

Kay Miller – September, 2011 OOM

“Lunar Sphere,” David Ellsworth, 2000, #2002.139



Questions:

1. Look at this object from the front, then from the side. What differences do you see? What surprised you?
2. Does this object look heavy or light? Examine the thickness around the top hole. Assuming that is the thickness throughout, how does that change your impression of the sphere?
3. Describe the color and texture variations of this sphere. [Use to explore idea of spalted wood and Ellsworth's choice of how to create the rounded vessel.]
4. This vessel has been completely hollowed out. If you were trying to gouge the inside out of a sphere like this, how do you think you would do it?
5. What does this sphere remind you of? What stories does it suggest?
6. Name the attributes you think the maker of such a vessel would have.

Key Points:

1. David Ellsworth is a premiere designer of turned wooden vessel forms. He was among a handful of pioneers who pushed the medium from a craft of wood turning to the field of wood art,

producing modern/contemporary art forms that are sought by dealers, collectors and museums alike. Lunar Sphere is among Ellsworth's signature later works. He is famous for developing special tools for "blind turning," allowing him to hollow out spherical, thin-walled vessels that are mere millimeters thick, excavating the interior through very small openings.

2. This object started as a block of wood with great areas of spalting, a process of decay that produces dark lines or other changes in wood color and texture, primarily as a result of fungal invasion. The two most difficult parts of turning the sphere were working with the delicate spalted areas – which some have compared to "carving mushrooms" – and achieving a consistently thin wall.
3. Ellsworth is famous in the wood art field for developing bent-axis scraping tools he developed in the 1970s that allowed him and other wood artists to both core out the interior through very small holes and refine the inner surface to a delicate wall thickness, giving the forms an exquisite lightness. Works such as Lunar Sphere exhibit a unique almost complete roundness of form.
4. Ellsworth is known for his generosity in sharing tools and techniques with other artists and teaching thousands of students in workshops.
5. His work is included in the permanent collections of 30 museums.

David Ellsworth bio:

- Born in 1944 in Iowa City. Grew up in an academic family. Learned to live by the Golden Rule, went to church and got a good education. Iowa, he said, is a good place to be from.
- Summers were spent in his family's Colorado mountain cabin. There he heard stories of the Native Americans from an elderly Blackfoot man named Charles Eagle Plume. His favorite story was about how a warrior could walk silently through the forest, even at night. Ellsworth taught himself to move without a sound by placing each downward step toe-first, to discover the rising of the earth and how to meet it with equal force. He learned to reach with outstretched arms to the trees and the rocks, first in the daylight with eyes closed, and then in the dark, discovering their energy, the radiance of their warmth, and their smell. He made his bows, arrows, tomahawks, slings, knives, spears, whips and guns from wood and leather, using the simplest of tools. ["Ellsworth on Turning," p. 3]
- Largely self-taught. Years later, Ellsworth realized that his understanding of the *centering process* essential for turning wood came from seminal experiences as a boy. "Specifically, I learned to let the tip of the sharpened tool seek the energy of the wood not as a conqueror, but as an equal." ["Ellsworth on Turning," p. 4]
- Before settling into a career as a wood turner, Ellsworth studied architecture, created sculpture in metal, and experimented with fibers. His academic family assumed that with his MFA, he would teach sculpture, drawing and design at the university level. His love for the vessel form became evident when he began working with clay, and he then returned to wood, a medium to which he had been introduced as a teenager.
- Married to Wendy Ellsworth, a color and bead artist. They live in Quakertown, Pa., on 20 acres of forested land and work in separate his and her workshops. Ellsworth designed their large home, which is filled with art in every medium.

- Owns 300-plus pieces of contemporary craft made by 80-some artists, most of whom he knows personally. “This means 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.” [“Interview with Connie Mississippi.”]
- The MIA has nine works by Ellsworth.



