the Internet as a collaborative tool by linking their efforts through their respective web sites. Also, galleries now have the capability to post entire exhibitions on the Net. So, in the future, we can only hope that clients will bother to visit the galleries to experience the works first hand before they commit to a purchase.

Critics have at times been considered a barometer of the arts, but I fear that they have never succeeded in addressing the "language of Craft" from their academic foundations in "art-speak". Moreover, most magazines today don't publish art criticism, simply because no one seems to want to take the time to translate it. What I do encourage are well-written reviews of exhibitions. In this way, more people in the field will become exposed to the works being shown, plus we could add to an expanded language base that would be both comprehensive and directly applicable to our roots of the crafted arts.

And finally...the ACQUISITIONERS:

While everyone has their own interpretation of the term “beauty”, I’m sure we all know the excitement of acquiring and living with objects whose beauty so enriches our lives. The passion we have seen by the buyers and collectors of turned wood objects over the past quarter-Century is clearly a direct reflection of the passion we Makers have in producing these objects.

Equally important is what these collectors have done with the works in their collections. Not only have collectors supported artist’s visions through their acquisitions, they have also contributed immensely to the education of the general public by giving the field of woodturning the level of credibility that it so richly deserves as a legitimate art form. This has been accomplished by donating objects for induction into the permanent collections of museums, plus loaning and donating entire portions of their collections to museums for public exhibitions. Equally important, collectors have provided the means for publishing books that document the scope of their collections, which subsequently preserves their place in the history of the Modern Movement of Craft. For example: Beginning with Edward Jacobson’s, “The Art of Turned Wood Bowls” in 1985, major museums throughout the country have now exhibited the collections of Dr. Irving Lipton, Dorothy and George Saxe, Ruth and David Waterbury, Anita and Ron Wornick, Robyn and John Horn, Robert Bohlen, and, as we see here today, Jane and Arthur Mason.

There are, of course, certain responsibilities that every buyer assumes. Once you’ve made that 2nd purchase, you need to hire a secretary. The reason for this is that when you become known as a ‘collector’, you will soon become inundated with a mountain of mail from every gallery and woodturner in the Western World who wishes to include their “latest and greatest” as part of your growing collection. Upon receiving your first mailing, it would also be a good idea to hire an architect and a lighting engineer to begin re-designing the interior of your house so that you can properly display your acquisitions. Whatever you do, be sure to include a light table, a slide library and plenty file cabinets, because most artists keep lousy records and you’ll soon find that you are in charge of keeping their records as well as your own. Another good plan is to commandeer one of your kids bedrooms as your new ‘collector’s office’. They don’t really need it, and they can always double up. Besides, they’re all going to leave someday anyway, and when they do come back...and they always

do come back...you will already have re-hired the architect and finished your new home that now has enough room to accommodate your growing collection, and your grandchildren.

Now I speak from some experience, since Wendy and I have acquired nearly 200 objects of craft and art over the last 20 years. We don't actually call ourselves Collectors with a capital 'C', because we don't have the capital to support the careers of all the talented people we know. But we do love being surrounded with the energies of all these people and, being Makers ourselves, we realize that supporting someone else's vision is another way of contributing to our own. My point is that collecting is one of the few legal addictions we have today, and I've always felt it was important not to miss out on the opportunity to support a good habit.

Of course, everyone acquires objects for different reasons. In fact, a number of people have come to me over the years and said they wanted to become collectors, but didn't know where to begin. I suggested that this was an important decision, and that they might start by looking in some of the boxes I just happened to have in the boot of my car!

Seriously, my advice is to take your time and do your research. Look at as much work as you can. Talk with other collectors, gallery owners and turners to find out what excites them. Start out slow to give yourself time to adjust to this excitement, and to grow as you learn from the objects you acquire...and grow you will. Don't freak out if an artist changes their style or moves in a new direction, it's a natural part of the creative process to explore new ideas in order to move forward. Support this growth, even if it means waiting for that 'special' piece that will surely come once this new direction has had time to take a good look at itself. Don't be surprised if you find yourself saying, "I just don't know why I'm drawn to this piece." Well, as we all know: When something stirs from within, you don't need to understand it to develop a long-term relationship. And most importantly, give yourself the time to learn to trust your own instincts! Recall that acquiring artwork, not unlike the process of making it, is part of a long and wonderful journey. You will never be disappointed, and you are guaranteed to bring many wonderful people into your life.

Another interesting aspect about acquiring work is that galleries and collectors always seem to want the pieces that are 'fresh' and 'hot', or 'never before seen'. I've been told this is part of the 'game' of collecting...whatever that means. Don't forget that every object that we

make is 'fresh' and 'hot' when it is being made. In fact, every object is always made at the peak of our abilities. So you might consider looking for older pieces, especially those that represent different stages in an artist's development. Their price, of course, will be more than the original price, because, again, the price of art should go up as an artist's career evolves. But they'll generally be less than the current market price for similar works. Artists who are conscious of their careers will have saved some of these pieces. And because it's the gallery's responsibility to help develop their artist's careers, they too may have stashed away a few of these earlier gems. Furthermore, the price of the works you see today reflects the growth of our field and the reputation of those who have contributed to it. And while not everyone's work is going to increase in value mega-fold over the years, I have yet to see the value of anyone's work go down...including the rocking chair I got from Sam Maloof in 1986.

As all collectors realize, sooner or later you will encounter the conundrum of the balance between the terms 'art' and 'craft'...it's just part of the baggage we inherited from the painters and the potters. I use the term 'balance', because the two are inseparably linked. I also realize that for some, this may be a tired old song. But I would suggest that as soon as woodturners broke with the traditions of their industrial past, they entered into a world that is rich with new concepts, new ideas, and a broader language base. It is a beautiful language, for it engages the "soul" and the "spirit of intent" that is at the heart of the creative process. Of course, it was inevitable – in fact, predictable - that woodturners would encounter this dilemma at this stage in their growth; in fact, all the craft media have done exactly the same thing. A case in point is an article I saw in a photographic magazine titled: "How a century of advances in equipment, and the dedication of talented photographers, transformed a Craft into an Art." I suppose this means that all the dedicated and talented photographers over the past 100 years are now artists. In any case, it certainly does sound familiar.

Now...I'm not aware of anyone who's come up with a usable definition of either 'craft' or 'art', but I can describe the intimacy of the relationship between them, which is that "craft is the foundation from which art can grow." To me, it is that 'can grow' part that's the most interesting, because it speaks of personal choice, interpretation, and intent.

Making the shift from craft to art is, of course, not easy. I like to think of it as being placed into a rich new landscape where there are no maps, no accurate guidelines or distance

markers. The direction one takes is less relevant than the direction one has taken. There are no rules that can't be broken, or formula that can't be changed. And once you feel you have arrived, you're likely to discover that you have just begun...or maybe you were there all the time.

On a purely personal level, I am proud to be both a craftsman and an artist. And when the two shake hands, I know that I am doing really good work.