

OUT OF THE WOODS

IF THIS IS THE MOST RECENT WORD ON WOOD, THEN PERHAPS THE INNOVATION CYCLE OF LATHE-TURNED WOOD IS OVER. INLAY, SURFACE TREATMENTS, CARVING AND "SCULPTURAL TENDENCIES" DILUTE FORM AND LESSEN REVERENCE FOR WOOD OR THE WOOD ITSELF AS SUBJECT MATTER.

BY JOHN PERREAULT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY DIRK BAKKER

How one divides up the various kinds of art that have been labeled craft is not merely an academic project. The process itself helps one see. Our traditional five media divisions—clay, fiber, glass, metal and wood—slice the action into neat cubby-holes. These fiefdoms served medieval guilds and academic turfs and to this day, some swear, indicate psychological proclivities. Wood people are different from clay people; glass people and fiber folks are at opposite ends of the craft spectrum; and metal workers, though as casters and welders they have a hot connection with clay and glass artists, as those who hammer at metal they are on their own. Then again, raised vessels are like thrown ones because they are hollow; but thrown ones are more like lathe-turned wood ones. Perhaps process is more important than material. There are those who think in straight lines, like weavers, and those who think in circles like turners of wood, ceramists and glassblowers. And on and on, until you do not know where you are or who you are.

Surely a love of wood, like the love of glass or clay, can cover a multitude of sins, but I for one question the oil-and-water effect of any wood exhibition that, like "Nature Transformed: Wood Art from the Bohlen Collection," includes both lathe-turned vessels and what purports to be sculpture or, at least work that displays so-called sculptural tendencies, as one of the exhibition subdivisions would have it. If one simply removed the "sculpture" (i.e. the non-vessels) from "Nature Transformed," a stronger, more focused exhibition might have resulted. A collection that would have made more sense as all "apples" was weakened by the presence of too many "pears" and even some "potatoes." Surely any lathe-turned vessel is speaking a different language than a carved wood torso or the otherwise interesting painted wood reliefs of Steven MacGowan. Two-dimensional woodworking invites a comparison to painting, and carved wood, after all, must stand up to Constantin Brancusi.

The exhibition was organized into three broad categories. *The Vessel Unleashed*, in spite of far too many works that strain for originality, was the strongest section. It was, however, not really the vessel that was unleashed but the Frankenstein of surface decoration. *Sculptural Tendencies* was overwhelmingly tabletop

kitsch. One might quip that here, alas, we have proof that when craft pretends to be sculpture it is probably not art. Finally, *Allusions to Nature* came across as meaningless, since all the works in the exhibition could fit this category.

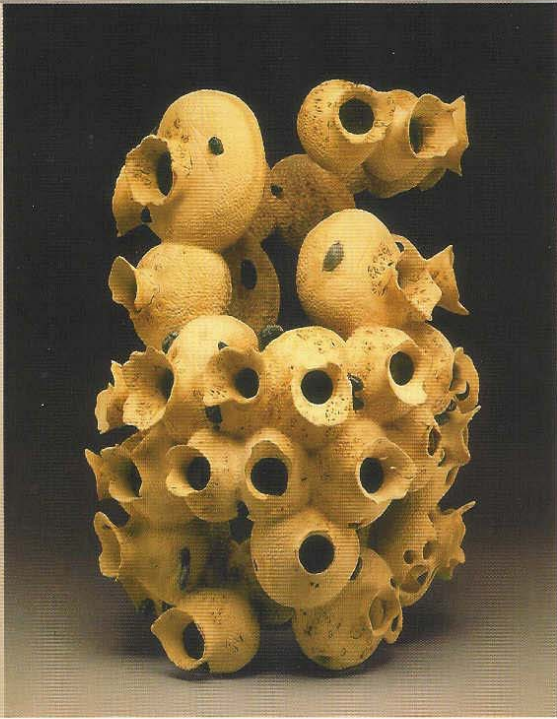
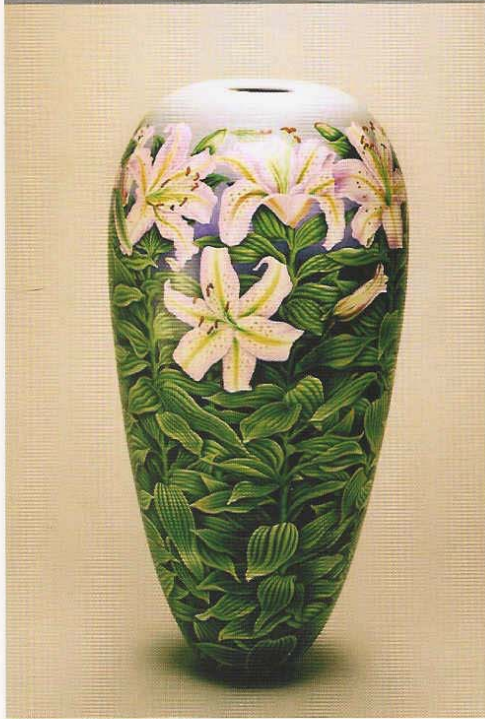
The works look better in isolation in the catalog, each a sealed-off image, than as displayed at the Museum of Arts & Design, New York City,* where pressed for space, they were jammed together and arranged in discordant juxtapositions. Because of the display, fiendishly decorative pieces such as those of Binh Pho or Matthew Hatal and the surface-fetish wing of wood vessels represented by Steve Sinner, Darrell Davis, Ron Fleming and Dick Codding came across as Decorator Art. Rule One: if you want something to be considered art, display it as art, not like bric-a-brac in an antiques mall.

When James Prestini (1908-1993) rescued the lathe-turned wood vessel from hobby art, he was honored in 1949 with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. It was widely agreed he had established that the wood bowl could be a work of art. But now, judging by this catchall survey—coming on the heels of a brilliant run of lathe-turned vessels—the old battle will need to be fought all over again.

