

The Center for Art in Wood

A new era begins

Mark Sfirri



The Wood Turning Center, under the leadership of co-founder and executive director Albert LeCoff, took on some ambitious projects over the past year, including changing its name to The Center for Art in Wood, adopting a new mission statement, and moving to a new location. To mark the occasion of its 25th anniversary, an exhibition was produced, accompanied by a lavish catalog to tell the story of twenty-five years of woodturning, using objects from the Center's permanent collection.

The Center had traditionally focused on turned wooden objects, but exhibitions in recent years have included wood pieces that were not turned, as well as works in other media. While turning still plays an important role at the Center, the word *turning* has been removed from its name. The Center's

new mission statement defines the change in scope:

The Center for Art in Wood, formerly the Wood Turning Center, is an arts and educational institution whose mission is leading the growth, awareness, appreciation and promotion of artists and their creation and design of art in wood and wood in combination with other materials.

The Center has left a much smaller and more remote location and is now at 141 North 3rd Street, still in Philadelphia, but in the heart of Old City. It is located strategically amid three major craft galleries, Wexler, Moderne, and Snyderman, where it is able to draw many more visitors. This new space, nearly double the size of the old, was completely renovated into a modern, professional

gallery and research center. The research and permanent collection areas are located on the second floor mezzanine overlooking the spacious gallery, which has twenty-foot ceilings and ten-foot-high by ten-foot-wide movable walls that allow reconfiguration of the exhibition space as needed.

Opening night exhibit

This exhibition inaugurating the new space contains vessels, as one would expect, but also furniture, metal work, collaborative work, drawings, other media, and a video installation to help tell the story. It is something of a Who's Who of woodturners. Curiously, it is also a Who's Who of who is not in the exhibit. Familiar names like Ellsworth, Lindquist, Saylan, Hogbin, and Osolnik are in, but equally familiar ►



Visitors' first glimpse as they enter the Center.



Exhibit gallery



Permanent collection and archives



Opening night ceremony

names like Raffan, Key, Hosaluk, Scarpino, and Jordan are out. At first this is puzzling, but two factors help explain it. First, a requirement established early in the planning dictated that the exhibited work be selected from the Center's collection. Roughly one object in ten was selected. A number of turners' best or signature work is not in this permanent collection. The reasons for that are complicated, as with any permanent collection. Second, the curator, Gerard Brown, an Assistant Professor and Department Chair, Foundations,

Tyler School of Art at Temple University is not a woodturner and was not aware of the field two years ago when he started this project. He was chosen in part because he was an established fine artist, writer, and academic, and served as the 2011 Resident Scholar for the Center. His status as an outsider allowed him to see the work without influence or habit. In "Notes on a Collection," one of two excellent and thought-provoking essays he wrote for the catalog, he explained, "I learned I was not interested in these objects as

souvenirs or relics or for their status as things that had come down to us from certain makers. To be interested in them in that way would yield a 'greatest hits' parade of the Center, which I've come to respect as an institution but which hardly needs to congratulate itself through such a gesture. I *am* interested in how this collection might propel a conversation forward by creating new conversations between artists and among objects."

Brown saw connections, or as he describes it "conversations,"

between works. For instance, he paired the teacup forms by David Sengel and Merryll Saylan, revealing the similarity of the form but contrast in interpretation. Sengel's has a smooth black finish, save for the rose thorns, which would hamper any attempt to drink from it, while Saylan's has a coarse texture and subtle coloration and is quite large, dwarfing the saucer that holds it. Three of Jim Partridge's burred, scorched, and blackened thick bowl forms, made in 1987, have a medieval quality to them, as if they have been used every day for hundreds of years. In turning, there is a widely accepted goal of thinness. The heft of Partridge's bowls is one of the things that sets them apart. They were displayed with Robyn Horn's similarly thick-walled *Sheoake Geode*, a play of textured and smooth surfaces with a natural finish. William Moore's 1990 piece, *Timna*, is an expertly integrated pedestal bowl form of madrone and copper. David Rodgers's *Something to Put Small Things In* is a carved rocking vessel form that

Robyn Horn, *Sheoake Geode*, 1987, Sheoake, 7" x 8¼" x 6¾" (18 cm x 21 cm x 17 cm)



Merryll Saylan, *Tea Set*, 1997 ITE, Boxelder, 6" x 6" (15 cm x 15 cm)



David Sengel, *Tea Cup*, 1996, Pearwood, black paint, thorns, 3¼" x 5¼" (8 cm x 13 cm)

is supported by a series of yellow polyurethane castings made from a mold of his big toe. This piece was created while he was an International Turning Exchange resident in 1999. (The ITE is an annual residency program organized by the Center since 1995).

