

The Past and Future of Wood Art

BY KEVIN WALLACE



PHOTO COURTESY OF WOOD TURNING CENTER

On the weekend of October 26th, 2001, over a hundred artists, collectors, dealers, and curators in the field of wood gathered in Minneapolis for a weekend of exhibitions, lectures, and camaraderie. Central to the weekend was the opening of “Wood Turning in North America Since 1930” at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Organized by the Wood Turning Center and the Yale University Art Gallery, this is the first museum exhibition to approach the field from a historical perspective. This March, the show traveled to the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, to be followed by its installation at the Yale University Art Gallery later this fall. As an added incentive, many attendees came because of their association with Collectors of Wood Art (CWA) and the full schedule of events that the CWA organized in conjunction with the turning show.

To put the importance of this weekend in context, one must have some un-

derstanding of the development of the field of contemporary turned wood and the artists, collectors, and organizations which have played a part in its growth. Lathe-based wood art has become a “hot” collectible over the last twenty years, while other areas of woodworking with longer traditions, such as furniture and box-making, have experienced relatively slow growth. This can be largely attributed to a number of visionary artists who re-invented the wooden bowl as a non-utilitarian item for display, changing its function to that of art object. As is the case with all art movements, it is also due to the support of a small group of collectors who recognized the potential of this new work early on.

THE ARTISTS

The artists who pioneered this new approach did not set out to create a new art movement. Each created work to suit individual purposes. James Prestini created a

ABOVE—

James Prestini, “Salad Set” (1939);
Wood Turning in North America Since 1930

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Rude Osolnik, “Laminated Vessel” (1996);
Mason Collection, Mint Museum of Craft+Design

Mark Lindquist, “Totem” (1987);
Mason Collection, Mint Museum of Craft+Design

Mel Lindquist, “Natural Top Hopi Bowl” (1986);
Mason Collection, Mint Museum of Craft+Design

Stephen Hogbin, “Spoons” (c. 1978);
Wood Turning in North America Since 1930

Bob Stocksdales, “Pink Ivory Boat” (1987);
Mason Collection, Mint Museum of Craft+Design

large number of functional bowls between 1933 and 1953 that displayed a keen sense of design and the influence of the Bauhaus.

Many artists who later came to be known as masters in the field credit Prestini's work with showing them the possibilities for approaching the bowl as an art form. Bob Stocksdale did not divorce himself from function in creating his pieces, yet by combining the influence of ceramic teabowl forms from the Far East and his love of exotic woods, he created a new standard for the turned wood bowl. Melvin Lindquist explored new techniques for hollowing out vessels and working with spalted woods to create vessels, while Rude Osolnik experimented with cast-off timber and laminated scraps of wood in order to lower costs for his craft show business. Each of these indi-

carved fluting to his work in exotic woods, Stephen Hogbin cut his turnings apart and reassembled them off-kilter, and Giles Gilson shocked everyone by painting over and obscuring the wood altogether.

IF A TREE FALLS IN THE FOREST...

All of this would have remained relatively unknown if there weren't collectors who provided validation and exposure for this new wood art. One should not underestimate the power of collectors in a burgeoning art field, for every art movement in history was supported by visionary patrons. By purchasing pieces, they allow the artist to continue working. By loan-

log that accompanied this collection was for many the first exposure to the work of these artists and set the first standard for collecting this new medium.

Across the country, other collections began to grow. Many of these new collectors, like Jacobson, felt a strong desire to share the work, making loans to traveling exhibitions and giving pieces to permanent museum collections.

THE ORGANIZATIONS

The American Association of Woodturners was founded in 1986 and has been instrumental in the development of the contemporary turned wood field. Yet,

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PHOTO COURTESY OF WTC

viduals made their contributions by independent exploration and experimentation and were, for some time, unaware of each other.

