

ARTISTRY IN WOOD

Turning scores a stellar debut at Detroit museum LYLE JAMIESON

Wood — “sensual, sculptural, seductive — is the latest craft to enter the fine art realm,” said Keri Guten-Cohen, the Detroit Free Press entertainment journalist, in appraising one of the major turning events of the year.

The weekend of July 8th, 2000, was an exciting turning point for wood fine art and woodturning artists from all over the world. The Detroit Institute of Art premiered its extensive new holdings in *The Fine Art of Wood: The Bohlen Collection*.

The Detroit Institute of Art is the fifth largest fine arts museum in the United States with holdings of over 60,000 works. Within its more than one hundred galleries are paintings, sculpture, and graphic and decorative arts that reveal the scope and depth of human experience, imagination and emotion. This exhibit marks the first time a major metropolitan fine art museum has owned and shown contemporary wood as fine art.

Art patron and collector, Robert Bohlen, of Brighton, MI set out three years ago “to assemble the best woodturning pieces in the world.” Early in 1999 he invited Bonita Fike, associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the DIA to view his collection. “If you think this work is museum quality,” he said, “pick what you want.” Fike picked 140 pieces from his collection of over 400, which Bohlen then donated to the museum. The exhibit showcases nearly 100 wood artists from around the world. “Wood art now benefits from the cross-pollination of ideas from different media, cultures, and time periods and demonstrates the universality of creative expression,” said Bonita Fike. The exhibit will be featured at the DIA through the end of February, 2001, and may travel to other museums in the future.

As an artist represented in this collection, I was proud and honored to be involved. Many of the artists, who came from all over the world for the opening festivities, stayed in Brighton, MI, about an hour from downtown Detroit and the DIA. Bob Bohlen arranged transportation and accommodations. The trip back and forth from Brighton to Detroit gave all of us a chance to renew old friendships and make new ones. It was a wonderful way for me to get to know some of the best and most creative wood artists in the

world on a personal level. The Friday evening reception at the DIA was well attended with more than 30 of the artists present and participating in a book signing of the spectacular catalogue. The DIA has issued a hard cover, full-color catalogue titled, *The Fine Art of Wood: The Bohlen Collection* available in the DIA museum shop for \$35.00.

Graham W. J. Beal, director of the DIA, stated: “The collection consists of wood objects created in the last decade when wood artists broke the boundaries of the vessel aesthetic to claim a freedom of expression long enjoyed by ceramists and glass artists.”

On Saturday the DIA hosted a talk and slide presentation by Ray Leer and Jan Peters of the del Mano Gallery on “The History of Turned Wood” and Albert LeCoff, executive director of the Wood Turning Center,



Pondering the future of Turning: The Bohlen Collection opens at the Detroit Museum of Art. Photos by author.

spoke and presented slides on “Wood turning: Back to the Future”.

The Sybaris Gallery in Birmingham, MI, a suburb of Detroit, had an opening reception on Saturday afternoon for a special all-wood show. Many of the artists in the DIA collection were represented and sales were booming at the opening.

On Sunday, Terry Martin from Australia gave a gallery talk and historical perspective of his work and an extensive slide presentation highlighting the best turning artists in the world, many represented in the DIA show.

The “millennium” has become synonymous with pivotal or turning points and we surely can accept this exhibit as a millennium-magnitude moment. Thanks to Bob Bohlen’s generosity and enthusiasm for wood, it is a turning point in the recognition of woodturning as fine art and it cele-

brates a pivotal artistic breakthrough.

In my opinion, this exhibition exposes the viewer to an exciting array of contemporary wood turning. One-hundred and thirteen pieces in this collection were made in the last five years. There were many departures from the vessel form, with a number of pieces that were sculptural. The exhibit has an element of historical perspective and the influence of pioneers like Bob Stocksdale with his classic shapes, Rude Osolnik's elegant candlesticks, and David Ellsworth's thin-walled vessels. We have all seen photos of their well-known work over the years. Leaders in the field, like John Jordan's beautifully textured hollow forms, Virginia Dotson's laminated vessels, Frank Sudol's intricately pierced forms, Betty Scarpino's bleached sculpture, Michael Peterson's flowing carved figures and Clay Foster's carved and painted vessels are well represented also. There are exciting new works from newcomers, like Ron Gerton's large hollow forms with cast bronze bases, Haley Smith's delicately detailed forms, and Jacques Vesery's exquisitely carved vessels. There was significant representation from around the world including from England, Stuart Mortimer's effective use of hand-fluted spirals; from France, Jean-Francois Escoulen's surrealistic temple sculpture and Alain Mailland's complex delicately carved shapes, and from New Zealand, Gael Montgomerie's fine use of color.

What does this mean for the rank and file membership of the AAW, the majority of whom will never become full-time studio artists? We can be proud to have our field recognized as part of this ground breaking moment in the fine art world. Most of the artists involved in this exhibit have given of themselves freely, sharing their techniques and ideas to help everyone enjoy turning at whatever level desired. This donation and exhi-



The Bohlen show include works by Jacques Vesery, left to right, Todd Hoyer, Michael Peterson and Lyle Jamieson.



Left to right: Works by Alby Hall, Stewart Mortimer, Paul Fletcher, William Hunter, Jean-Francois Escoulen and Matthew Hatala.

bition can only raise the bar for all of those involved, whether as observer, collector, artist or hobbyist. We are all gaining enjoyment and fun from the lathe.

Bonita Fike in the book *The Fine Art of Wood: The Bohlen Collection* closes with the statement:

"Although all art is in some sense autobiographical, it is when the personal becomes symbolic that art relates to others and the viewer becomes a participant. Art helps the

viewer see the world in a different way. It does not depend on technique or material. Art is a way of making ordinary experience extraordinary. And the artists in this exhibition use wood to assist us in discovering the exceptional in life."

What else can I say?

Lyle Jamieson is a sculptor and teacher in Traverse City, MI. His work can be seen on his web site at: <http://www.lyle-jamieson.com>