Progression in his development/hardships/discoveries as an artist:

First stage: 1974 – Artists in Residence, Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colo. Started developing functional hollow forms: sugar, salt & pepper shakers

Second stage: 1976 – First hollow forms that required Ellsworth to create a “bent” tool to reach the interior of low, flat decorative forms. Peer support was crucial: “The general public certainly wasn’t going to pay between \$35-85 for something that didn’t hold cereal!”

1977 – Sold nine bowls in an Aspen gallery. Never made another sugar shaker. Torn between a failed marriage and the drive to push the limits of his technique in hollow turning. “Fear must have been part of the drive to keep pushing.”

August, 1978 – **Breakthrough year.** First national craft show in San Francisco. Meets other wood artists, including Bob Stocksdale and Mark & Melvin Lindquist. Discovers the richness and plasticity of green wood. Ellsworth began turning green wood one evening in 1978 in his Colorado studio. The next morning, the dried piece was twisted up and sitting on the floor on its side. He was thrilled. “What have I been doing buying wood from a store, when this is like working with free energy in the palm of my hand?” Ellsworth developed a philosophy that dry wood was dead, while green wood was alive. [“Ellsworth on Turning,” p. 232] His forms softened and warmed up.

Third stage: 1979. His article on hollow turning was published in *Fine Woodworking* magazine. He starts working with a 3-foot diameter red oak burl, discovering what Mark Lindquist had been working on for years – the beauty of the natural edge.

Fourth stage: 1989-1991, Solstice Series. Hollow vessels made of ash, then burned and painted. Challenged archetypal notions of chaos and order. A clear reaction to the Gulf War and first Bush Recession. Designed as sculpture, not bowls or vessels. They helped to change the face of what woodturning was “supposed” to be. His gallery in Atlanta didn’t want these rough, natural-edged vessels. His gallery in New York told him to come get them out because they were scaring their customers. “I was thrilled! I’d finally hit people in the gut instead of the head.”

Fifth stage: 1991. Returned to the vessel and the sphere. Abandoned burl for the wood in his Pennsylvania woods – oak, maple and ask. “The sphere provided the perfect root to a lifetime of design potential.” [Interview with Connie Mississippi]

Lunar Sphere, 2000. Spalted sugar maple; H 13 ¾ Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury. MIA accession: #2002.139.

1. Light-colored wood sphere, with brown striations; small round hole near one end; unfinished surface; very small flat “base.”
2. Walls are about 1/8-inch thick.
3. Piece is very light.
4. If you look at it straight on, the sphere looks perfectly round. Move to the side and it looks oval.
5. Ellsworth turned the sphere on the diagonal when the maple was “green” or “wet.” After the sphere dried, the natural warping caused the wood to morph into an ovoid shape. Ellsworth has studied how green wood dries. Green wood has elastic fibers. Dry wood has rigid fibers. Wood moves in a predictable pattern as it dries. The wood’s moisture content, fiber’s mass, tension and elasticity all help determine the shape it will assume when dry. [“Ellsworth on Turning,” p. 233]
6. “When I started working with green wood in the late 1970s, I quickly realized *control* was the wrong approach. As soon as I replaced that term with *discover*, I encountered an entirely new path in working with wood. The great challenge in working with green materials is anticipating what direction the movement might take and how much might occur.” [“Ellsworth on Woodturning,” p.9]
7. “The sphere is the most difficult object to design from, because it is inherently too perfect. In this case, I positioned the grain diagonally: first, to allow the lines of spalted grain to draw one’s eye through an ascending/descending movement, and second, so the form would distort naturally away from a perfect sphere toward a slight ellipse.” [Artist statement, “Conversations with Wood,” p. 88.]
8. The greatest difficulty in working with spalted wood is its fragility. Stick a tool in the wrong place and you have a hole. [David Waterbury, 7-21-11 walk-through.]