It was the next generation, working in the late 1970s, that saw the potential for lathe-based wood art and created the field we know today. Mark Lindquist brought an aesthetic informed by ceramics and art history to his sculptural bowl forms, while David Ellsworth gave a refined sense of design and technical accomplishment to his hollow vessels. William Hunter introduced

ing these pieces to important exhibitions or giving them to museums, they provide exposure and validation. For the first few decades, there were very few collectors, yet those who did recognize the importance of this new work did so with great commitment and zeal. The first to come to the public's attention was Edward "Bud" Jacobson, who not only created an outstanding collection of turned wood objects, but also arranged in 1985 for it to tour such important venues as the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. The cata-

because it is an organization which caters largely to amateur turners, it was up to another organization to focus on matters of documentation and promotion, which were of interest to collectors.

The Wood Turning Center, also founded in 1986, documents and promotes work created utilizing the lathe. As such, they focus on exhibitions, symposiums, residency programs, and publications that present the history and ongoing growth of this process, with an emphasis on presenting the finest work currently being done.

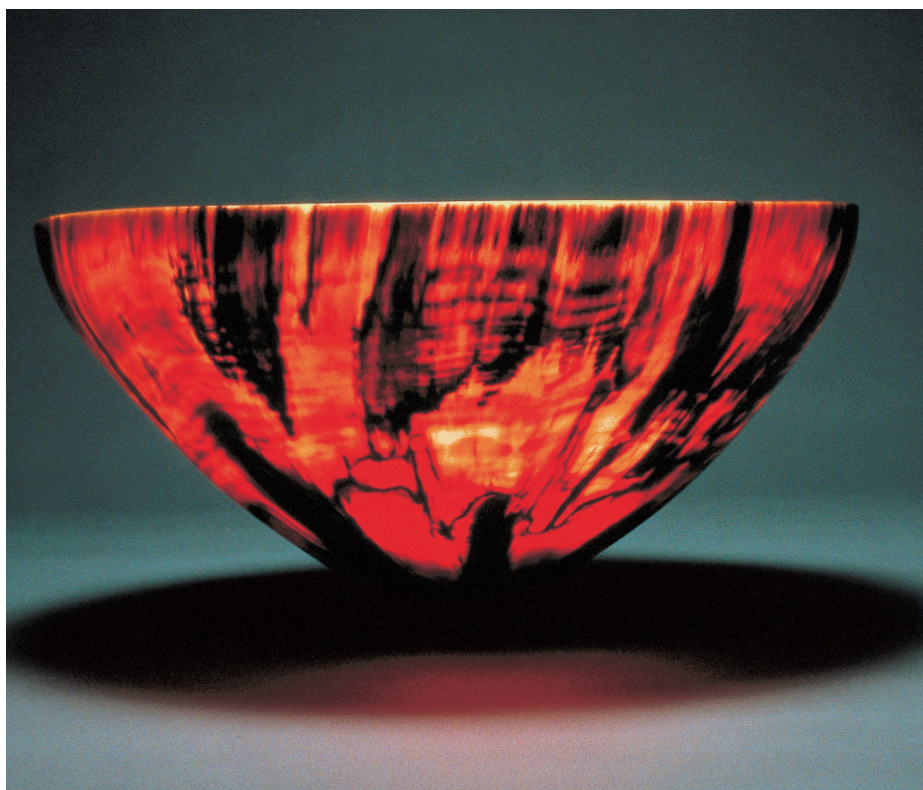
Collectors of Wood Art began in October 1997, when Robyn Horn, a respected artist and collector, invited a number of her friends to her home in Little Rock, Arkansas to discuss the possibility of starting such an organization. These friends included not only other artists and collectors, but also curators, gallery directors, and writers.

The first meeting of this group was full of questions. Should it be at all limited or include vessels, sculpture, and furniture? The final decision was that it would be

most important aspects of CWA's mission is exposing potential collectors to the field of wood art, and presenting the Collector's Choice exhibition at SOFA Chicago has probably been the group's most successful way of doing this. At the same time, it raises a number of questions regarding how artists become favorites and the manner in which collectors can influence others by aesthetic agreement. Like any such event in any area of the arts, there is a thin line between holding a popularity contest and rewarding and promoting those who create the finest work.

which was currently popular among the collectors.

