

# Conversations with Wood:

## Selections from the Waterbury Collection

erry Martin

If the field of wood art is to grow, it needs the support of significant public institutions. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) has a good history of working with the field and has an admirable permanent collection of wood art, so their latest show, *Conversations with Wood: Selections from the Waterbury Collection*, is a significant milestone. It was given added relevance because its launch coincided with the AAW's 25th symposium held in nearby Saint Paul.

The presentation of a much-loved personal collection is a public exposure of any collector's soul, perhaps made all the more difficult when it is the curator who chooses the pieces to be shown and decides how they will be displayed.

This exhibition, driven by a curatorial agenda, dissects the Waterburys' vision and rebuilds it in a way that does not necessarily reflect why and how they built their collection. For thoughtful collectors such as the Waterburys, it must be hard to let go of their treasured art and this is highlighted by what they wrote in the book that accompanies the exhibition: "We have learned that practical considerations are a poor substitute for passion."

When I visited Ruth and David Waterbury's lakeside home, it was evident how passionately they have created their collection, which is not only a celebration of their love for the art, but also of their deep and abiding

relationships with the artists who made it. Ruth and David live in splendid intimacy with a body of work that took 27 dedicated years to accumulate. A tour of their house will leave you as well informed about the growth of the wood art field as a tour of any museum. Of course, relatively few can visit a private home, so lending such a huge portion of their collection for public edification serves us all very well.

The MIA exhibition is the work of curator Jennifer Komar Olivarez, Associate Curator at the MIA, and her team. In a panel held at the Collectors of Wood Art forum that ran parallel with the AAW symposium, Jennifer made it clear that curatorial independence ▶

Installation, "Conversations With Wood,"  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2011,  
collection of Ruth and David Waterbury.

Photo: Amanda Hankerson





One room in Ruth and David Waterbury's home.

is very important to them and that while they were happy to involve the Waterburys at many levels, all final decisions about what was to be included in the show were ultimately the responsibility of the curatorial staff. This panel was a perfect prelude to viewing the show itself and a chance to learn about many aspects of creating an exhibition that we normally never hear about: the creation of the display cases, wall colors, and the rationale behind groupings of work. It

was a generous sharing of the trials of producing a show within a tight budget.

So how would the collection look after being squeezed through the filter of independent curating, institutional bureaucracy, and the practical limits of transposing a personal collection from an intimate family home to a large public space? These were the questions on my mind as I walked into the MIA.

The halls of the museum are enormous vaulted spaces linked by long open corridors that lead from one exhibition

to the other, and the small journey it took to reach the destination created a fine sense of anticipation. At the end of a long corridor, wood art was scattered around an area beneath a staircase outside the entrance to the main exhibition. Jennifer had explained that they wanted it to be a kind of teaser to lead the audience into the show, but it looked rather forlorn under the lofty ceilings.

The huge Todd Hoyer *Suspended Column* offered a rare chance to see some of his larger work. We don't often see wood art on this scale and it gives a very powerful impression, contrasting with the smaller work nearby that was apparently grouped under themes of technique. It was a bold and perhaps surprising choice, given that technique is not necessarily the best way to understand art. The first group was a set of carved or incised vessels by Liam Flynn, Jacques Vesery, Al Stirt, J. Paul Fennell, and Clay Foster. I had a spirited discussion with some other visitors about whether this was art or craft, and I concluded that these pieces were all delightful examples

(L to r)

**Michael J. Brolly**, *Baseball Bat*, 1996, Ebonized walnut, 8¾" (22 cm) wide

**Michael J. Brolly**, *Sinker Ball*, 1988, Ash, 5" (13 cm) dia

**Mark Sfirri**, *Baseball Bat*, Rejects from the Bat Factory Series, 1996, Ebonized ash, 28½" (72 cm) long

**Mark Sfirri and David Sengel**, *Black Bat Collaborative*, 1999, Ebonized ash, 24" (61 cm) long

**Mark Sfirri**, *Baseball Bat*, Rejects from the Bat Factory Series, 1996, Ebonized ash, 33¼" (84 cm) long

Photo: Amanda Hankerson



**Todd Hoyer**, *Suspended Column Series*, 1990, Arizona ash, 27" (69 cm) high

**Arthur Jones**, *Night Star VII*, 2003,  
Mahogany, 32" (81 cm) high

of what “wood artists” do to try to distinguish their wood art from unadorned craft bowls. The fact that we discussed it with such interest proved to me that the display did its job well.

As I wandered into the main hall, the first piece I encountered was the extraordinary *Night Star VII* by Arthur Jones, one of the most outstanding works in wood I have seen for years. It is simple in concept but stunning in effect: slats flare from the central hub to create ever-shifting patterns as you move around the piece.

The Waterburys are great lovers of baseball and their baseball-themed pieces were delightfully and effectively grouped on the wall, with a clever key to the pieces alongside. It was such a pleasure to revisit Michael Broly’s *Baseball Bat* that I watched him make in 1996 when we were residents in the second International Turning Exchange. Shown with Mark Sfirri’s quirky *Rejects from the Bat Factory*, this was the perfect themed display.

Moving further in, I was initially puzzled by why a group of pieces by artists such as Mike Schuler and Gianfranco Angelino were placed together. Then it hit me: They were all translucent! Or they would have been, but there was no light shining through them to bring out the glowing wood tones that such work is famous for. This was an amazing oversight. To choose work for this reason and then to display it without dedicated light was a pointless exercise. I had already been feeling increasingly uneasy about the lighting, but looking at Merete Larsen’s supposedly translucent vessel sitting in a dull pool of ineffectual light made me feel sad.

