SOUTHWEST-STYLE POT • SHOPMADE WOODEN COLLETS • THE UPS AND DOWNS OF SPINNING WOOD

AMERICAN WOODTURNER

Journal of the American Association of Woodturners
August 2017 vol 32, no 4 • woodturner.org

WOOD WORKS: A REGIONAL EXHIBITION

BUFF FOR THE PERFECT FINISH

PEN BLANK CASTING

BETTY J. SCARPINO
ARCHETYPES IN WOOD

BETTY J. SCARPINO

Archetypes in Wood

David M. Fry

Betty Scarpino stands among the works she made in tribute to other participants in last year's Windgate ITE International Residency, sponsored by The Center for Art in Wood.

Photo: Samuel V. Scarpino

If you haven't already, meet the woman who once lifted weights for three months to prepare for a timed woodworking competition in China. And who also edited more than a thousand articles on woodturning, authored a hundred-plus articles and presentations herself, and served as a teacher and ambassador of the craft across several continents. None of this should eclipse her record as a working artist whose altered plates, resectioned disks, clutches of eggs, and cloven seed pods hardly need a signature, although credits to her abound in many collector and museum catalogs and exhibitions.

Although Betty Scarpino has spoken and written at length about the techniques and back story of her individual artworks, their content often remains elusive or ambiguous, even if familiar. And that's exactly the way she wants it. Nuanced titles and gallery signage have their place, she believes, but "Words can limit what viewers see, and if I don't tell them what they're looking at, they may see something that I haven't noticed. I can't say something is exactly this or that, or it will take away from it. Even I might not know what it means until years later." As Betty's stock in trade, metaphors sometimes echo slowly through multiple levels of awareness. To some extent, her work has become a memoir of the subconscious.

From sensual to celestial

Mystery notwithstanding, admirers of Betty's work undoubtedly have their own distinctive sense of its intrinsic appeal. Betty perceives a range of appreciation: "Yes, many will just see beautiful grain, lovely carving, pleasing forms. But there may be those who see purely sexual references in some of the work. Yet others will view my art as I think it's meant to be seen: complex and layered." But that's not to deny the erotic component of certain forms. "When people recognize the sensuality, it tickles me. But I don't intentionally carve 'sensual' and/or 'erotic' into my forms." Georgia Museum of Art curator Dale L. Couch puts it this way: "Betty's ambiguous and polymorphous works woven through with themes have caused me to initially ask whether these objects were composed of wood or plasma; genitalia or cosmic concept? All are possibilities with this artist, as her playful wit and philosophical wonder exist side by side in both the work and the maker."

Visual archetypes

One aesthetic lens that offers insight into the meaning of Betty's work is the multidisciplinary theory of archetypes. Rejecting the blank-slate concept of mental development, archetypal theorists hold that the mind has innate, unconscious patterns or structures that shape the accumulation of knowledge from experience. Although archetypes were originally conceived in narrative terms, they have also been described as primitive imagery.

Betty's two-sided *Undercurrents* provides an excellent opportunity to apply the theory, if for no other reason than its provocative title. A disk of bleached wood presents finely incised concentric grooves interrupted by central and peripheral whorls of

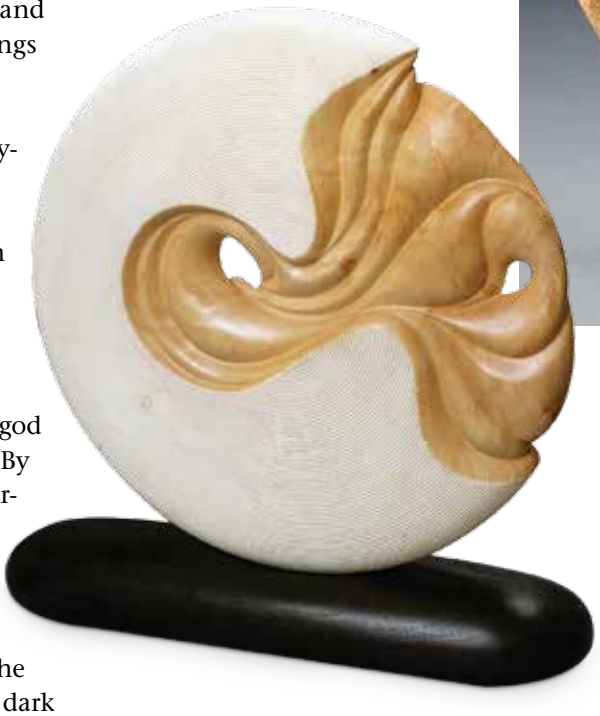
sinuous polished wood. The drama emanates from the contrast between the gleaming folds and the dull, scored background. There is an intimation of an exposed delta—perhaps a river's or a woman's—against a background of temporal cycles. Ancient calendars, such as those of the Mayans and Sumerians, featured concentric rings overlaid with symbols.