It's interesting to note that almost all of the artists presented in the 1999 Collector's Choice exhibition were included in the Wood Turning Since 1930 exhibition. At the same time, dozens of artists considered important enough to the field for inclusion in the exhibition by the Wood Turning Center and Yale University were not exposed to those attending SOFA Chicago. This certainly points to the importance of different organizations with different agendas supporting and promoting



PHOTOS BY DAVID PETERS, COURTESY OF DEL MANO GALLERY

PHOTO COURTESY OF MINT MUSEUM

broad-based and focus on wood as an artistic medium.

The second gathering, in September 1998, created the blueprint for subsequent meetings. Ron and Anita Wornick, hosts of that event, felt that the lathe should not be over-emphasized in wood art and that furniture was an important aspect of the field; consequently, a wide range of galleries were invited and a wide range of artists in the field, from Mark Lindquist to Wendell Castle, were represented.

The third CWA Forum was held in November 1999 in conjunction with SOFA Chicago. Along with lectures, a special exhibition entitled "Collector's Choice" was featured, presenting a group of artists voted in by CWA members. One of the

One of the criteria given members in voting is to "choose artists who, in your opinion, are doing the most interesting and creative current work." While certainly supportive of creative growth in the field, this measure leaves out many historically important artists due to their long-standing commitment to a particular aesthetic. For instance, in the 1999 Collector's Choice exhibition, a number of pioneers who were still active in the field, such as Bob Stocksdale, Melvin and Mark Lindquist, and Rude Osolnik, did not fit a criterion which valued innovation over consistency of vision and were not included. While Collector's Choice was highly successful, those who viewed the exhibition as an introduction to the field were only shown that work

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Rude Osolnik, "Natural Edge Bowl" (1987);
del Mano Gallery

Ron Kent, "Norfolk Island Pine Bowl" (1987);
Mason Collection, Mint Museum of Craft+Design

Bob Stocksdale, "Untitled Bowl" (1997);
del Mano Gallery

wood art, including those galleries who represent and expose the work of new artists.

MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

The contemporary wood art field has reach an important place in its growth, and the opening of "Wood Turning Since 1930" and the surrounding events played up both

its strengths and weaknesses. A number of exhibitions focusing on private collections have preceded “Wood Turning since 1930,” among them the Wornick collection at the Oakland Museum, the Bohlen collection at the Detroit Institute of Art, and the Mason collection at the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, which coincided with the fourth CWA forum, hosted by the Masons. As each of these presented the personal selections of collectors, they focused on different areas and approaches to the field.

The Wornick collection presented work where scale and vision was para-

mount, best exemplified by the piece from David Ellsworth’s “Solstice Series” that appeared on the cover of the book accompanying the show. The Bohlen collection focused largely on newer artists, exploring advanced carving and multi-media techniques. The Mason collection probably had the most similarity to the work presented in the “Wood Turning Since 1930” show, as they have long been aware of the historical importance of particular artists and have collected many of them in depth.

In addition, The Wood Turning Center

which presented the aesthetic of private collectors and the current state of the field, the “Wood Turning Since 1930” exhibition’s mission was to give a broad overview of the field and the artists and works which best documented its development as an art form. As such, the exhibition is largely successful. If it can be said to focus largely on the Wood Turning Center’s history of the movement, this is due to the involvement of their strong-willed director, Albert LeCoff, who for many years was the Wood Turning Center. As the organization has grown, there has been a great effort to shift

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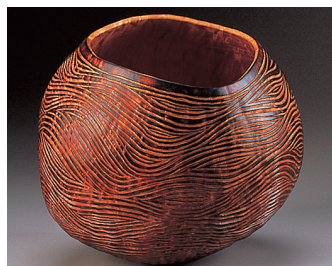


PHOTO COURTESY OF WOOD TURNING CENTER



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Ted Anderson, “Sunburst” (2001);
Gidgee Gallery

Robin Wood, “Star Bowls” (2000);
Challenge VI-Roots: Insights and Inspirations

Mark Bressler, “Angel Dance” (2001);
Alder Gallery

Trent Bosch, “Treden Series” (2001);
Alder Gallery

Mark Bressler, “Toranado” (2000);
Alder Gallery

Christian Burchard, “Black Arbutus” (2001);
Patina Gallery

has been responsible for a number of museum exhibitions over the years, most of them being part of the Center’s “Challenge Series.” The most recent of these, “Challenge VI,” is scheduled to travel to eight museums over the next two years. It continues the objective of encouraging both established and emerging international artists to seek out new personal areas of exploration. As such, these exhibitions feature the cutting edge in lathe art.