9. “Spalting is a natural process in which fungi attack the living cells of organic material. This process occurs in dead or dying trees, leaves, or any other compostable material. I have been told the fungi exist throughout the earth’s surface, but they only manifest in areas where there is both heat and moisture.” [“Ellsworth on Turning,” p. 16]

David Ellsworth – in his own words (from his website):

“My first exposure to woodturning began in 1958, when I was fourteen. By the time I received my Master's degree in sculpture in 1973, I had worked in many media including metal, fiber and polyester. But it was my experience working in clay that led me to consider the intimate power of the vessel form. My love for the material of wood returned and by the mid-1975, I had developed a series of tools that allowed me to produce thin-walled hollow forms through a process I called 'blind turning.'

“As both a maker and a teacher, I am constantly reminded of the importance of remaining a student of one's own work. This philosophy has allowed me to remain receptive to many influences that surround me, including objects from other cultures, the infinite variety of the materials I use, and my own personal and spiritual connection to the vessel form. The evolution of my work has therefore taken many directions, each stage of which I see as the foundation for a body of work that is yet to be realized.

“My intent as an artist is to translate thought into form and to create singular statements that evolve through the integration of the material of wood with the process of turning. I prefer to work in series where I can explore ideas, challenge concepts and expand the dimension of my work into a broad visual language. I consider the skill of my craft to be the foundation from which my artwork has evolved, and that the identity of each object is a glimmer of the collective body of my life's work.”

History of Wood Art:

Wood turning started out as a craft, whose artisans were primarily hobbyists and industrial arts students and teachers. Most of their pieces turned on a lathe – from table legs to bowls - were functional. Then in the 1930s, a revival in turning was sparked by the availability of smaller, more affordable lathes for home and shop. This was at about the same time that artisans in other craft genres - ceramics, glass, metal work and fiber art - were becoming radically experimental, shifting their approach from homey, hand-made products into museum-quality art. Their innovations spurred wood turners to see greater sculptural possibilities in the medium of wood. Some of the best work of wood artists mentioned below can be seen in the MIA’s **Gallery 275**.

Definitions:

Woodturning is a form of woodworking that is used to create wooden objects on a lathe. Woodturning differs from most other forms of woodworking in that the wood is moving while a very sharp stationary tool is used to cut and shape it.

Lathe. A machine that spins wood, usually powered by a motor. The wood is held in place at both ends by a headstock and a tail stock. The sharp lathe tools are balanced against a rest in front of the spinning wood, allowing accurate cutting into the wood.

There are **two distinct methods** of turning wood: spindle turning and faceplate turning. In **spindle turning**, the wood is fixed between 2 points. The spur center digs in to the wood and is powered by a motor. The other, a hard center or a live center may be a point or set of points in the tailstock. In **face plate turning**, the wood is secured with screws to a faceplate or in a chuck or jig. The tail stock and a center may also be used for added support on large pieces with a faceplate. Most bowls, platters and many vessels are face plate turned, while furniture legs, spindles, and some vessels are spindle turned. The method used may differ depending on the shape of the blank and the technique of the turner, and both methods may be used on the same piece.

Burl: An aberrant, knoblike growth that can occur on a tree's root, trunk, or limb. Burls can form with either onion-like layers or in a cross-grain structural pattern. Either type creates stunning visual beauty when used in decorative furniture and turnings.

Spalted wood: A fungal decomposition of cell structure that is Mother Nature's way of turning a dead or dying tree into the forest floor. Spalt manifests in warm, moist climate conditions and produces brown or black zone lines highly favored by wood turners for their decorative patterns.

The origin of woodturning dates to around 1300BC when the Egyptians first developed a two-person lathe. One person would turn the wood with a rope while the other used a sharp tool to cut shapes in the wood. The Romans improved the Egyptian design with the addition of a turning bow. Early bow lathes were also developed and used in Germany, France and Britain. In the Middle Ages a pedal replaced hand-operated turning, freeing both the craftsman's hands to hold the woodturning tools. The pedal was usually connected to a pole, often a straight-grained sapling. The system today is called the "spring pole" lathe. Spring pole lathes were in common use into the early 20th Century. A two-person lathe, called a "great lathe", allowed a piece to turn continuously (like today's power lathes). A master would cut the wood while an apprentice turned the crank.