The late David Pye was a professor at the Royal College of Art in England and taught Stephen Hogbin there. He also wrote books about craft, most notably *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* and *The Nature & Aesthetics of Design*. Pye's pioneering turned and carved vessels and boxes have beautifully textured surfaces made on a carving machine

that he developed. While the Center may lack important work by some makers, Pye's bifurcated bowl and two sculptural pieces are examples of significant work that does not appear in most private or public collections of turned wood. Turner and graphic artist Ron Fleming's *Echinacea* is exhibited with his original drawing, which shows how an idea translates into a finished object. What is striking about this is that Fleming was able to realize, from two dimensions, the spontaneity and spirit of his vision in the finished work. For some turners, maybe most, the creation of a new work may start with a basic sketch but the form is realized as the ▶



Jim Partridge, *Blood Vessel Series*, 1987, Burr oak, 4½" x 9" x 6¾" (11 cm x 23 cm x 1 cm)

David Pye, *Study in Flower Forms*, 1980, Wood, 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 7" x 3" (16 cm x 18 cm x 8 cm)



William Moore, *Timna*, 1990, Wood, metal, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (26 cm x 29 cm)

piece is being made, clearly not the case here.

Hugh McKay created *Blue Rose* while an ITE resident in 1996. It is a relatively thick-walled vessel composed of pierced rosewood. Many contemporary pierced vessels are thin-walled, and the emphasis is on the contrast of the positive and negative shapes. In this case, the extra thickness of the walls allowed for a more sculptural treatment of the positive elements. McKay cast blue glass pieces that appear as precious stones set in bezels (stone settings in metal jewelry made by hammering the metal over the stone to encapsulate it). He accomplished this by carefully sizing the rosewood to accept the glass inserts. His execution is flawless.

Darlys Ewolt's piece, *Untitled*, is a work in bronze that fits comfortably into this exhibit because of its overall round, vessel form. It has a series of fins that create an undulating rhythm around the top surface. The video installation by Robin Wood, titled *Cor Blimey*, provides a look at the pole turner's work process. At the end of the video he knocks the core block off the interior of the bowl that he is working on. As you see the piece fall, you notice that the gallery floor where you are standing is littered with hundreds of similar blocks, bringing the video experience into real space.

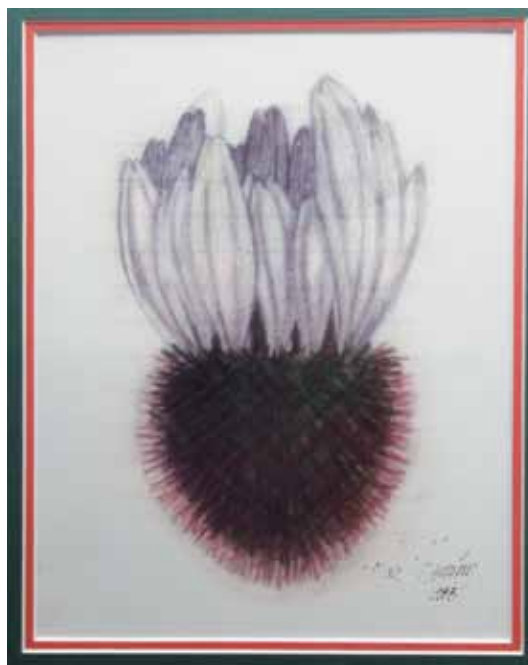
Exhibit catalog

The Center's shows are almost always accompanied by catalogs.