Although these exhibitions focused largely on artists who create lathe-based wood art, in particular explorations of bowl and vessel forms, they also explored the sculptural and painterly aspects of the movement.

Following after museum exhibitions

the balance of power to a Board of Directors and bring in guest curators, yet the influence of Albert LeCoff is easily recognizable in this exhibition.

The installation of this exhibition at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts was exceptional and evidence of a belief in the historical importance of the work. There was no doubt that visitors to the museum would see the work, alongside the other exhibits, in a proper historical context. To see work by these artists in this setting, shown with the same reverence as works by accepted masters in contemporary art as well as treasures from other cultures was particularly rewarding to those who have watched the field grow over the last two decades.

Due to the involvement of CWA, leading and emerging galleries in the field of wood were on hand, exhibiting work in banquet rooms at the Marquette Hotel. While the exhibition at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts showed the work that changed the field, these galleries presented the current state of the wood art field.

Galleries are not simply the link between artists and customers, but the link to important collectors and, by extension the link to museums. They are the first step in the process of filtering out work that is unoriginal, badly made or ill-conceived. Although the argument can be made that

their early relationships with the artists and reputation, del Mano exhibited a wide range of work from the masters of contemporary woodwork to the finest emerging artists at the event.

Because of their position in the field, del Mano Gallery faces several unique challenges, among them finding the best way of presenting the pioneers in the field in a manner befitting them, while also exhibiting the best new artists.

Many of the better-known artists were also exhibited by Santa Fe's Patina Gallery, which in a very short period of time has won the loyalty of leading artists and collectors. Galleries such as Patina have a

representation, from Alder Gallery's electric collection of artists to Gidgee Gallery's focus on work by Australian wood artists. As part of their mission, CWA always attempts to leave a new gallery exhibiting wood in their wake and Douglas Baker seemed excited about the artists he exhibited and invited many local collectors to attend the event.

Those who participated in the CWA Forum in Minneapolis are certainly only part of a larger network of galleries exhibiting wood art. A great many dealers choose not to exhibit at the CWA Forums. Among these are Martha Connell Gallery in Atlanta, R. Duane Reed Gallery, with

