

Interview of David Ellsworth, conducted by Connie Mississippi.  
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Mississippi: Please comment on your own craft collection; who's in it and why?

Ellsworth: I have an inherent love of objects that no doubt evolved through my upbringing in the southwest, most notably my exposure to the art and architecture of Native American cultures.

I started acquiring work in the mid-1970's when I first exhibited in the craft shows, and I probably now have three hundred pieces of contemporary craft made by eighty-plus artists, most of whom I know personally. This means that my family is surrounded by a lot of positive energy, and this supports my own attitude about my life as a maker in such a remarkably exciting period of creativity and growth within the crafted arts. Most of the pieces are turned objects, but many are in clay, glass and fiber, plus paintings and photography. In addition, through these objects my students have the benefit of learning about design, method, intent and the history of object development over the past forty years.

My taste leans toward objects that are simple, yet powerful in design, objects that reflect an economy in their construction while incorporating an honest and direct use of material. I often consider Native American ceramics as a reference to a balance between function, design, decoration, and the simple, yet direct applications of process. Like ceramics, turning is basically a centering process. And when it comes to making the humble bowl form, the more we release the head and engage the heart, the more engaging the forms become. As such, I have quite a number of bowl forms by Bob Stocksdale, Alan Stirt, Bruce Mitchell and Bill Luce among others.

I am also drawn toward sculptural forms, such as the works of Mark Lindquist, Robyn Horn, Todd Hoyer, Michelle Holzapfel, and Michael Peterson. The works of these artist's are very different from one another, as are their methods of work. Lindquist and Hoyer will retain references to the turning process, but they then expand the forms through enhancements of texture, tone and a sense of monumentality in scale. On the other hand, Horn, Holzapfel and Peterson make few if any references to turning in their works. Instead, they manipulate the material as a pure sculptural medium, each employing constructivist techniques that express their own unique and imaginative styles. For me, what unites all of these artists is their ability to allow the material of wood to speak directly through their work, as if the pieces could be made of no other material except wood.

Another side of me leans toward the work of Michael Hosaluk, Mark Sfirri, Steve Loar, Giles Gilson, Garry Knox Bennett, Skip Johnson and Stephen Hogbin. These artists are exceptional designers who also introduce elements of whimsy and humor in their pieces.

Here, as with these other artists, when you hear the voice of the maker coming so strongly from within the work, it becomes a powerful message.

Mississippi: Discuss the different stages of our work over the years and how you were feeling as each stage developed. Also, discuss how you feel about each stage in hindsight.

Ellsworth: The first stage in my development of hollow forms came in 1974, when I was Artist in Resident at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colorado. These were my production item: sets of sugar, salt & pepper shakers. They were functional hollow containers of laminated exotic hardwoods and they sold for \$18/set. I made about 5,000 of them in 2 ½ years: Basic survival as a studio woodturner.



“Salt, Pepper & Sugar Shaker Set”, 1976. Tallest, 2”h. Walnut & Zebrawood

The second stage started in 1976 with the first hollow forms that required me bending a tool in order to reach the interior areas of these low, flat forms. This was my first adventure into non-utilitarian “decorative” objects. I was fortunate in receiving strong encouragement from my peers – especially those in other media - because the general public certainly wasn’t going to pay between \$35 and \$85 for something that didn’t hold cereal! By the fall of 1977, I finally did sell nine bowls in a gallery in Aspen and I never made another sugar shaker again. At this time I was torn between a failed marriage and my drive to push the limits of my technique in hollow turning. It was clear that I was headed into unknown territory which was a great challenge. Fear must have been part of the drive to keep pushing, but the forms, themselves, were nonetheless very tight, hard-edge and controlled.



“Bowl”, 1978. 2”h x 13”d. Bubinga Rosewood

In August of 1978, I did my first national craft show in San Francisco. It was a breakthrough year in all respects. I met Mark & Melvin Lindquist, Hap Sakwa, Michael Grahem, Doug Ayers, Jack Straka, Garry Knox Bennett and Bob Stocksdale, and connected for exhibitions with sixteen galleries. Whew...what a head bender!

I had also just discovered the richness of green wood and realized that the plasticity of this material was a great challenge to my design theories, whereas the rigidity of dry wood always had to be dominated with technique. With confidence and new challenges, my forms began to soften and warm up. I did, as well.



“Vessel” (detail) 1978. 7”h x 10”d. Black Walnut

The third stage came the following year in, 1979. My article on hollow turning was published in Fine Woodworking magazine and I went to my first Rhinebeck Craft Show in New York. Some guy laid a 3-foot diameter red oak burl on me and when I returned to Colorado and started working it, I discovered what Mark Lindquist had been working on for years: the beauty of the ‘natural edge’. I would spend the next ten years exploring this motif through various designs, including one piece that was 34” in diameter. The largest I did was 54” high and 20” diameter. The woodturning field was blossoming in the early ‘80s, and everyone and his uncle was working with burls. We virtually beat that natural edge idea to death and I haven’t made one since 1989.



