

Turned and Sculpted:

Wood Art from the Collection of Arthur and Jane Mason

Betty J. Scarpino



The significance of Jane and Arthur Mason's gift of thirty-two woodturnings to the Georgia Museum of Art extends well beyond the artworks themselves. This collecting couple's support for the field of turned-wood art is wide-ranging, and already, it reverberates. Longtime champions of turned wood, Jane and Arthur gifted this historically noteworthy portion of their collection to a museum previously unfamiliar with the field. The Masons understand the importance of connections, and they know how to generate enduring enthusiasm.

With a few noteworthy exceptions, missing in the Masons' gift are representative objects that showcase stylistic shifts in the field of woodturning, as well as work that illustrates their more recent burgeoning interest in surface enhancement and manipulation of wood-turned forms. Understandable: The seeds for Arthur's initial interest in woodturning were planted because of his father's background in forestry. From this inherent love of trees and wood, Arthur (and Jane) were primed to leap full-scale into collecting wood art as a result of a visit, in 1986, to see *The Art of Turned Wood Bowls: The Edward Jacobson Collection* at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. Beautiful wood-grain throughout, *The Jacobson Collection* showcased these

Arthur and Jane Mason donated work by the following artists to the Georgia Museum of Art, Athens. The work will be on view in a special exhibition May 14–August 7, 2016, at the Dorothy Alexander Roush and Martha Thompson Dinos Galleries.

Dale Couch, Curator of Decorative Arts.

Garry Knox Bennett	Mel Lindquist
Phil Brown	Bruce Mitchell
Marilyn Campbell	Ed Moulthrop
Rod Cronkite	Matt Moulthrop
Virginia Dotson	Philip Moulthrop
David Ellsworth	Dale Nish
Dennis Elliott	Michael J. Peterson
Robyn Horn	Merryll Saylan
Todd Hoyer	Al Stirt
William Hunter	Bob Stocksdale
Mark Lindquist	

(Above) **Robyn Horn**,
Diagonal Cubes, 2005, Redwood,
graphite, 18" x 17" x 6¾"
(46cm x 43cm x 17cm)

Michael J. Peterson, *Western Pot Form*,
1991, Maple burl, 5" x 11" (13cm x 28cm)



Robyn Horn, *Geode #202*,
1988, Quilted maple,
10" x 10" x 10"
(25cm x 25cm x 25cm)

artists' love of their medium and their skill at bowl turning. I understand how Arthur and Jane must have felt; I was mesmerized many years ago when I saw *The Jacobson Collection* on display at the Indiana State Museum. The memory still thrills.

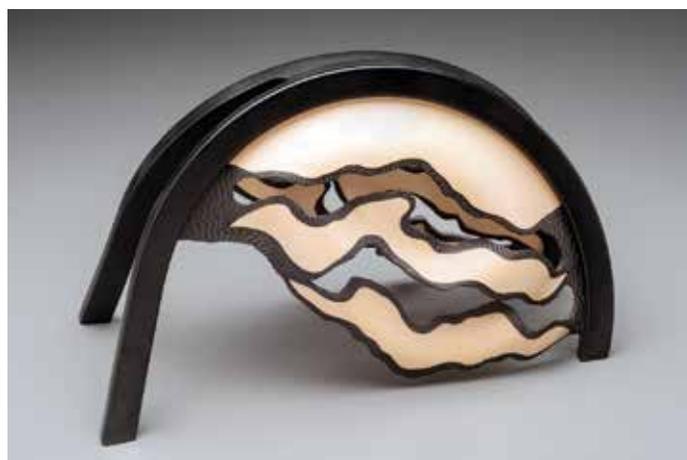
A historical collection

The gift includes the work of many well-known artists, and for the most part, the pieces are older. Each one seems to represent its maker ideally, and, collectively, the grouping is illustrative of the emergence of woodturning as a distinct craft field. Michael Peterson's vessel, turned in 1991, can

be regarded as an icon of early hollow-turned vessels. Now, Michael rarely, if ever, uses the lathe. Instead, his monumental, stacked sculptures are individually hollowed using a chainsaw—and they are rectangular. Robyn Horn has also departed from woodturning to focus on direct-carved, monumental sculpture. Her divergence is brilliantly illustrated with the two works in this exhibit, an early turning from 1988, *Geode #202*, and a more recent angular sculpture, *Diagonal Cubes*, 2005, where Horn continues to investigate her relationship with sculptural possibilities inherent in massive hunks of wood.

The Masons' support of woodturners' early explorations in surface embellishment is illustrated with Todd Hoyer's *World Bursting Apart*, 2001, and Merryll Saylan's platter *Disk*, 1998. Neither is opaquely painted; wood is a significant aspect. Yet, surface embellishment is the element that attracts and holds attention. The one highly decorative, non-wood-appearing sculpture is Marilyn Campbell's *Snow Home*, 2000. Woodgrain is not easily apparent in the holly and ebony Campbell used, and resin binds the turned elements. The inclusion of this piece is a suggestive nod to the future, as is signified by its creation date of 2000. ▶

Merryll Saylan, *Disk*, 1998, Stained poplar, 9" × 9" × 1⅜" (23cm × 23cm × 3cm)



Marilyn Campbell, *Snow Home*, 2000, Holly, ebony, resin, 8½" × 12" × 3" (22cm × 30cm × 8cm)



Todd Hoyer, *World Bursting Apart*, 2001, Wood, 18" × 12" (46cm × 30cm)



Merryll Saylan, *An Apple a Day*, c. 1996, Hard maple, birch, 1¾" x 24" x 4" (4cm x 61cm x 10cm)



Garry Knox Bennett,
Bowl #692, 2002, Wood,
paint, 6" x 12" x 7"
(15cm x 30cm x 18cm)

Ed Moulthrop, *Donut*,
1988, Ash leaf maple,
3¼" x 7" (8cm x 18cm)



Philip Moulthrop,
Bowl, 1996, Ash leaf
maple, 3¾" x 11⅞"
(9cm x 30cm)



Saylan's conceptual sculpture, *An Apple a Day*, stands out as an example of the potential for using the repetitive aspect of woodturning for expressing ideas. Saylan turned 80 this year and is still actively involved in the field—perhaps an apple a day worked. The Georgia Museum of Art is fortunate to have two of her artworks bequeathed.