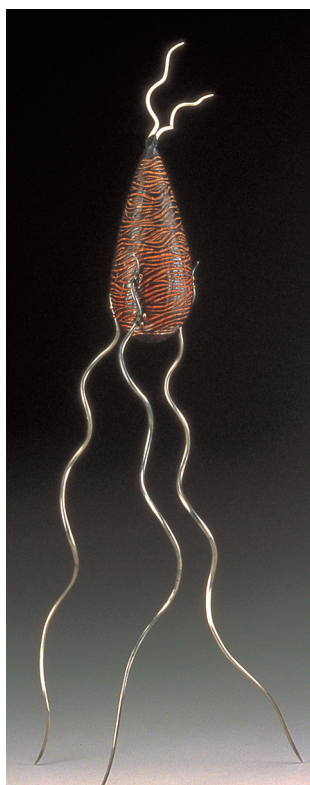
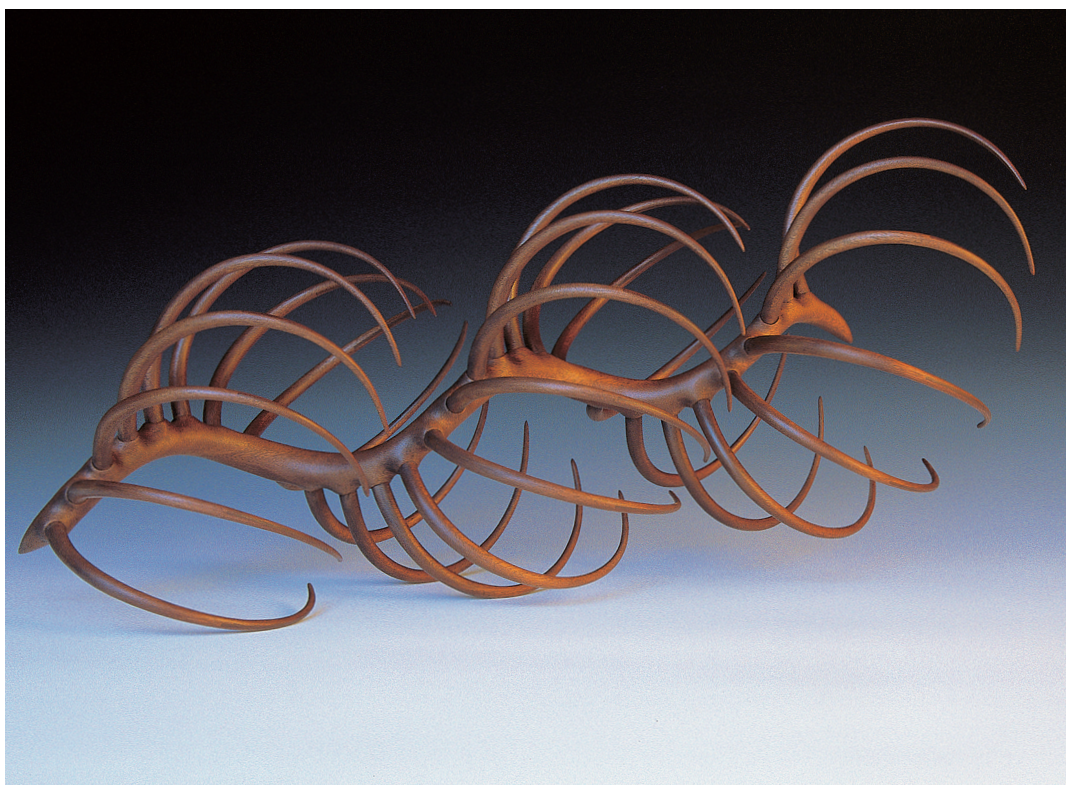


PHOTO COURTESY OF PATINA GALLERY



PHOTOS BY DAVID PETERS, COURTESY OF DEL MANO GALLERY

a gallery is a business and is concerned with marketability above all else, very few people get into the gallery business with a love of money that is greater than their love of art, and most want to exhibit the best work.

The largest display and widest range of work at the Minneapolis Forum was exhibited by del Mano Gallery of Los Angeles. A seminal gallery in the field, del Mano found their niche in the wood art field soon after opening their doors in 1986. Since that time, they have created cataloged exhibitions of the leading artists, along with an annual "Turned Wood" exhibition, which provides an overview of the field. Due to

two-prong approach to the field, establishing a local market and collector base, while working to be accepted by important collectors, such as CWA members. When the 2003 CWA Forum is held in Santa Fe, Patina Gallery will certainly be the center of attention and their place in the field will be cemented.

Other galleries included Sansar from Bethesda, Maryland, who has been involved with the field for some time and newcomers Alder Gallery from Coburg, Oregon, Gidgee Gallery from Southern California and Douglas Baker Gallery from Minneapolis. Each of these galleries focused on a particular approach to artist

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT—
Christian Burchard, "Silvermoth" (2001);
Patina Gallery

Arthur Jones, "Reiteration" (2002);
del Mano Gallery

locations in Chicago and St. Louis, Blue Spiral in Asheville, North Carolina and Finer Things Gallery in Nashville.

The continued growth of the field is dependent upon a great many galleries in different cities, exhibiting a wide range of artists and creating new collectors of wood art.

Those who were in attendance were able to view a wide range of contemporary work, ranging in scale from miniature to monumental, and it was apparent to all that the field was growing in size and sophistication. Though favored by collectors for years, simple wood bowls exhibiting the natural beauty of wood were the rarity at this event, with the focus on work which displayed the artists vision, from finely carved vessels to sculptural statements.

Although work at the CWA Forum was

shown within the context of lathe art, the finest examples would exhibit as comfortably in art galleries as sculpture. A good example of this is Jason Russell's "Erosion," a set of five sculptural forms that had little to do with the field's history of vessel forms. Similarly, "Reiteration" by Arthur Jones is a striking biomorphic sculptural work that had little relationship with work by other exhibiting artists and Michael Peterson's exquisite "Locust Stone" was more suggestive of a fossil than anything from the history of craft or art.