In an exhibition of decorative art, all aspects of presentation are important: the design of cabinets, wall color, layout of pieces, how we progress through the show, and so on, but nothing is more



important than the lighting. In such an environment the lights need to draw the eye to the object, and that is best achieved by contrast with the ambient light and by tight focus. The lighting in this show consisted almost entirely of long-throw nonfocusable lamps that illuminated the floor and the visitors as much as the works themselves. I double checked by going into several other exhibitions throughout the MIA and

found that the problem was endemic. It is a problem the MIA needs to address.

Stepping back for a wide view I was taken by the colossal tables, which held many of the larger pieces. They were almost like banqueting tables presenting a medieval feast. I loved the fact that I was able to lean over and around the pieces to look at them without the interfering reflective barrier of vitrines. It was a courageous choice as there is a risk in ►



**Thierry Martenon**, *Untitled*, 2006, Ash, 38¾" (98 cm) high



**Neil Scobie**, *Erosion*, 2001, Red cedar, 29" (74 cm) high

**Rolly Munro**, *Papatua Form*, 2000, Pohutukawa, gold leaf, 8⅞" (22 cm) dia



**Stoney Lamar**, *Slipping Off the Wire*, 2004, Madrone burl, steel, milk paint, 38" (97 cm) high



**Mark Lindquist**, *Prodigal Vessel (Returning) with Overlapping Spiralettes*, 1994, Black birch burl, 14½" (37 cm) high

exposing pieces this way, but it was worth it. There was something quite ceremonial in the way they were displayed and it was also an agreeable nod to bygone days as throughout history wooden bowls have been displayed on wooden tables. It would have been good to see one of these tables crowded with bowls such as David Comerford's excellent *Captured Rings Vessel Series*—a feast for the eyes.

Working my way around the enormous tables, I was drawn to the individual *tour de force* creations by some of the best wood artists in the world. These pieces confirm that the Waterburys have been very well-informed collectors. The fabulous Rolly Munro *Papatua Form* can easily stand among the very best vessels the field has to offer. The carefully incised facets captured light and shimmered delightfully as I moved around. It's brilliant. Thierry Martenon's *Untitled* consists of two standing spires with his characteristic rough texturing and coloring. Thierry is a bold rule-breaker who started out as a turner, but quickly discovered the sculptor within, so it is appropriate that his piece is displayed beside Mark Lindquist's pioneering *Prodigal Vessel* from 1994. It's a beautiful juxtaposition of two *enfants terrible* from different eras of the wood art world. This display was in keeping with the soaring space and worked best of all for me.

Nearby was a slash-and-burn themed group with George Petersen's large gridded disk on the wall, brutally attacked then rubbed back, and Jack Slentz's plunge-cut (or is it *stabbed?*)

cube. It might appear that these artists are angry with their material, but the pieces reflect the fact that working wood is not always a creative flow of shimmering shavings. The raw results are surprisingly pleasing. Stoney Lamar's *Slipping off the Wire* and Robyn Horn's *Full Circle* were placed together, which seems appropriate as they have a long history of friendship and respect for each other's work. It was all bold sculpture and a strong counterpoint to the tightly controlled, smaller-scale work inside the vitrines.

Among the more historical pieces, I was drawn to Ed Bosley's *Sand Castle* from 1987. Ed was an innovative turner who sadly has not been talked about much in recent years. Mel Lindquist's *Natural-Top Hopi Bowl* was near Norm Sartorius' *Spoon*, a stunning natural-edged amboyna burl piece that uses the waney edge in a way that would have delighted Mel.

There was so much more to see: Sharon Doughtie's delightful *Solar Flares*, a superb blend of ethnic identities; Richard Hooper's *Vector Warp*, a celebration of pure design; the compelling *Carved Basket-Weave Closed Vessel* by J. Paul Fennell; *Blossfeldt Vase* from the ever-unpredictable Michelle Holzapfel... it was truly a feast for the eyes, but one piece stood out among all the others. William Moore's *Pitcher* is sublime. It manages to quietly embrace everything: an acknowledgment of craft and function, superbly simple turning, elegant line, understated and refined decoration, original blending of materials. Significantly, it was also a quiet voice in a crowd clamoring for attention. This was the standout piece in the show.

After I had exhausted my ability to learn from this exhibition, I was left asking myself what it told me about the Waterbury collection. The struggle to find ways of grouping the work may have been a reflection of its seeming incoherence, something that is unavoidable because the collection was acquired



**Ed Bosley**, *Sand Castle*, 1987, Broadleaf maple burl, 11¾" (30 cm) high

over many years of the growth of wood art, which has in itself often been incoherent. The curatorial team has certainly succeeded in showing that the Waterburys have created a *representative* collection. Perhaps these questions are unfair, but I imagine they are the kind of questions other collectors who are considering lending collections might ask themselves.

This review has been as much about the curated vision as about the Waterbury collection. If I had not heard the panel at the CWA forum discussing the constraints they had to work within, I might have been more critical. This highlights the need for more informed commentary on how pieces are chosen and exhibited, something the CWA might consider for future forums. On balance, I think the curator should be complimented because I could see the delight on the faces of the people at the exhibition. The Waterburys have given us all a wonderful chance to appreciate their much-loved collection and we owe them a deep thank-you for that. ■

*Photos by Robert Fogt unless otherwise noted.*

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**Richard Hooper**, *Vector Warp*, 1997, Birch plywood, 12" (30 cm) high



**William Moore**, *Pitcher*, 1999, Yew, bronze, 6½" (17 cm) high



**J. Paul Fennell**, *Carved Basket-Weave Closed Vessel*, 2001, Chilean mesquite, 7" (18 cm) dia