

Beyond the Lathe: An ITE Perspective

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Lathe artist, sculptor, architect... these names only partially define the multi-talented artists who comprise the Wood Turning Center's 2008 International Turning Exchange (ITE) in Philadelphia. The diversity of these artists' occupations and experiences is echoed in their origins, from Atlantic to Pacific, and from Germany, New Zealand, and Japan to America. For eight weeks during the summer of 2008, these five men and one woman came together in Center City Philadelphia, under the auspices of the Wood Turning Center, and in the studios of The University of the Arts, to share, inspire, and collaborate. As a weeklong visitor, I had the rare opportunity to observe and indeed to learn from six individuals who have instilled in me a far better appreciation for wood and its relevance in the continually expanding world of contemporary art.

Over the last seven years, I have been increasingly exposed to wood art, particularly turned wood, developing a love for those objects that emanate from the functional, vessel form. In retrospect, it seems as though I have been on a never-ending quest to link past and present, and historic wood-turning of the eighteenth century with lathe-work today. Such connections are important for curators like me, who are charged with the welcome responsibility for interpreting objects from the Middle Ages to modern times. Discerning collectors, from the Midwest to the East Coast, have supported me in my journey, exposing me to an array of high-level work with some items offered to my museum as a way of advancing an even greater appreciation for wood art in Western Pennsylvania. With flood doors wide open, I have disciplined myself in reviewing wood, guided first and foremost by the quality and execution of design and the demonstration of an artist's ability to push the boundaries of the medium. Comfortable in my pursuit of the functional and sculptural, I have historically strayed from the conceptual. That is, until ITE.

Of the numerous lessons learned through my residency as the ITE scholar, one of the most important was the appreciation of wood, a revered material, as a means to an end; and equally valid as paint, stone, ceramic, glass, and metal in conveying the vision of an artist. And while my love of wood objects as vessel forms may continue to drive my passion for the medium, I now witness the relevance of wood in the vocabulary of materials exploited by contemporary artists, not just "artisans." The Wood Turning Center clearly supports a similar agenda, welcoming artists who quite honestly if not proudly announce that ITE has been one of their first substantive experiences working on a lathe. Personally speaking, I am energized by such proclamations, finding in it a strange sense of comfort for my own phobia in facing a rotating piece of cherry or tulip.

It is from the ITE artists that I have gained the confidence to pick-up a chisel or a gouge, even when such a tool is forcibly thrown back at me by the lathe. Turning is a skill. It takes patience, physical and emotional energy, and intimate knowledge of the material,

its grain, and its properties. It takes vision to see success in one's failures. I see these admirable traits in the ITE artists.

Of the many characteristics that one respects individually in the ITE artists, collaboration – which is paramount to the ITE program – is universal. An observer like myself cannot help but be enamored by the free sharing of knowledge and experience that becomes almost second nature in every interaction among the artists. And while ideally this sense of compassion is seen in many artistic fields and professions, I find it particularly pervasive in those passionate about wood. I should have assumed as much prior to ITE, considering the forthright generosity of wood art collectors and scholars, who have time and again offered to provide me with a greater understanding of a field that I have grown to love. I am equally grateful to the six 2008 ITE artists, all of whom responded unquestionably to my desire to learn from a lathe.

Yet ITE provided me with a lot more than experience on a lathe. I was given endless opportunities to engage six international artists, to review their techniques, to discover their sources of inspiration, and to hear quite candidly about how they see themselves and their work in the 21st century. These valuable conversations provide me with the tools necessary to promote wood art as an integral part of the art world, whether seen alongside other crafts (like ceramics, textiles, glass or metalwork) or within contemporary art galleries devoted to painting, photography, and sculpture. The fact that several ITE artists already work in multimedia, and have incorporated wood as a material in their work (such as in theater and film/video), is indication enough that designations like craft vs. art already are blurred – if not irrelevant – in exploring art in the 21st century.

Museums will continue to wrestle with the terminology in exploring how best to preserve the most innovative, provocative, and informative work of a generation. No doubt the Wood Turning Center will face a similar predicament, especially as the field of wood art continues to develop “beyond the lathe.” We can worry about the semantics later. ITE is a nirvana for those interested in wood, from every turn.