

Back to School...

by Betty Scarpino



Betty Scarpino, *River Stones*, 2006

When I was invited to be the first resident artist at the newly founded Center for Turning and Furniture Design in Indiana, Pennsylvania, I enthusiastically accepted. I like new experiences and generally find them exciting and rewarding. My four months at the Center as an Artist-in-Residence and Assistant Professor was no exception. I learned much, and my life and work is richer for the experience.

Steve Loar is the Director of the one-year-old Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). The Center recently evolved from the Woodworking and Furniture Design program, headed by Christopher Weiland since 1978. That program had established a reputation for involving the study of both turning and furniture as fine-art disciplines. A successful program such as this made a good candidate for expansion. Steve recently came to IUP after twenty-two years of teaching and administration at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. His unique partnership with Chris officially began three years ago and that partnership, along with Chris's program at IUP, provided the ingredients to bring this seemingly impossible-to-accomplish project to fruition.

The Center is a division of the Department of Art and the College of Fine Arts at IUP. That is significant. It is the first program in the nation to

offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in fine arts with a studio emphasis in both turning and furniture design. Years ago I recall discussing a similar development in the ceramics field with Sandra Blaine, ceramic artist and retired director of Arrowmont School. She taught ceramics at University of Tennessee when it was housed in the Home Economics Department. Similarly, I learned woodworking in the Industrial Arts Department at the University of Missouri some twenty-five years ago.

I said it is significant that the turning program is a division of the Department of Art, not necessarily that it's good or bad. It is a development, potentially a milestone for our field. Our work and our lives are affected by who we hang around with. If our field is to mature the way many of us would like, it makes sense to expose ourselves to influences that can move us in the direction we'd like to head. By being associated with an art department, we are influencing other artists, and at the same time we are being influenced and informed. These associations will filter into the larger communities of woodturning and of art. So - it is significant.

I found myself with the title of Assistant Professor, standing in front of ten students who were, for the most part, twenty-two years old. Fortunately it was not a severe culture shock for me—my sons

are currently nineteen and twenty-two years old and have been away at college themselves. I know the territory - sort of. Even so, I wasn't sure what to expect. Neither were they.

I wanted to get my students on the lathes as soon as possible. After a brief introduction and background on the turning field, we started making shavings, turning small objects from green wood. Their skills improved greatly within the first few weeks and we began working on turned objects as sculpture. Much of the turning field is about technique. Some in the art world scoff at technique, or at least we think they do. Arguments abound over "technique versus concept". My ultimate goal for this class was to make turning a part of each student's vocabulary for creating art. At a minimum, I wanted them to at least consider turning when making sculpture. In order to accomplish that, I offered an approach balanced between teaching technique and discussing concept and content.

Many of the old methods of turning seem to linger in wood shops, captured in the belts and pulleys of old lathes, a few of which still occupied the wood studio at the Center (they will shortly be replaced with more new lathes). It was a revelation for me to see how far I had progressed from my wood shop days in the late 70s and early 80s. I can say that the equipment today is much easier and



Betty Scarpino, *Pod Yellow Eggs*, 2006

more fun to use than the lathes and tools years ago. So, too, are some of the new techniques. It's imperative that new equipment and methods be available for students. New lathes are much safer, not to mention easier to operate.

Much of teaching is made up of individual experiences with students. Many of the most memorable moments came about through one-on-one contact. In early February, two students and I drove to Pittsburgh to hear a lecture by a famous furniture maker. On the way back, late in the evening, we stopped at a fast-food restaurant. As we were eating and talking, Matt Nauman commented, "When I heard that you would be coming here, I was excited that I would be taking a class from a famous person. I never would have imagined that I would be sitting at Burger King with you, eating a hamburger!" I assured Matt that I was a regular person who had to do her own housecleaning.

Early in the semester, Matt provided an "ah ha" moment for himself, for me and for the entire class. Matt was practicing his new skills with the skew chisel by cutting small shavings off of the end of a bead. He came close to turning a very thin, captured ring, something he knew nothing about. He picked up the super-thin, partial ring, carried it to me and asked, "Is it possible to make an entire ring of wood?" On his own, he discovered the

technique of making a captured ring. I'm not sure who was more thrilled, him or me!

