

“New Masters of Woodturning – Expanding the boundaries of art”

A review

By Judson Randall

In the introduction to their new book “New Masters of Woodturning,” an extraordinary compendium of sketches of wood-turning artists, authors Terry Martin and Kevin Wallace say they are inspired by and appreciative of the “willingness of everyone to share their ideas, techniques and joy in what they do.”

Now we, the viewers, writers, collectors, curators, students and makers involved in the lathe-turned art field should feel appreciation and inspiration because of how Martin and Wallace have provided contemporary detail and insight into these 31 international artists and their work.

Martin, of Brisbane, Australia, is a turner and sculptor whose work has been in scores of exhibitions and in dozens of collections, public and private. He is a curator, lecturer and writer involved in the field over many years. His 1995 book, “Wood Dreaming,” is the only documentation of Australian woodturners. Until 2006, he was a writer for and editor of “Turning Points,” the Wood Turning Center’s unique journal of the lathe-turned art field.

Wallace of Los Angeles is a board of directors’ member of Collectors of Wood Art and an advisory board member for the Handweavers Guild of America. A curator of many California exhibitions and a writer on the contemporary art field, Wallace is the author of seven previous books, including biographical expositions of artists and examinations of trends in contemporary craft art. He was associated with del Mano Gallery in Pasadena for many years.

Their book picks up where previous chroniclers of artistic woodturning – Dona Z. Meilach in 1976, Dale Nish in 1985 and the growing coverage of the field by “Fine Woodworking” -- left off.

Today, there are several publications that cover the lathe-turned art field, including the American magazine “Woodwork”, the “American Woodturner”, and the Wood Turning Center’s “Turning Points” as well as its exhibition books documenting its breakthrough “challenges” and other exhibitions.

However, “New Masters” is a singular catalog of the lives, educations, artistic approaches and techniques of a broad international selection of the artists who will do for the 21st century what the old masters did for the 20th. Martin and Wallace pay tribute to the founders of the modern lathe-turning field, including David Ellsworth, Stephen Hogbin, Bob Stocksdale, James Prestini, Mark Lindquist, Ed Moulthrop, Rude Osolnick, Al Stirt, Ray Key and Richard Raffan.

As a testament to their energy and scope, the authors cast a broad net, bringing in the artists from nine countries on the continents of North America, Europe, Africa and Australia, as well as the island country New Zealand. Each of these artists' works is not just representative of his or her country but examples of the cultural influences of the continent or region in which they make art.

For example, Virginia Dotson, whose laminated and layered works reflect her Arizona domain. "I am intrigued by the features of the landscape and what they reveal about the past," she said.

"New Masters" is lavishly illustrated with photographs of the artists, their surroundings, their shops, and selected studio photographs of their works, as well as explanatory photographs of many of their techniques. The photographs are either supplied by the artists or shot by a variety of other photographers.

Among the expository technical photographic layouts is the illustrative sequence on how Peter Hromek, a Czech who moved to Germany, created the multiple-axis "Paradise," a sensual three-lobed work, in 2007.

We readers are treated to Martin's and Wallace's explorations of many aspects of the artists included in this catalog of the "New Masters." We learn, for example, what inspires the makers and how they came to engage in their artistic pursuits:

To take one, we learn that William Moore, an Oregon artist who combines spun metal with his wood forms and sculptures, is one of few art-school- educated turners. A sculptor by education, he was inspired by Henry Moore and design movements such as Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts and Bauhaus.

And Michael Hosaluk of Saskatchewan, Canada, describes his beginnings as: "I was born among people who use their hands." His inspirations, we learn, include the "art of unknown artists from ancient cultures whose work lives on in museums."

A second exploration that Martin and Wallace bring to us is the artists' current approaches to their works, what informs their expressive intent and their way of carrying it out.

For example, Ron Layport of Pittsburgh, who, like Hosaluk, is inspired by "works made a thousand years ago that speak of personal struggle, daily life, mystery and ceremony," tells the authors that he approaches his highly sculptural works "like a canvas. Even though I know what I am hoping to achieve, I try to be receptive to opportunities and changes of direction as they present themselves."

And yet, we are told about Hayley Smith's approach to her intricately textured and surface-sculpted works: The Arizona artist who spent most of her life in Wales, told Martin and Wallace – referring to wood -- that "I like the challenge of finding the balance between its existing character and what I can add to it. It is, after all, not a blank canvas."

The third exploration that Martin and Wallace share with us readers is the artists' techniques for achieving their completed work.

Many viewers of lathe-turned art, which can often hide its lathe-turned origins, look at a sculpture and say to themselves, "How did she do that?" Practitioners and hangers-on in the lathe-turned art world always want to discern the processes that lead to the expression, even though the artists might want the final product to be the only voice speaking.

The significant achievement of "New Masters of Woodturning" is that, in many cases, it exposes the tricks and techniques that produced the final, resolved work.

Besides the sidebar layout of Peter Hromek's creation of "Paradise," the book gives us, for example, an explanation of how Louise Hibbert, a British artist who now lives in Virginia, achieves her expression of natural beauty in a piece that comes to be the balance and form of an apparent seed pod.

On the whole, "New Masters of Woodturning – Expanding the Boundaries of Wood Art" is a valuable reference and a delight to read. The writing is straight-forward and clear and it brings to life the artists who are blazing new trails for wood turners of all levels of ability.

The book also includes a glossary, a list of wood turning organizations, and a list of further readings.

Judson Randall of Oregon is a professional editor and writer with more than 40 years experience on newspapers and is editor of Wood Turning Center publications.

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