James Prestini, an artist, designer and engineer, is considered the **father of modern wood turning**. Prestini started turning wood in the 1930s and was the first to think of his pieces in terms of form, not function, taking his vessels to new levels of thinness and elegance. This anticipated the current emphasis on planning, complexity and aesthetics in wood art. Prestini used the lathe to produce forms he wanted, selecting the wood for grain, color and texture to suit his purposes. He was the first to establish the artistic viability of wooden vessels. [MIA catalog, p. 28]. By the early 1940s, Edgar Kaufman, Jr., curator of MoMA's Industrial Design Department recognized Prestini's elegant, forward designs, and began exhibiting his objects at MoMA in the mid-1940s. [MIA catalog, Olivarez, p. 25] The MIA has two James Prestini pieces: Plate, #96.60, and Bowl, # 2005.22.

Bob Stocksdale was one of the first professional wood turners and was known for his smooth edges and regular forms. Starting in 1950, MoMA included his work in its annual “Good Design” exhibitions. Stocksdale taught himself to turn wood during World War II, when he was a conscientious objector doing alternative service in forestry. For a long period, Prestini and Stocksdale were virtually the only turners recognized for their wood objects. Then in the mid-1950s, Prestini quit the field, leaving Stocksdale as the field’s sole leader, a celebrity of sorts. Stocksdale had an almost religious feeling about the material. Instead of just signing his work, he titled them with the wood’s name. [MIA catalog, P. 51] In March of 1969, Stocksdale was given perhaps the first single-artist museum shows for a wood turner at the Little Gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York [MIA catalog, Olivarez, p. 26] This was a milestone: No longer was Stocksdale termed just a “wood turner.” Now he was an “artist-craftsman” and “wood lathe-artisan,” opening that as an appellation for wood artists to follow. [See his “Vessels” at the MIA: #2008.109.38, #2008.109.37, #2002.84.49]

The first generation of recognized wood artists included a handful of men: **Prestini, Stocksdale, Melvin Lindquist, Ray Allen, Ed Moulthrop, Rude Osolnik**, among them. Many were engineers or men from diverse professions with a penchant for precision. Engineer **Ray Allen’s** work was so detailed that he worked from meticulous blueprints that he created and tacked to the wall. Allen was among the first to create laminated pieces, for which he meticulously glued together segments of contrasting ebony and ivory woods into blocks before turning them, achieving intricate mosaics. [MIA “Vessel”, accession: #2009.74.1]. His largest vessels have up to 7,000 pieces in them.

Although scattered geographically, these artists became aware of what others were doing through publications and symposia. They shared ideas, techniques, tools and even materials. In the 1970s, most wood artists concentrated on perfection of form in bowls and other vessels. They capitalized on the grains of gorgeous woods, creating unbelievably even walls and silky smooth finishes.

Little artistic notice had been given to **Rude Osolnik**, who in the post-World War II period already was experimenting with irregular, cast-off pieces of free wood from veneer mills – perhaps the first to turn laminated wood, but certainly among the first Americans to make a career of woodturning. His signature tapered candlesticks were sold in department stores in the 1950s and 1960s. [MIA collection: “Vessel”- # 2008.109.3& # 2003.2.2]. But his radically creative approach in making “natural edge” bowls with flared rims” would not be recognized for many years [MIA catalog, pp. 26 & 50-51].

Osolnik, Ed Moulthrop and Melvin Lindquist began pushing the enveloping, redefining the wood bowl in size and materials. Ed Moulthrop bought his first lathe at age 16 with money earned by delivering magazines. He broke new ground with his own specially designed, long-handled tools – reaching up to 5 feet in length – that allowed him to turn monumental-sized pieces. He photographed his young son Philip peeking over the top of a huge vessel. Moulthrop priced his work by the diameter of the vessel – the bigger the diameter, the more difficult to turn, the higher the price. Moulthrop phased out his architecture career – he had designed Atlanta’s International Airport – to become a full-time wood artist in 1976 [MIA catalog, LeCoff, p. 49.] He also experimented with chemicals to stabilize and protect the wood – transforming the field. His son Philip and grandson Matt are also professional wood artists. The MIA has pieces by all three Moulthrops. [**Ed Moulthrop**: “Vessels”, #2003.2.3, # 2008.109.26, # 2008.109.27.]