Probably the most enthusiastic newcomer to turning was Tenley Schmida. Early on, she mastered the technique of turning small discs using double-faced tape to hold the wood onto the lathe. Jewelry was her objective, and she made several lovely pieces, all of them shiny. I can still see her prancing around the studio with a recently turned, highly polished object cradled in her hands! I encouraged Tenley to consider her jewelry as body sculpture and to do research on other artists who make one-off jewelry. I wanted her to be able to address the question, "Is it sculpture?"

I found the combination of young women, fashion consciousness and woodturning to be interesting. Some of them refused to wear an apron, however, they proudly walked around layered in masking tape. It was their solution to keeping shavings out of their clothing. They taped their pockets shut, secured the necklines of their shirts (tape from cloth to skin), and closed up the waist bands of their low-rise jeans with the stuff (more tape from cloth to skin)! I admit the cleverness of it, but there are more practical solutions... .

Four graduate students were enrolled in the class. I had met Michael Stadler a few months earlier

at the ITE conference in Philadelphia. It was wonderful to have conversations with someone already interested in and knowledgeable about the turning field.

Michael made several conceptual sculptures using turned elements. My favorite was, "???" The main component was a lathe-like contraption, mounted on and between two stands, which suggested an altar. The motor turned a spindle, around which Mike had looped a series of strings. The opposite end of each loop was wound around a pulley. Each pulley was attached to the back of a metal chair, similar to those sat on by spectators at turning demonstrations. He placed a turned bowl on each chair. When the motor was turned on, the strings rotated around and around the spindle and the pulleys, connecting the turned spindle to each chair and bowl. His multi-layered message was not lost on me. Mike had participated in enough turning demonstrations to understand their lure and the audience's captivation.

Blake Anthony started the class with a sequoia-sized chip on his shoulder about turning. He is a sculpture major and could not see what turned objects had to do with sculpture. He simply wanted to learn the techniques—a turned object, in and of itself, was not sculpture! Over the course of the semester we had several discussions about that and, generally, I agreed with Blake's views. For his



Betty Scarpino, detail of *Familiar Strangers*, 2006

part, Blake came to know and understand turning in a new light, appreciating many aspects of lathe work. In the end, he successfully incorporated turned elements into several large sculptures. I wouldn't say that Blake is a total convert, but his skills with the lathe and his understanding of turned elements are such that when one of his sculptures requires turning, he will grab a gouge and make what needs to be made. I consider that a huge success. I enjoyed having him in the class. He was a lively, articulate participant in discussion sessions.

In a way, Blake stood for the question of legitimacy that some in the art field will continue to challenge us with. But to that challenge I say, "So what?" We are already here, making things! Many artists in our field long ago progressed beyond woodturning's technical and mechanical beginnings. We are making glorious objects, each of us figuring out what lies below the bark's surface in our own special way. There is no compelling need to label what we make as "art" or "craft." Simply put, we create things. For me, labels limit and confine. Our time and energy is better spent addressing other, more exciting questions and concerns.

I believe this class was successful. Every student will, at the very least, be able to consider turned elements for what they make. They know the language and the basic techniques of our field.

The seeds are planted.

I understood my role at IUP to be two-fold: to teach and to learn. On the surface, I was a showpiece; I was the first instructor for the advanced-level class and I was the Artist-in-Residence. The not-so-obvious reason I wanted to be there was to learn and to be immersed in an atmosphere of creativity in a fine-arts setting. What an opportunity!

So how should an artist begin a residency? I can't say that it is better or worse to begin with preconceived notions of what you are going to make. Perhaps it's the perfect opportunity to continue something already started. On the other hand, maybe the chance to be totally influenced is just what an artist needs. My experience provided me with chance happenings, a synchronicity that so often occurs in my life. I am learning the patience it takes to leave myself open to what the world provides.