This one is a limited-edition, full-color portfolio, consisting of full-page color images of each of the 108 pieces selected for the retrospective, as well as images of the entire permanent collection, all enclosed in a clamshell box. There are nine essays by seven writers, including Gerard Brown; Elisabeth Agro, a curator of craft and decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (as well as a former ITE resident); Glenn Adamson, Head of Graduate Studies at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (also a former ITE resident); Robin Rice, Member of the Board of Trustees, The Center for Art in Wood, and Adjunct Associate Professor, University of the Arts, Philadelphia (also a former ITE resident); and artist Michelle Holzapfel, who is in the exhibit. Holzapfel gives an insightful and personal account of her experience in a male-dominated field. In reference to a request to review a 1994 exhibit and conference she attended, she wrote, "I overcame my reluctance to speak to the whiff of the locker-room that I had encountered in Tempe. This struggle to illuminate my world still raises the question of its abiding powerlessness. So I conjure courage every time I write." On a subject that applies to the experience of both men and women, she writes, "The Game of Fame is a slippery place, where Aspiration can trip on Ambition. I mostly played 'hide and seek' and learned that laurels can chafe. But my heart is intact."



David Rogers, *Something to Put Small Things In*, 1999 ITE, Polyurethane rigid foam, walnut, 3" x 5" x 14" (8 cm x 13 cm x 36 cm)



(Left) **Ron Fleming**,
Echinacea, 1999, Dogwood burl,
maple, 11" x 9" (28 cm x 23 cm)
Promised Gift, Kaiser Collection

(Right) **Ron Fleming**,
Drawing, 1992, Tissue paper,
pencil, colored pencil, 10" x 8"
(25 cm x 20 cm)
Promised Gift, Kaiser Collection

A new era

The Center began modestly a quarter of a century ago in Albert LeCoff's house. The move, in 2000, to a space that allowed for exhibitions and research was a transformative leap. As dramatic as that was, it is eclipsed by this latest incarnation. The Center is now a destination and consequently has a new audience. From the beginning, none of this would

have been possible without Albert LeCoff's vision and hard work, as well as a supportive board, staff, and funders who continue to enable his visions to be realized. ■

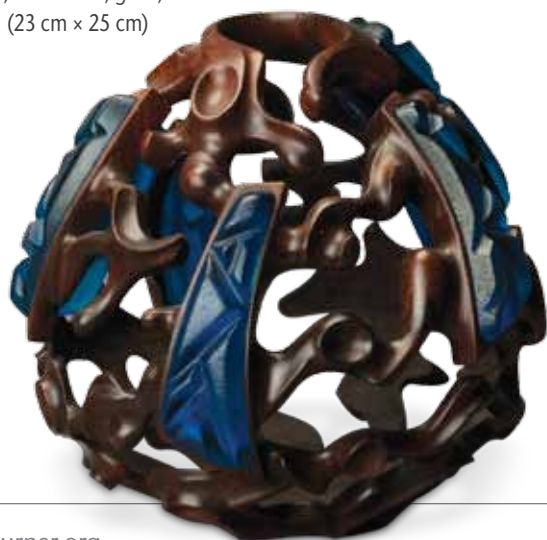
Mark Sfirri is a sculptor and furniture maker who incorporates turning into his work. He has a studio in New Hope, PA. He coordinates the Fine Woodworking Program at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, PA.

More information about the Center for Art in Wood can be found at centerforartinwood.org.

Photographs of installation and facilities by Karl Seifert.

Photographs of individual artwork by John Carlano.

Hugh McKay, *Blue Rose*,
1996 ITE, Rosewood, glass,
9" x 10" (23 cm x 25 cm)



Travel destination for wood art enthusiasts

The CAW is a nonprofit arts and educational institution whose mission is the growth, awareness, appreciation, and promotion of artists and their creation and design of art in wood and wood in combination with other materials. The large exhibition gallery and the museum store are open to the public.

In their new location, art made from wood now attracts a larger public audience who discover the work through the huge plate glass windows. Typical visits last more than an hour. The museum collection of 1,000 objects and the research library with 25,000 files, photos, and books are open by appointment for research. The International Turning Exchange (ITE) residency occurs annually in June and July, with the final exhibition in early August. Program details are available at centerforartinwood.org.