In the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of young turners – including **Philip Moulthrop, Mark Lindquist** (Melvin’s son) and Pennsylvania turner **David Ellsworth** - pushed creative exploration of

flawed woods – burls and spalted woods. Mark Linquist produced “flowing sculptural forms” from spalted maple. Canadian sculptor **Stephen Hogbin** took wood apart and reassembled it for sleek sculptural forms- from furniture to “walking bowls” - often from laminates instead of solid pieces of wood. The MIA has objects by all these artists.

By June 1979, **David Ellsworth** was recognized in *American Craft* magazine, for his new “blind turning” process. These allowed him to hollow out turned forms through very small openings, using specially designed bent tools. Lunar Sphere is a prime example of this. Although Ellsworth described the blossoming wood art field in the 1980s as being in its adolescence. It seemed that every turner was working with burls and exotic woods.

Melvin Lindquist was known for producing works with raw, unfinished edges. But his son, Mark Lindquist became a pivotal figure for his pioneering use of raw, unfinished surfaces and chain saw-defined patterns. Many of these techniques required muscular agility. After Mark Linquist was in an accident, he created a set of robotic chain-saw tools, allowing him to hollow out the inside of large vessels. He directly influenced the sculptural work of such other wood artists as **Robyn Horn and Jack Slentz**. [MIA catalog, p. 27]

The late 1970s and 1980s, saw additional breakthroughs by such artists as **Ron Kent, Ed Moulthrop, David Ellsworth, Mark Lindquist, Stephen Hogbin, Todd Hoyer, Merryll Saylan and Del Stuffs**, who produced stunning trompe l’oeil still lifes, sculptural, naturalistic carvings, even whimsical shapes. More single-artist shows and retrospectives followed. While traditional woodworkers dried wood before turning it, **Ron Kent** preferred turning Norfolk Island Pine when it is “wet” or “green.” Then, he soaked his thin-walled creations in Danish watco oil, giving them a glowing translucency [MIA: #2008.109.20 and others]

Christian Burchard also became known for his works that were turned when the wood was green and allowed to morph into twisted shapes. **Norm Satorius** was known for his sculptural spoons with rough edges. **Stoney Lamar** created sculptures by partially turning an object, then remounting it on the lathe to create off-center, multiple-axis sculptures. [MIA catalog, p. 28-29]. Artists like engineer **Michael Schuler** used dark resins to fill the voids in such natural objects as pine cones, then turning the dried mosaic blocks.

As turners became aware of deforestation issues, most eschewed use of exotic woods from live trees, turning instead to wood and burls from dead or blown-down trees.

Like artists from other media, wood artists began drawing their inspiration from many sources: nature, pottery, ancient art forms, cinema, diverse cultures, space, natural disasters, the work of other artists, as well as the darkness and light of human relationships: **Christian Burchard** modeled his wooden “Baskets” [Mia: # 2000.101.1] on Dale Chihuly’s glass baskets [MIA catalog, p. 67]. **William Hunter** drew inspiration for his objects’ swirls and flair from flames, waving grasses, human muscles, antlers and other natural forms [MIA accessions: # 2008.109.16, 2003.2.1, 2005.86]. By carving through turned works, Hunter’s creations cast gorgeous shadows and inspired flights of memory in his viewers. **Michael Mode** referenced the 16th century Moghul ruler Akbar for his technically ambitious, “The King’s City. David Sengel married thorns and box elder wood for our “Egret” # 2002.84.43a,b and for whimsical forms. Wood artists like **Robyn Horn, Michelle Holzapfel and Michael Peterson** use little, if any

turning, in their work. Instead, they manipulate the material as a purely sculptural media. In the Waterbury show, Holzapfel referenced the work of Karl Blossfeldt's *Art Forms in Nature*.