"Doorway, Doorway" by George Peterson represented the sort of work which seems currently in vogue among collectors,

these and Binh Pho's "Lotus Blossom III" was a wonderful vessel with sculptural elements.

By utilizing the platter form, Hayley Smith opens the door for her works to cross over into areas normally associated with painting. They suggest abstract two-dimensional works and are ideal for hanging on the wall.

Work from Dennis Elliott's "Orbital Series" is designed to be interactive. For many, the attraction of wood is its tactile qualities, and this new series of work offers the viewer the option of manipulating how the piece is displayed, thereby involving the viewer in the actual artistic process.



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Ron Fleming, "Band of Angels" (2000);
del Mano Gallery

Binh Pho, "Lotus Blossom III" (2000);
del Mano Gallery

George Peterson, "Doorway, Doorway" (2001);
del Mano Gallery

Michael Peterson, "Locust Stone" (2001);
del Mano Gallery

Jason Russell, "Erosion" (2001);
del Mano Gallery

with a strong sculptural feel and the obvious influence of pioneering wood artists Mark Lindquist, Todd Hoyer and Robyn Horn. Such work was very difficult to sell ten years ago, when similar ideas were explored by these artists. While this reflects the way the field has grown and redefined itself, it is also a tribute to the way the artist has built upon these influences to create his own work.

Despite the many directions the field has grown, there were artists on display who explored the potential of the vessel form. Ron Fleming's "Band of Angels," a finely carved work in rare Pink Ivory wood was an excellent example of the finest of

Unfortunately, works by artists in wood who are not lathe-based were not well represented. One would hope that future events would be more inclusive, as areas such as art furniture and boxmaking have potential for tremendous growth, and the collectors are open to their inclusion in the wood art movement. More importantly, the basic concept of referencing the work as "lathe-based" is becoming less relevant and more confining as a way of talking about the latest developments in wood art.

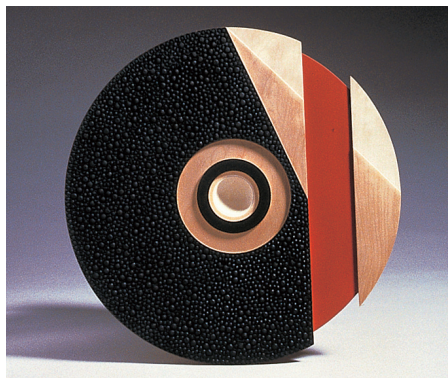
The lecture program, organized by the Wood Turning Center and The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, featured many impressive names and had potential to increase the historical weight of the weekend. While it was a good idea to have participants present papers beforehand, it resulted in rather tedious lectures rather than potentially exciting panel discussions. One would have been better served to hear a conversation with David Ellsworth, Stephen Hogbin, Mark Lindquist, and Merryl Saylan than a series of largely read

reach program, or Mark Lyman's perspective on the SOFA Expositions, yet it would have been more rewarding to have them discuss the field. The greatest let-down was hearing Michael Monroe, a knowledgeable and important figure in the field, deliver what was essentially an advertisement for Guild.com, while displaying the company logo on the overhead screen. These speakers offered little or no discussion of the future of the marketplace or the potential for any approaches which had not been previously explored. Again, a panel discussion would have been of more interest, but

sented at the MIA was an excellent choice.

THE SOFA EXPOSITIONS

SOFA (Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art) Expositions in New York and Chicago have proven to be important events for artists, galleries, and collectors in craft media. By focusing on work by artists in traditional craft media, SOFA is an exposition equal to any in the fine arts world, making clear the importance of these "new" art mediums. Based on the success of its previous participation, Collectors of Wood Art plans on a continued presence



talks on various subjects. Charles Hummel proved an excellent moderator, but could not save this panel discussion from its format. Interestingly, the most compelling talk was delivered by Michelle Holzapfel, who was unable to attend and sent her lecture on video. Among the most cerebral of wood artists, Holzapfel addressed the woodworkers place in the world in terms of mythology, raising questions and offering a unique perspective.

