



Emil Milan: MIDCENTURY MASTER

Emil Milan is the most influential carver you've never heard of

By Mindy Kinsey

Emil Milan standing in the barn door of his Thompson, PA studio, 1983.

Photo by Leighton Johnson.

Emil Milan combined functionality with sculpture to create a genre still popular today. Working from the middle of the 20th century until his death in 1985, he was known for his flowing bird sculptures, bowls, and spoons. *Woodcarving Illustrated* readers will recognize the ancestors of our Comfort Bird (WCI Holiday 2011, Issue 57) in Milan's smooth, stylized birds. Or, you might still have one of his popular fish-shaped serving bowls tucked into a cupboard; he made more than 2,000 for one store alone.

While Milan's work was very widespread (he was featured in the first Pottery Barn catalog and demonstrated woodworking at the first Pottery Barn store in Manhattan), teaching was his more important contribution. Well known for saying that a sharp tool is a safe tool, Milan taught thousands via private lessons; the

Peters Valley School of Craft in Sussex County, New Jersey; the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Extension; and the USAID program in Honduras, among many others. Artists still cite him as a sort of great-grand mentor of carving. He also played a part in the growth of several regional craft organizations and was involved with the American Craft Council.

However, like many artists, Milan sank into obscurity after his death. Until 2008, that is, when, inspired by their love of his style and belief in his influence, a team of researchers began collecting artifacts and information related to Milan. The team consisted of Norm Sartorius, Phil Jurus, Barry Gordon, and Craig Edelbrock, and they talked with more than 300 people, conducted 40 interviews, and gathered more than 100 pieces of artwork to create *Emil Milan: Midcentury Master*.



Cheese Board with Ceramic Insert.
Bissilon and glazed ceramic plate.
2" by 11½" by 22". Collection of Tina and
Albert LeCoff. Photo by John Carlano.



Pair of Birds. Jacaranda. 6" by 8" by
10". Collection of Morris Baker.
Photo by John Carlano.

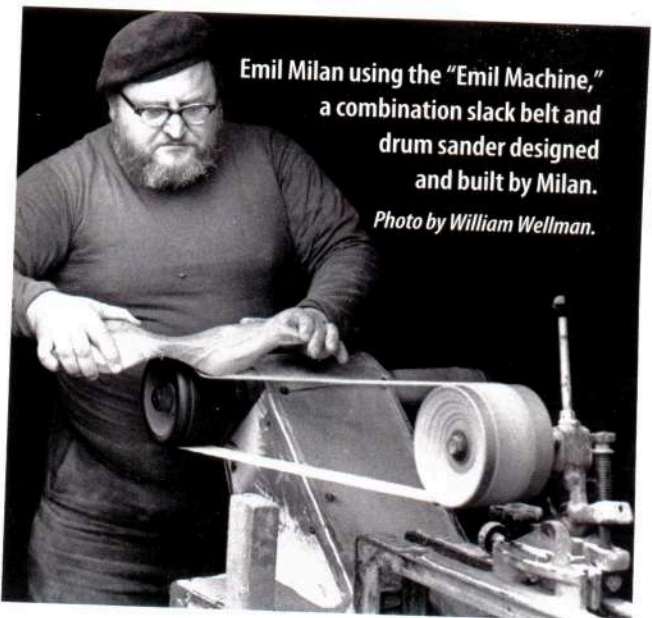


Salad Bowl and Servers.
Catalpa. 7" by 17" by 12".
Collection of Phil Jurus.
Photo by John Carlano.

It is a beautiful book in every sense—the design, photographs, and storytelling. The pages reflect the clean, flowing, functional style espoused by Emil Milan himself, while the narration is not just a biography but a fascinating history of woodcraft in modern America. The authors' passion and respect for their subject shows in the meticulous research they undertook to piece together the story of his life and influence, as well as the ample documentation of his work. Bowls, spoons, trays, and birds flow across the pages, interspersed with photographs that lend context to the artwork. This book will be a treasure to anyone who appreciates elegant design, beautiful wood, and a well-told tale.



Emil Milan: Midcentury Master by Craig Edelbrock (published by The Center for Art in Wood) is available at www.emilmilan.org/the-publication. Limited edition \$189; standard edition \$65.



Emil Milan using the "Emil Machine," a combination slack belt and drum sander designed and built by Milan.
Photo by William Wellman.