With its sensual contours and lunar cycles (approximately twenty-eight), *Mercurial Moon* also seems to portray a female subject, as the moon is often rendered in Western mythology. But astronomical wonder is more explicit here, with different lunar phases juxtaposed. The title comes loaded, invoking a moonless planet whose namesake god embodies change and moodiness. By design or serendipity, the rough surfaces of the crescents and smooth expanses of the full faces correspond to what backyard astronomers actually see through their scopes: crisp, rugged terrain near the crescent "terminator lines," where dark meets light and long lunar twilight shadows are cast, versus the washed-out disks of full lunar noon.

Mercurial Moon, 2015, Persimmon, bleach, paint, 6½" × 5" × 2" (17cm × 13cm × 5cm)

Turned, cut, carved, painted, bleached, and textured.

Photos: Wilbur Montgomery



Undercurrents, 2005, Maple, bleach, black dye, 13" × 14" × 4" (33cm × 36cm × 10cm)

Photo: Shawn Spence

Permanent Collection of the AAW

Altered plates

Before Betty's woodworking moved largely into sculpture in the round, she made a series of relatively thin plates with lightly contoured backs usually suitable for wall or shelf mounting. *Night Wind,* a commissioned work, stands apart somewhat because of its carved back. It's one of the relatively few pieces whose content she's explicitly explained: With "stars, clouds rushing past a bright moon, treetops lit by moonlight, romance of the wind, *Night Wind* captures some of what we all have felt at night time. The motion contained within the form gives rise to the wind." Although some of the familiar anatomical forms appear in this composition, the erotic ▸

Night Wind, 2011, Walnut, bleach, 19" × 19" × 6" (48cm × 48cm × 15cm)

Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

Collection of Kay Kitagawa and Andy Johnson-Laird

(Clockwise from top left)
Blue Egg Bowl, 1997, Ash, oak, maple, bleach, milk paint, largest bowl is 3½" × 11" (9cm × 28cm)
Collection of Leigh Darbee

Seeds for the Future, 2016, Ash, acrylic paint, 4½" × 20" × 4" (11cm × 51cm × 10cm)
Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

Be Seeded, 2016, Cherry, acrylic paint, 3" × 19" × 3" (8cm × 48cm × 8cm)
Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

dimension is swept up into a larger, wondrous natural order.

Eggs

A recurring archetype in Betty's work, the egg usually represents woman or her offspring. Her wood varieties have the advantage of solidity, which reflects her aversion to depictions of women as fragile or vessels to be filled. Her eggs don't nest like Russian dolls, but they do "nest" in clutches within protective bowls.

In at least one instance, Betty considered the possibilities for understanding the relationship of bowl to eggs: "As I was thinking one day about making a bowl and putting blue eggs into it, my mind wandered to, 'What is a blue-egg bowl?' It could be three things: A blue bowl with eggs, a blue egg inside a bowl, and an egg-shaped 'bowl.' In many ways, I consider this my first 'conceptual' piece, in that I thought of an idea, then executed it."

Occasionally, Betty evokes the age-old role of parenting by placing eggs on the top edge of wedge-like forms. The balance beams are much larger than photographs suggest, and the vulnerability of even a perched solid egg is more pronounced. An offspring may linger at one end before "launching" to new terrain, or the mother assumes a position to counterbalance children on the other side of the fulcrum.