Similar problems plagued the panel on the marketplace, which featured gallery owners Martha Connell and Ray Leier, Guild.com's Michael Monroe, and SOFA Director Mark Lyman. It was of some interest to see Connell's slide show of the evolution of her gallery, or Leier's history of del Mano Gallery's exhibition and out-

there was not even an opportunity for any questions from the audience or the beginning of a dialog.

The most exciting aspect of the lecture series was the perspective offered by Christopher Monkhouse, Curator of Decorative Arts for The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, who utilized the dual screen format to juxtapose slides of work from their permanent collection with work in the current exhibition. To share his understanding of the relationships involved in work from different periods of time and in different mediums expanded one's understanding of how the wood art field fits into the larger scheme of things. His enthusiasm for the historical pieces, combined with a fresh perspective on the contemporary turned wood objects, was inspiring and clear that having the work pre-

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Hayley Smith, "Bebop" (2001);
del Mano Gallery

Bud Latven, "Tower #6" (2000);
Patina Gallery

Dennis Elliott, "Gemini Orbital" (2001);
Douglas Baker Gallery

Bud Latven, "Torsion #7" (2001);
del Mano Gallery

at these events. The next CWA Forum will be held in conjunction with SOFA Chicago in the fall of 2002. There will be a second Collector's Choice exhibition, which will have the same criteria as the last but

will include a few furniture artists. By doing so, CWA is using their influence in expanding the field of wood art which has been largely dominated by woodturning. It's important to note that the SOFA Expositions, though always open to all craft media, were originally viewed by many as dominated by galleries exhibiting glass. As ceramics, furniture, basketry, and turned and sculpted wood have grown in acceptance among collectors, they have been increasingly part of the mix. To a large extent the field is looking to those who collect in other media, particularly glass,

and will certainly present the opportunity for discourse which is worthy of Michael Monroe's knowledge and experience.

IN CONCLUSION

Considering the elements at play in the wood art field, from the galleries, to the SOFA Expositions to Collectors of Wood Art, one can easily get the impression that the field is, to a large extent, market driven. Art history features stories of talented artists who died poor and unaccepted as well as those who benefited from patrons or were hugely successful in the art markets of their time. Works of art cannot be

so, the wood art field needs to be viewed from an expansive and more inclusive perspective.

As the "Wood Turning in North America Since 1930" exhibition travels to new venues and Collectors of Wood Art goes on to hold their next events in New York, Chicago and Santa Fe, the field will continue to grow. Although these organizations have a great deal of influence, the future belongs to the new artists, collectors, and galleries who will expand upon what they have started. The exhibition and weekend events were a wonderful opportunity to

PHOTO COURTESY OF WOOD TURNING CENTER



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT—
Michelle Holzapfel, "Oakleaf Bowl" (1989);
Wood Turning in North America Since 1930

Todd Hoyer, "Suspended Sphere Series" (2000);
del Mano Gallery

which has come to command such exorbitant prices that wood looks like a bargain. CWA's involvement with the SOFA Expositions guarantees that wood art will have a strong presence and encourages these collectors to consider the field.

A number of lectures and other events are also planned for the CWA Forum at SOFA. A panel discussion titled "The Visual Power of Wood—By Chance or By Design" is scheduled for SOFA NY. It will be moderated by Michael Monroe

judged by their commercial viability. Yet, just as history is written by the victors, in the art world it's written by historians who rely heavily upon the work in museum collections, exhibition catalogs and other publications. This system may not be ideal, but the wood field has fortunately been blessed with a number of visionary collectors, curators, dealers and critics.

The growth of the field of wood art has been largely dominated by lathe-based work, but as the leading artists have branched out into other areas of exploration, they have opened the doors for the field to expand. Yet, this is dependent upon talented artists with original vision and their ability to get the attention of galleries and collectors who are supportive of their work. In order to do



PHOTO BY DAVID PETERES, COURTESY OF DEL MANO GALLERY

look back and take stock of the current state of contemporary wood art, but also made it clear that there is a great deal to look forward to.

Kevin Wallace is an independent curator, consultant, and writer in the field of craft art.