By the 1980s, **women** turners were gaining prominence in the field because of their inspired, unfettered approaches:

Robyn Horn is one of the most adventurous wood sculptors, working with her chainsaw on monumental, free-form pieces with a high level of abstraction. With her MIA piece, "The Scream," accession # 2002.135, she translated Edvard Munch's famous image of psychological torture through her characteristic chip-carved surface.

Connie Mississippi created the largest wood piece at the MIA. For her "Sea Chamber," [MIA accession: #2003.3], she took a engineered material – plywood – made from natural material (wood). Then she turned that to create a form that references a natural material – a sea shell.

Hayley Smith, who started as a printmaker and painter, often works with circular forms, into which she has superimposed linear figures, carving, burning or painting different parts of the piece, without completely obscuring the wood. [MIA: Platter, #2002.84/45. Bowl: # 2009.75.13

Betty Scarpino ["Stepping out of Line," # 2002.84.42a,b] creates visual and metaphorical contrasts that sometimes reflect human relationships, as with her "Revealing Relationships," piece in the Waterbury show that revealed feelings hidden while she was undergoing a divorce. In an email to Docent Terry Nadler, Scarpino wrote: "...Maybe what came out in this sculpture was such a universal connection that the depth of the meanings are only discoverable over time."



David Ellsworth ~ **Vessels**

"Vessels": 1980-1989

The decade of the '80's was a period of great exploration and discovery within all craft media-woodturning in particular. In developing my own voice as a designer-craftsman, I was determined that each piece would become singular in character, true to the medium of wood, and reflective of the influences that have inspired me.

The process of vessel making is one of balancing ideas with execution where the heart, not the head, is in charge. Throughout this process, the material must speak, command - even scream - for its own identity. Without this interaction one simply makes a good object, a good design, but one which lacks the presence of the power of "self". Thus the vessel is the language of self; expressed, but not overwhelmed by one's material or technique.

Ultimately, I find myself drawn to the privacy of the interior to discover the origins of its force. It is within this volume that one encounters an object's spirit and 'pulse', elements that engender the same qualities of mystery that we find within ourselves.

Hollow Turning Tools...from David Ellsworth

I designed these tools to turn hollow forms up to about 9" high and 10" diameter. The cutting tips are 10% Cobalt high speed steel, and held into the shafts with Super-Glue so there's no set screw to corrode or clog with dust...simply heat with a propane torch to remove and replace the tips.

Each tool comes with an extra tip and instructions for tip replacement and sharpening. Also included are suggestions for turning the handles for good balance, how to use the tools, and the do's and don't's of turning inside a hollow form.



Hollow turning tools - Set of two tools: \$64.95

Studio



Resources:

Ellsworth's website: <http://www.ellsworthstudios.com/>

"Ellsworth on Woodturning: How a Master Creates Bowls, Pots and Vessels," David Ellsworth, Fox Chapel Publishing Co. Inc., 2008.

"Conversations with Wood: The Collection of Ruth and David Waterbury," MIA catalog, 2011. Essays by curator Jennifer Komar Olivarez, xxx Patricia E. Kane, Christopher Monkhouse and Albert LeCoff.

Collectors of Wood Art (CWA) Newsletter. Interview of Ellsworth by Connie Mississippi, Aug. 2001. (Can be found on Ellsworth's website.)

Interview with David Ellsworth by Steve Worcester. (Found on Ellsworth's website.)

"Conversations with Wood Transcript," by Kay Miller from three July 2011 walk-throughs with curator Jennifer Komar Olivarez and collectors Ruth and Dave Waterbury. View on MGPVolunteers.

Terry Nadler's collected notes for "Conversations with Wood."