Perhaps I am overreacting. Rarely are collectors the world's best curators. The late Edward Jacobson was an exception: his 1985-86 traveling show of turned wood vessels, which was my own introduction to the depths of turned wood, remains a touchstone of this refined art. Most collectors, however, shop and invest. Focus and taste are rare, good intentions notwithstanding. This occurs not only in craft but in painting and sculpture too. "Nature Transformed" at MAD overlapped with another uneven collection across the street at the Museum of Modern Art, the Broida Collection, which also could have used more weeding. But what are museums to do when the runaway art market and/or expansion initiatives make purchases difficult and there, standing on the loading dock, is the proverbial gift horse?

How does the Bohlen Collection measure up? Does it add to previous high-profile surveys that were more elegantly focused? Through it can we learn how wood art is moving, discover new talent, question received opinion and further develop an aesthetic

OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DEWEY GARRETT—*Tosca* (left), 13½ by 10½ by 10½ inches, UMMA, and *Aida*, 12¼ by 9½ by 9½ inches, MAD, both 2000, palm, dye; ALAIN MAILLAND—*The Stone Eater*, 2000, elm burl, Italian stones, 17 by 12 by 12 inches; RON FLEMING—*Yama Yuri*, 2001, basswood, acrylic paint, 36 by 17 by 17 inches.



BELOW: JOHN JORDAN—*Boxelder Vessel*, 1996, box elder, 14¼ by 9 by 9 inches, UMMA. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STONEY LAMAR—*Untitled*, 1996, madrone, 26 by 16 by 6 inches, UMMA; DICK CODDING—*Untitled*, 2000, Norfolk Island pine, mahogany, oxidized copper tacks, 12 by 9½ by 9½ inches; TODD HOYER—*Untitled, Suspended Sphere Series*, 2000, eucalyptus, wire, 20¼ by 17½ by 8¼ inches, UMMA; BINH PHO—*Kimono #3*, 2001, olive, ash, bamboo, acrylic paint, 10¼ by 8½ by 6¾ inches, UMMA.

for the medium and thence for craft art in general?

If this is the most recent word on wood, then perhaps the innovation cycle of lathe-turned wood is over. Inlay, surface treatments, carving and "sculptural tendencies" dilute form and lessen reverence for wood or the wood itself as subject matter. Am I alone in suspecting a kind of wood rococo—a lessening of formal and therefore of expressive standards? Has the straining for individuality begun to yield only novelty? It was good to see work by favorites such as Ron Kent, Dennis Elliott, Dale Nish, Todd Hoyer and Stoney Lamar, all of whom are holding their own.

Here and there were some discoveries for me. Trent Bosch's *Sienna Series*, 1999, seems to have peeled away a layer of white ash to find a bowl emerging from a bowl; Dewey Garrett's dyed palm bowls, one red and the other yellow, both 2000, display an outstanding grasp of form, color and texture; John Jordan's high-shouldered *Boxelder Vessel*, 1996, gives texture to light, and Alain Mailland's *The Stone Eater*, 2000, composed of clustered jugs, demonstrates considerable talent, although other pieces suggest he might profit from more focus.

The fully illustrated catalog has educative essays by MAD's David McFadden and the Australian editor, writer and artist Terry Martin. McFadden's optimistically titled "Wood Sculpture Today" focuses on wood qua wood. Martin, with a few more ecological overtones, does the same in his essay "Wood Art: The Alignment of Intent with Nature's Bounty." Janice Blackburn's "Turning to Wood: A Curator Responds to the Art Form" should be given points merely because her choice as an essayist is most unusual. She works for Sotheby's London as the curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts Exhibitions and before that was assistant curator for the notoriously avant-garde Saatchi Collection. Since neither position quite qualifies her to write about wood and, I must add, the fact that exhibitions of merchandise "curated" for an auction house are not exactly required to be scholarly, she admittedly struggled with her assigned subject matter. "My first reaction when invited to contribute an essay," she writes, "was to ask, 'Why me?'" Confessing her lack of knowledge, she nevertheless goes on to be quite insightful.

All three authors have a difficult time formulating a consistent discourse around the varied group of 82 objects by 71 artists selected by Sean Ulmer, the curator, from the patently diverse collection of Robert and Lillian Montalto Bohlen. The secret of the bookings, however, may be that many of the works have been donated to the University of Michigan Museum of Art, where the exhibition originated, and to the Museum of Arts & Design. I hope their acquisitions or collections committees got to pick and choose.

I am not certain that "Nature Transformed" is an accurate survey of the state of wood art, which might have been its only museological justification. In any case, what is really needed

now is to move beyond the general survey to concentrations on particular artists. Post-Prestini pioneers Bob Stocksdale and Rude Osolnik have been taken care of elsewhere, but what of David Ellsworth and Mark Lindquist and of Howard Werner, who is not even in this exhibition, or of the important women artists, such as Virginia Dotson, Michelle Holzapfel, Robyn Horn and Merryll Saylan, who have been omitted. Of course, one does not know if the curator's taste is at fault or if these artists are simply not in the Bohlen Collection. We need to solidify and reinforce the turned wood aesthetic, even if only to seal off and document a movement that after six decades may have run its course. ■

*The exhibition premiered at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA), Ann Arbor (June 12-October 3, 2004), and completed its tour at MAD (May 18-September 10, 2006). *Nature Transformed: Wood Art from the Bohlen Collection*, 176 pages, published 2004 by UMMA in association with Hudson Hills Press, Manchester, VT, is \$50 from the press, 802-362-6450. The works in the collections of UMMA and MAD are gifts of Robert M. and Lillian Montalto Bohlen.

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