

Doing A Good Turn For Artists In Wood A Philadelphian Seeks Recognition For Wood-turning As A Fine Art

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Albert LeCoff holds the wooden bowl to the light and caresses it with his square fingers. Shaped like a bird's beak, the bowl is about 10 inches in diameter and made of English oak. It is a creation of Bob Stocksdale, one of the most famous contemporary practitioners of the ancient craft and modern art of wood-turning.

"I definitely believe that these will be the antiques of the future," says LeCoff, 37, a Philadelphian who for a dozen-plus years has been, as it were, on the cutting edge of the renaissance of wood-turning.

He picks up another object - V-shaped, ivory-colored, made of box elder, somewhat larger than the first. It's the creation, he explains, of "one of the most famous innovators in the use of the lathe" - David Ellsworth of Bucks County.

"This piece is like an eggshell," LeCoff says admiringly. "He's made a wonderful form. . . . It's not just taking a piece of wood and excavating it, but he's doing it in such a way that the figure of the grain is highlighted by the shape."

The objects are among the 150 or so - bowls, vessels, furniture, sculpture, toys - that LeCoff has been assembling over the last dozen years. His wood-turning collection is believed to be the most extensive in the country. Along with a library and about 3,000 color slides depicting the history of wood-turning, it is on display in the Wood Turning Center, organized last year and, for the time being, located in LeCoff's house in Germantown.

The center, listing an organizing committee of 35 artisans, museum curators, gallery owners, collectors and teachers, has a twofold mission: to encourage artists to practice and the public to appreciate wood-turning - essentially, the use of the lathe to create functional and decorative objects. LeCoff is assisted in the work by his twin brother, Alan, a management specialist, who handles the administrative tasks.

For Albert LeCoff, a woodworking instructor at Chestnut Hill Academy, it's the first step toward realizing a dream he has had for more than 10 years - the creation of a center to teach and promote wood-turning and show off the creations of its practitioners.

THE NEXT STEP

The next step - which he hopes will take considerably less than 10 years to accomplish - is to establish the Wood Turning Center in a building of its own. LeCoff dreams of a place where lathes can be set up to demonstrate and teach and where there's lots of space to preserve and exhibit the artifacts of wood-turning.

"The richness, the diversity, the high quality of objects being made today, ranging from functional to decorative to sculptural, is really amazing," he declares. That's obviously a partisan view, but it's shared by museum curators around the country.

"I think wood-turning has in the last 10, 12 years enjoyed a renaissance," says Michael W. Monroe, curator of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art. Today's artists "are creating some outstanding works . . . pushing their materials and tools to new boundaries of expression."

Says Jonathan Fairbanks, curator of American decorative arts and sculpture at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, which has one of the country's most significant collections of contemporary crafts: "I've noticed in the past 10 years that not only has there been a renaissance in techniques - tremendous strides in methods of joinery and systems of layering and new tools and new methods of treating woods - but one can sense a lot more soul going into the work."

UNCHANGED TECHNIQUE

The basic technique, though - the artist/craftsman standing at a lathe, gouging a spinning piece of wood with a metal tool - is essentially unchanged. Archaeologists believe that the first lathe was invented about 3,000 years ago, although they aren't certain where. They suspect it may have been

invented at about the same time by the Etruscans, the Celts and the people living in what is now the Crimea.

The earliest turned object that has been found intact is a wooden bowl, circa 600 B.C., dug out of a burial mound in Bavaria. The first known representation of a lathe, on an Egyptian papyrus painting, dates to the third century B.C.

For most of the last 3,000 years, wood-turning has been thought of as an adjunct to such crafts as furniture-making and architectural decoration - most Victorian gingerbread was turned on 19th-century lathes. It thrived here and there as a hobby - among, for example, Hapsburg emperors in Austro-Hungary and the 18th-century French nobility. (Louis XVI, who lost his head in the French Revolution, was a famous turner.)

Only recently, however, has wood-turning been considered a craft and art in itself. A man named James Prestini is widely regarded as a pioneer in the movement; his exquisitely turned wooden bowls and platters adorn museums around the country. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has 13, a gift of the artist.

But although many museums proudly display the works of such artists as Prestini, Stocksdale, Ellsworth, Ed Moulthrop and Melvin and Mark Lindquist, wood-turning is still not widely recognized as an art as well as a craft.

"While all the other craft media were going into the universities, wood-turning stuck around in the high schools," says Ellsworth, a former Coloradan who lives and works in a woodsy spread near Quakertown. Only one university - the University of California at San Bernardino - offers a bachelor's degree in wood-turning.

Ellsworth is one of the few wood turners who makes a living at the art, and he makes quite a good one: Prices for his work range as high as \$9,000. He also is president of the American Association of Woodturners.

Founded just two years ago, the organization has 2,700 members and puts out a quarterly journal (edited by Ellsworth) called the American Woodturner. Its headquarters are in San Marcos, Texas, where its unpaid administrator, Bob Rubel, lives. On Sept. 15, it will hold its second annual symposium in Philadelphia - three days of demonstrations, lectures, workshops and trade shows.

On the third day, Sept. 17, at the Port of History Museum, the Wood Turning Center - separately, but not by coincidence - will open the first "International Show of Turned Objects." The work of about 100 artists,

from Canada, the British Isles, Australia and West Germany as well as the United States, will be on display through Nov. 13 - about 250 objects, including bowls, vessels, furniture, miniatures and jewelry.

Thirty-nine recognized artists have accepted invitations to display their works. The exhibition also will include a juried show of works - mostly in wood, but some in metal, alabaster and ivory, by 60 artists of the lathe. LeCoff hopes that this first juried international show of turned objects will mark a milestone in public acceptance of wood-turning as an art.

Born in Philadelphia in 1950, LeCoff graduated from Antioch University with a degree in art education. After a two-year apprenticeship with Manny Erez, an Israeli wood turner, he became a teacher and, for a time, operated his own wood-turning and custom-furniture business.

In 1977, he, his twin brother and Palmer Sharpless, then head of the George School woodworking department in Newtown, organized a three-day symposium attended by 50 turners from around the country - the first such gathering, he believes, since the 19th century. Since then, LeCoff has organized conferences and shows around the country and has lectured frequently, last year in England and the Netherlands.

About five years ago, a man he had never laid eyes on knocked on his door and, when he opened it, shot him four times. (LeCoff learned later that the man thought he was too friendly with his wife; LeCoff says he was friendly with the woman, but not that way.) One bullet lodged in his spine, and doctors said he would never walk again. He was told that he would be in the hospital for a year.

"I told them that I couldn't afford to be in for a year - I had too much to do," he says. "I ended up by being in the hospital for five months, 10 days."

He still walks with a limp. "He moves a lot quicker now," says his brother. "He covers a lot more territory than he did."