I find it ironic that the alphabetical listing of artists begins with Garry Knox Bennett, not generally known as a woodturner. Yet, here he turns up in a historical gift of turned objects. Bennett's playfully mocking, anti-woodturning viewpoint is reflected in the title, *Bowl #692*. Surely the number 692 is random. And, delightfully, he may have embellished

the bowl, but not turned it himself. Nonetheless, there it is, its interior painted an innocent, clean-slate white.

The Georgia Museum of Art is a teaching facility and, because of its location in Athens, is fortunate to now have a tie with the Moulthrop family legacy of woodturning, centered in nearby Atlanta: Ed, Philip, and Matt. These three generations are well represented in the Masons' gift, providing a connection that will lure local interest and involvement.

The Masons have made it their sincere mission to get to know the artists whose work they collected. As is the case now, woodturners were easily accessible in the 1980s. Arthur simply called David Ellsworth, whose work he admired in *The Jacobson Collection*. From that initial contact and visit, the Masons met many other makers. Once they got to know an artist, they often collected her or his work in depth, such as with Virginia Dotson. Over the past thirty years, they have invited woodturners for meals, visited with artists at conferences, and every year hosted residents from the Center for Art in Wood's Windgate ITE International Residency.

The Georgia Museum of Art

The Masons' connection with the Georgia Museum of Art is indirect and originated from Jane's involvement with painting, sculpting, teaching art, and an early business enterprise teaching people how to use computers. Because of her combined background in art and computers, Jane was asked to join the board of visitors for

The Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia to help plan its new art building. Now finished, the building is located next to the Georgia Museum of Art. It is Jane's vision that many art students will see and study their collection. She understands the role that connections can play in fostering future interest and support for wood-turned art.

Overseeing the reception and exhibition of the gift is Dale Couch, Curator of Decorative Arts, Henry D. Green Center for the Study of the Decorative Arts. Couch's knowledge and appreciation for American/Southern turned-wood furniture, 1640–1840, is a starting point for his increasing interest in and enthusiasm for contemporary turned objects. It is curator Couch's intention to use the Mason collection as a baseline from which the museum will eventually build a wide-ranging collection of woodturnings, historic to current.

Museums focus their in-depth collections on only a handful of media, and Dale Couch views the Masons' gift as it was intended: An opportunity to pick woodturning as a strength in modern studio craft. That intention is already successful: Couch expects the museum to eventually develop woodturning as a focus. A quick study, Couch has already learned much about contemporary woodturners and is captivated with their work. He will attend the AAW's 30th Anniversary International Symposium in Atlanta and will participate on two panel discussions.

As the Georgia Museum of Art builds its collection, it will be interesting to see the direction the museum takes concerning future inclusion, or not, of non-turned sculptures from makers such as Horn and Peterson. There is a compelling case to be made for acquiring this sub-group of wood artists' new work: Initial involvement in woodturning led a variety of makers to eventually give up roundness in favor of a broader

vocabulary that includes angular and large. That Jane and Arthur included Horn's sculpture signals the possibilities this could provide.

On the other hand, and perhaps more compelling, contemporary woodturning-focused exploration is moving the field into expressiveness not previously imaginable. It is admittedly a difficult but potentially delightful curatorial decision. It is evident, though, that joining, following, and supporting contemporary woodturners on their journey of exploration and expression will be fulfilling and rewarding.

The historical significance of the gift provides valid foundation for building a comprehensive collection of wood-turned art. The turning field has been chastised for its all-too-narrow focus on the use of a machine—the lathe. Distractors point out that ceramists would, for instance, never want to be categorized by a wheel or weavers by a loom. Just because a field has been defined by reference to a specific machine, though, does not mean it cannot be successful, interesting, and valid. Why not explore the depths of what can be created from lathe-turned objects? The concept of limitations is an established design tool.

Reverberations

Edward "Bud" Jacobson first saw a Moulthrop bowl in the Hand and Spirit Gallery in Scottsdale in 1977, and from there began his own collection of turned-wood bowls, eventually donating it to the Arizona State University Art Museum. (This is documented in the book, *Crafting a Continuum: Rethinking Contemporary Craft*, edited by Peter Held and Heather Sealy Lineberry.) Previous to the donation, the collection traveled to numerous venues to be seen by thousands of wood enthusiasts, including Jane and Arthur Mason. In turn, the Masons donated three Ed Moulthrop bowls to the Georgia Museum of Art. Gifts can reverberate, and the Masons' bequeath is already making waves. The works in this historical collection will be studied and also used as a basis for the museum to build a strong focus on woodturning as a studio craft. ■

All photos courtesy of Georgia Museum of Art.

Betty J. Scarpino lives, carves, turns, and writes in Indianapolis. Her artwork can be seen at bettyscarpino.com.

Matt Moulthrop,
Mimosa globe, 2011, Mimosa,
4" × 8½" (10cm × 22cm)



Virginia Dotson,
Flared rim vessel, 1987,
Arizona walnut,
2½" × 9¾"
(6cm × 25cm)