“Vessel”, 1982. 5”h x 6.5”d. Walnut Sapwood Burl



“Vessel”, 1987. 11”h x 16”d. Norway Maple Burl

The fourth stage came in 1989-1991 with my Solstice Series that were made of ash, then burned and painted. These pieces challenged the old archetype of *chaos* and *order*, and were a clear reaction to the Gulf War and the first Bush Recession. They were designed as sculpture instead of bowls or vessels, and in many respects they helped change the face of what woodturning was ‘supposed’ to be by making it possible to become something ‘else’. By this I mean that our over-use of exotic and burl woods during the 1980’s gave our field a very narrow view of the term ‘beauty’. Exceptions to this would be the works of Merryll Saylan, Mike Hosaluk, Giles Gilson and yourself, among others. My intent was to engage concepts that moved beyond beauty, even beyond *vessel*. My gallery in Atlanta didn’t want them. My gallery in New York told me to come get them out because they were scaring their customers. And I’m sure some people even hated them. I was thrilled! I’d finally hit people in the gut instead of the head.



“Sapah”, 1990. 22”h x 5”d. Ash

The fifth stage came in 1991 when I returned to the vessel, the primary vessel; the sphere. I also abandoned the use of burl wood in favor of what was growing in my back yard, my own woods in Pennsylvania; oak, maple and ash. I wanted to show that the creative process wasn't limited to a perceived beauty, vis-à-vis the visual elements of exotic woods and burl, but that there was beauty in all our materials, especially the ones that were not necessarily fashionable at the time. To me, creating is collaboration between ideas, materials and process. The sphere provided the perfect root to a lifetime of design potential. I have since returned to working with burl, spalted wood and the odd chunk of whatever comes along. And whether stretched or squeezed or squashed, the root design element of my work today is focused on the sphere.





“Stratum Sphere”, 1997. 12”h x 12”d, Spalted Sugar Maple

Change is a curious factor within the arts. If you try to predict change, the work ends up being too calculated, too predictable, sometimes sterile. And if you don't follow change when it does occur, you miss the opportunity for to explore the ‘self’ in self-expression. It's a good case for my feelings that the art world is a most exciting place to be, but it's not intended to be a safe place.

Mississippi: In your opinion are there artists in the wood turning field exploring their creative potential through their techniques, or designing for the techniques?

Ellsworth: Both...and probably for all the right reasons. We are a field composed of a very small number of people with academic arts backgrounds and a huge number of people who come in as hobbyist turners, develop their skills and then suddenly discover a creative voice that they never knew they had. Regardless of origin, we see the results in the extraordinary variety of objects that are being made today. Some will use the lathe as a means of exploring their creative drive. Others will always work within the limits of the machine, itself. That's life. What more can we ask?

Yes, the field has a measure of the ‘art mentality’ that is often in conflict with the ‘craft mentality’. And, yes, everyone has a right to their own preferences of what they feel is good, bad and ugly. But unlike the fine arts, the crafted arts is an inclusive field. It supports creative efforts regardless of one's background or motivation for making.

Possibly the most important challenge facing woodturners in the coming years will be to get their heads out of the sand and begin to explore the makers in other craft media for ideas, experience and a greater sense of aesthetic development and personal growth. For a field that is sharing shelf space in galleries and museums with objects from all the other media, woodturners are far too cloistered in their understanding of the rich history and

the language of art and craft that is readily available to them. In the *information-knowledge-wisdom* continuum, woodturning is still in the information stage, feeding itself with what it already knows. But the moment we walk into that next room, a huge amount of growth will occur. It will be very exciting to see, and it will only take hard work and another generation to pull it off.

Mississippi: What about the “new” work in woodturning?

Ellsworth: I think what people are referring to as “new” work involves the use of carving, color and texture, but also processes that don’t directly involve the lathe. Of course, none of these approaches are *new*, as they have all been explored in some form in woodturning for millennia, including the use of texture and paint. What probably is new today is the number of people exploring ideas that fall outside the box of our perceptions of traditional woodturning. So, if this new work is a signal that people are thinking about what’s *possible* in woodturning, instead of what it’s *supposed* to be, that would be a good thing. I certainly don’t see these explorations as replacing the old with the new at all, but rather as the potential for expanding our visual repertoire and adding flavor to the language of craft. At the very least, we’re certainly creating a larger lake to swim in.

Mississippi: Talk a little about the larger field of the arts and crafts, including where wood art fits into this picture.

Ellsworth: The field of the crafts is currently experiencing what is clearly a very complex and somewhat awkward period of both growth and identity. Makers in all the media fields are cranking out good work, but they also seem to be peeking over their shoulder, as well as cautiously down the road and wondering what’s on the horizon; when’s the next growth spurt?