Our new Oneway lathes did not arrive till several weeks into the semester, which initially forced me to use the old equipment. I opted for turning long spindles and, sure enough, a chance encounter provided me with several long pieces of choice, air-dried butternut. I headed for the large Powermatic long-bed lathe and turned a four-and-a-half-foot by four-inch columnar object. I must say that was exciting! I'd never before turned

such a large chunk of wood and to accomplish it on an old lathe was something. I textured the outside surface with a skew chisel, took it off the lathe and proceeded to carve it.

I can't help but think of metaphor: turn a traditional form using old equipment, uncover what lies below the surface using processes previously not combined with turned forms and put the result on a pedestal—an apt metaphor for the turning field itself. We are resurrecting woodturning, giving it new life. Perhaps it was fitting that my work at the Center directly referenced this process. *Internal Dialogue*, the first sculpture I produced during my residency, is a turned spindle which I carved and bleached: fairly basic processes, yet somehow much more.

While at the Center, I had the opportunity to collaborate with other professors in the art department. I love prints, especially woodcuts, and a brief encounter with Patricia Villalobos, the printmaking professor, headed me in the direction of creating a large woodcut print. After a couple of advice sessions, Patricia handed me off to grad. student, Steven Hadley. Over the course of five weeks, Steven and I worked together to create a successful print. I learned that a reduction print takes a long time to make—each application of ink takes four or five days to dry. Several print sessions lasted into the evening



Betty Scarpino, detail of *Inner Response*, 2006

and we discovered that we both like a peculiar combination of ingredients on pizza: barbeque chicken, pineapple and feta cheese. We even convinced Jesse, a self-proclaimed picky eater, to try a slice.

I wanted the print to have a highly figured wood-grain pattern, so I selected a wide board of ash. Because ash is a ring-porous wood, I was fairly sure the ink would transfer the grain's image to the paper. After I carefully planed and sanded the board, Steven and I printed a proof sheet. Wow! The grain pattern was spectacular! The next step was to revise my original image—the pattern was so vivid that I had to scrap my initial drawing and create something new. I worked with paper cutouts, paint, markers and glue to come up with a bold design: three simple forms strategically placed to flow, yet not competing with the pattern of the grain. I would have had no problem doing some sort of virtuoso carving—the challenge for me had been to use bold, simple forms. Patricia noted that these forms were similar to the turned elements strewn around my work bench. Yes, I am a creature of habit.

Steven and I had some difficulties with the printing process, but we kept at it and finally ended up with two successful editions of the print. In the end, neither of the editions looked anything like my original drawing in form or color. The two

constants were the exceptional grain pattern transferred from wood to paper and the bold forms. No matter, I loved working that way, trying and discovering. We learned much more than we would have if things had proceeded without glitches. I can hardly wait to do another woodcut print!

Not everything about being at IUP flowed smoothly. A major change for me was adjusting to being constantly surrounded by people. At home I live a fairly quiet life and sometimes a day or two will go by without contact with people. While there, I was immersed in the routine of a college campus bustling with activity, noise and music. Initially it was difficult for me to concentrate on my own work. For that I needed solitude.

I changed my work schedule, staying late in the evenings, having quiet time to myself. That provided what I needed to get started. But as the semester progressed, I not only became more comfortable with the noise and people, I looked forward to it. There is something to be said for working in an atmosphere of high enthusiasm. It's catching.

The sculpture I finished, *Internal Dialogue*, is the beginning of a new series and I have two more in progress. I am fairly certain I would not have begun such a series had I not been presented with

this particular set of circumstances. Reflecting on the overall picture, it has meant a lot to me to have had this opportunity, especially at this point in my career. I feel highly charged with energy from my four months as the Center's first resident artist!

Residencies such as this are important for our field. I can't say enough about the significance of a lengthy residency. It provides a stretch of time, unconditional support and an atmosphere for creativity. Undoubtedly this significance will unfold as time goes by, but even now I can say that the outcome is profound. Seeds of influence have been planted in me, as well as in my students. Those seeds will mature and grow, informing us. In turn, we will be an influence on the field of turned wood in the years to come. ●

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