Seedpods

Of the various natural forms Betty has explored, seedpods have become perhaps her most notable spindle sculptures. The shapes are male, with the reproductive contents exposed through a gaping slit. *In Seeds for the Future,* which was made for the AAW's 30th-anniversary exhibit, *Turning 30,* each seed has been integrally carved from the interior. Betty notes, "Each of the six beads represents five years of AAW's history and 'binds together' the turning field. The seeds represent the possibilities for individual expression, coming out of the turning field. I think this piece is particularly successful as a painted piece—the wood and paint work well together, cohesively. The pods are variations on something I started when I taught one semester at Indiana University, Pennsylvania, and was a resident artist as well. I've also made a variety of smaller pods and ones that are boat-like (half a pod with the inside carved out)."

Prints

Betty's art also includes works on paper produced in part on the lathe. She

Balancing Act, 2001, Ash, maple, stain, milk paint, bleach, 8" × 44" × 3½" (20cm × 112cm × 9cm)

The white egg represents Betty, and the two blue eggs indicate her two sons. Her life has been a balancing act between artwork and motherhood.

Photo: Judy Ditmer

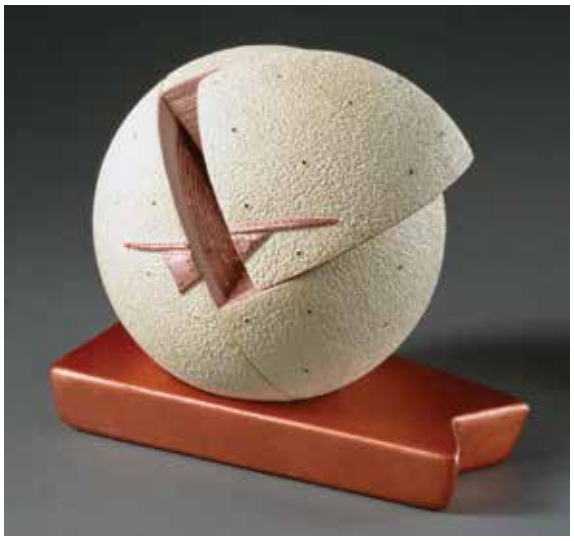
notes, "I have been making woodcut prints for about fifteen years, but making *Roads and Rivers* was the first time I incorporated woodturning into the 'cutting' process on the block. The prints were pressed for AAW's Pittsburgh Symposium-themed exhibit, *Merging,* which represents where the Alleghany and Monongahela Rivers flow together to form the Ohio River. On the print, Pittsburgh is located in the valley of the 'Y.' For this red version of the design, I used oak so the printing would read as wood." The dendritic river fork rests atop an arboreal calendar.

Roads and Rivers (woodcut print on handmade paper), 2015, 12" × 22" (30cm × 56cm)

Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

Going by intuition

Trained in Industrial Arts in college and in design classes at Arrowmont, Betty had been taught the importance of detailed drawing and clay modeling before executing the real work. Those classes proved to be the only occasions when she actually went through the preliminaries. Since then, she's worked primarily through intuition. As she says, "I'll have an idea of a form that I want to make. Then I'll go and get the biggest and best piece of wood that I can find that will allow me to be excited about what I want to make. Using premium wood is both a motivation and a risk. But if I want to go to a lot of trouble, I may as well shoot for a really worthy outcome. I also know that if there's a problem, there are at least five solutions. So, nothing is wrong. You've got to have a methodology." That is not to ▸



Portal to Joy, 2017, Buckeye, acrylic paint, ink, 6" × 6" × 6" (15cm × 15cm × 15cm)

Made for the 2017 POP exhibit, *The Sphere–Second Round.* A turned sphere was cut into parts, inscribed with words about joy, textured, painted, and reassembled. Artist statement for the show catalog: "Joy resides within, and *evidence* of joy surrounds us all."

Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

say that the end result always pleases her. There are a few pieces lying around the shop that await a better fix.

Once the wood is selected, she continues, "I typically put it on the lathe to turn. At that point, I'll know whether it will be a disk or a plate. For a disk, I might cut out a part or draw on it with chalk to see what looks good with the grain direction and color. I don't want to work against heavy figure. After drilling an off-center hole and drawing a line, I start carving, responding to the whole." Although her disks and plates sometimes appear to have been turned on multiple centers, she manages to work front and back with only one mounting.