In part, this caution is due to a burgeoning market that rewards artistic directions, but primarily in work that continues to be made through craft disciplines and traditions. The roots of the creative process are similar in the making of both art and craft, yet the primary focal points of the work being made today center on technique and beauty, both of which come straight out of the craft idiom. The bottom line is that much of the work of today in all media, including woodturning, is very safe, even ‘slick’. As part of the natural cycle of growth, it’s a definite shift away from the Esherick aesthetic. Yet I feel it is quite narrow in scope, and that’s never a good place to be.

I also feel that we have inadvertently created a growing hierarchy of art *over* craft that has caused many makers to choose an identity that is targeted more toward the marketplace than on aesthetic considerations for the work itself. Last year’s decision by the American Craft Museum and the College of Arts & Crafts to drop the word ‘Craft’ from their names only served to complicate matters. At a time when makers are searching for some rationale to the labels that have been placed upon them, this was not exactly a

vote of confidence for a field that will forever be rooted in its craft traditions. This begs the question: Are we in denial? Is craft dead? Maybe we've just shifted into a "don't see, don't tell" gear for a while.

Of course, cultures are constantly defining and re-defining themselves through their artwork. But I personally would rather stick with the current confusion between art and craft, where we're constantly searching for a balance that can never really be found. It's much more fun to debate a subject when the debate itself has its own sense of beauty. In fact, in every conference or teaching venue I've participated in, the art/craft continuum initiates the most engaging dialog between the greatest numbers of people who invariably have the broadest outlook in relation to the creative process. What could possibly be more stimulating than that?

Looking down the road, what I would like to see is a series of events from discussion groups to conferences that relate directly to the *creative process*: How do people connect with their artwork, personally, spiritually and through their material? What brought them to become makers? What drives them? What are their passions, their fears, their inspirations? In other words, how can we better understand who we are?

Secondly, I'd like to see workshops offered in our existing craft schools that stress the conceptual (constructivist) in addition to the standard procedural (behaviorist) methods of learning. We have new woodworking/turning programs in a growing number of colleges and universities throughout the country, and we ought to have students standing in line for these programs. We don't. But we could get more students if we had courses in our craft schools that would function as an introduction to the more committed, academic programs. In essence, we need to create learning opportunities for our next generation of makers that gives them the experience of making art *before* they go into the marketplace.

Mississippi: Do you have any projections for the future?

Ellsworth: Ha! Well...I think the next stage in our growth will be to better understand our respective identities as makers, agents and buyers, and to more fully explore the potential of each of these entities because they are so intimately interconnected.

Artists have always been more likely to seek new directions in their work when they have confidence that buyers will support these explorations. And knowledgeable buyers have always been willing to provide this support...it's what makes the art world tick. But it's also a bit awkward not knowing who has the courage to take the first step. My feeling is that the art work must make its own statement before any movement in buying trends will take place.

You can see the effects of this confusion in the proliferation of derivative work that exists in all fields at both the local and national levels. Derivative work is rooted in insecurity,



plus the desire to be “like” someone else without realizing that copying dilutes the field by pulling energy away from the originator. Much of the problem is due to a lack of communication and research on the part of makers and buyers, alike. But it will remain a problem unless we have a better way of addressing the subject, including how to reach people in an intelligent and rational way.

Another thing that will help both makers and buyers is to understand that an object made one, two, ten or twenty years ago is just as important to an artist’s career as any object that is hot off the press. At present, many makers are afraid to date their work because they know buyers won’t touch it if it wasn’t made yesterday. The end result is a lack of sales for a huge number of pieces that are simply being considered ‘outdated’. But if we think about *legacy*, it all makes sense, both to the maker and the buyer. The long-term view that we have seen in other media, especially in ceramics, encourages buyers to explore an artist’s legacy through all phases of their work. Museums figured this out years ago. Collectors donate work to museums. The connection ought to be clear.

The role of the galleries can expand from its current base as distributors of art work to becoming an educational resource for buyers and artists, alike. Yes, we need more galleries, especially to handle the work of emerging artists. But there is currently a huge gulf between the few galleries that consistently seek national exposure and the multitude of local galleries throughout the country that never venture beyond their home turf. Where are these galleries? Which artists do they carry? Who buys from them? Hello!

If we can figure a way to bridge that gulf, emerging artists will automatically enter into a more knowledgeable and comprehensive marketplace. Buyers will become more informed about the type of work that is available, and, hopefully, more galleries will prosper as a result of a better educated audience. The Internet could play a huge role in helping to connect the pieces of this puzzle. A cross referenced data base is needed. Right now, we simply have a series of individual websites that seem to be ‘linked’ only to a limited marketplace. How about an international database that linked them all?

Our ultimate goal is the survival and prosperity of the arts at all levels. And since we makers, sellers and buyers are mutually dependent upon one another for this survival - and with 300,000,000 of us walking around in this country alone - it seems reasonable that these goals can be reached.