Overlapping careers

Betty started turning in the 1970s during her Industrial Arts training at the University of Missouri. She made furniture but had no opportunity to develop her sculptural interests within the department. Frustrated, she took the prerequisite courses in drawing and modeling for access to the Fine Arts studio, where she found more support. After graduating, she ran the woodworking area of the university's Craft Studio and began to sell her production turnings. Off on her own, she advanced her artistic development at Arrowmont, where Michael Hosaluk introduced her to carved and reconfigured turnings and Steve Loar exposed her to academic design theory.

In 1990, Betty's career took an abrupt turn when she became editor of *American Woodturner,* which at that time was essentially a quarterly newsletter generated by a volunteer editor and unpaid authors. She became the first professional to produce the journal, which entailed not only editing, but also layout and advertising. Prior experience with computer programming helped prepare her for the digital transformation taking place in publishing. Her track record during this three-year period so impressed the AAW Publishing Committee sixteen years later that she was invited to apply again for her old position, relieved of the layout and advertising workload.

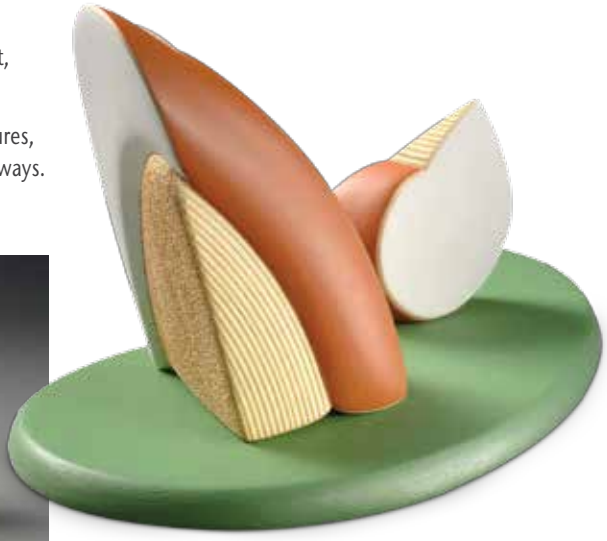
After she returned to full-time studio work in 1993, Betty continued to evolve into a successful wood sculptor with a distinctive body of work. She exhibited in top galleries like del Mano and found her way into museum and private collections. These include the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Mint Museum of Craft and Design, and Yale University Art Gallery, as well as the homes of the Waterburys, Masons, Breslers, and many others generously supporting woodturned art. In 2001, she was one of four women on a panel discussion program that launched the opening of *Wood Turning in North America Since 1930* at the Renwick. Work from all four was represented in the exhibit and in the catalog.

Since she first presented at the 1996 AAW Symposium, Betty has demonstrated, taught hands-on classes, lectured, and served on panels in diverse settings across North America, Europe,

Dreams and Shadows, 2008, Maple, bleach, acrylic paint, 6" × 13" × 4" (15cm × 33cm × 10cm)

Arguably one of the strongest archetypal statements in Betty's sculptural output. Is this some sort of ritual choreography between ancient competitors or a tableau of primeval coexistence? A martial arts teacher wound up buying this work.

Photo: Shawn Spence
Private Collection



Whale Song, 2016, Maple, acrylic paint, 6" × 9½" × 6" (15cm × 24cm × 15cm)

Comprising cutoffs from other sculptures, *Whale Song* can be arranged in many ways. Other artists suggested the title.

Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

and Australia. Her travel calendar is still full, and the honoraria account for a significant part of her income. She has served as both a resident artist and, much later, a photojournalist during an eight-week international artist residency sponsored by The Center for Art in Wood and hosted by the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. In her more recent residency, she not only posted a voluminous blog with pictures of the other residents, but created artworks inspired by participating artists and their projects.

During her second tenure as journal editor between 2009 and 2014, Betty had to drastically cut back on her studio work. She characteristically threw herself headlong into the job, and within a year took the publication from four to six issues. She never doubted that she could find enough content to support the expansion. A part of that optimism was her conviction that women woodturners deserved more exposure in the journal's pages, as well as at symposia, national and local AAW meetings and panel discussions, and exhibitions within and outside the organization. She was also instrumental in the establishment of the Women in Turning (WIT) program.

Looking back over ten years of accumulated experience producing *American Woodturner,* she reflects, "I think my greatest contribution as editor was to change the dialogue among members to one of inclusion and to avoid any tendencies to pit art against craft." By the time of her departure in 2014, she had enlarged her own knowledge of the field enormously and made contact with collectors, museum staff, and other artists whom she might never have sought out on her own.

Back in the studio again, she found the woodturning marketplace radically changed. A number of premier galleries had disappeared during the Great Recession, though demand for demonstrators and workshop leaders continues. Regardless of the marketplace, Betty will continue to make and teach her art and facilitate and promote the myriad contributions of others also pursuing their linkages to the subconscious. And she will still prod the woodturning community to ask, "What meaning lies within the works of art we create, under the surface, veiled behind the grain, the texture, the form, the finish? What metaphors do we invoke? What issues do we address? What parts of ourselves are chiseled into the fibers of walnut, cherry, and maple?"

For more, visit bettyscarpino.com. ■

David M. Fry turns wood and writes near Washington, D.C.

Blue Dance, 2016, Persimmon, bleach, acrylic paint, 8" × 6" × 8" (20cm × 15cm × 20cm)

Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

She Sails, 2016, Holly, various woods, acrylic paint, 17" × 10" × 3" (43cm × 25cm × 8cm)

She Sails is Betty's tribute to Letty Esherick, who had a troubled marriage with noted woodworker Wharton Esherick. Betty notes, "Metaphorically, I have set Letty free, but more importantly, I have freed myself of negative thoughts about Wharton."

Photo: John Carlano

Permanent Collection of The Center for Art in Wood

Exhausted but empowered after eight straight days of intense carving in China, Betty stands by her sculpture in the international wood carving competition. She was the only American represented at the event, where she made many friends with local and international makers.

Photo: Zina Burloiu

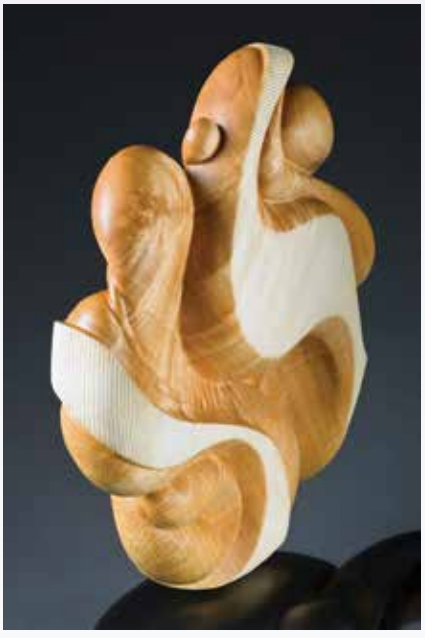
Rhetoric Unbound — A Closer Look

Editor's Note: Found here are alternate views of the cover image. Rhetoric Unbound, *Betty Scarpino's most recent finished work, calls for more than just the typical front (or even front-and-back) view. There is much more to this dynamic work.*

As I strive to clarify thoughts and express feelings, it's all too easy to get wrapped up in rhetoric. I did not learn effective communication until opportunities to do so presented themselves in my 50s and 60s. Many of those experiences felt like trials by fire, but I prevailed and as a result my life and artistic endeavors flow more smoothly.

I began *Rhetoric Unbound* eight years ago by turning a disk and cutting grooves across its surface. Those grooves "bind together" the form. Next, I drilled a random hole that would serve as a limitation and provide a starting point for carving. The demands of editing *American Woodturner* intervened, so the disk languished.

About a year ago, I decided to reconsider not-yet-finished work. Carving commenced on the disk, and many months later as I applied finish, I wondered if all the carving and sanding had been worth the effort. The piece contained an assortment of wood characteristics—curly and straight grain, as well as areas of punky and spalted wood with hard and soft areas. Carving had been a challenge.

These variations bring to mind styles of communicating. While carving, I felt as though I was digging through layers of meaning and that there was something "in there" to be understood and released. Finally, I realized it was the *process* of being fully present while carving that provided an opportunity for discovery about my relationship with language—metaphor and meaning, carved into wood.

Perhaps, though, all these words are not necessary. It truly is enough to just enjoy the forms and contrasts flowing within *Rhetoric Unbound.*
—Betty Scarpino