

ART

If Only Shop Class Had So Much Style

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE current exhibition at the Yale Art Gallery demonstrates the evolution of working with wood on a lathe from a common industrial art - does anyone remember high school shop class, with its triumphs and catastrophes? - to highly creative art.

Many pieces belong to Yale; they are gifts from the collection of John and Robyn Horn. The first part of the exhibition is utilitarian objects, some of which were created following printed instructions in manuals. The first extended series is bowls and related objects that share in the streamlining that is associated with all forms of modernism.

A set of salt and pepper shakers and a sugar container by David Ellsworth exemplify this. They were made in 1976, a time when he was also turning pieces that demonstrated the mastery of eggshell thinness for which he is known. He has made some definitely non-useful vessels with a deliberately ravaged look to emphasize the thin walls.

A father and son, Mark Lundquist and Melvin Lundquist, are represented by bowls of a different order, characterized by a burly roughness. Their bowls, from the mid-1970's, have smooth interiors, but the natural shape of the wood has been kept.

Mark Lundquist also made one of the most monumental pieces. "Silent Witness #1, Oppenheimer" is a stacking of turned sections of walnut, elm and pecan and is intended as a reflection on Robert Oppenheimer, one of the inventors of the atomic bomb. This dedication caused controversy when the 85-inch tall piece was made in 1983, but so did Lundquist's artistic decision to unabashedly call this piece a sculpture by designing a pedestal for it.

The first wood turner here to demonstrate a sense of humor is C. R. (Skip) Johnson who is earliest represented by a "Mountain Man" and a "Mountain Woman" as well as a pig, all from 1965. Mr. Johnson's "The Itinerant Turner's Toolbox" (1981) is an open case of wood making tools that are themselves made of wood, but the most prominent object in the case is a keg labeled "beer."

Stephen Hogbin, is notable in the evolution of wood turning because he was the first person to break the integrity of an object through his willingness to cut and reassemble sections of wood. The lathe became an aid to quickly executing design ideas. The grand illustration of this is a functional chair characterized by rather playful scallop-like contours that is made this way. Some of Mr. Hogbin's other pieces like a mass-produced



Clockwise from above: "Domestic Violence II" by Michelle Holzapfel; "Our Mother Hangs in the Balance" by Michael J. Brolly; "Junior" by Mark Sfirri; "Firebird" by Stoney Lamar. All but "Junior" are at the Yale University Art Gallery. "Junior" is at Brookfield Craft Center.

pair of spoons have extensive hand carving.

Creating a rich polychrome surface through turning can essentially be accomplished through gluing together pieces of different woods before the turning process. Many pieces here have dazzling surfaces. Lincoln Seitzman effects a rather symmetrical pattern out of cherry, wenge and imbula woods for his ode to American Indian basketry, "Pettrified Sewing Basket" (1993). On the other hand Max Krimmel's "Makowenaple" (1987) made of various woods is what catalog notes call "well-organized chaos."

Half of this exhibition is tilted toward objects that are definitely on the art side of the line, although a premium on good craftsmanship remains a constant. These include anecdotal sculptures such as Michael J. Brol-

ly's "Our Mother Hangs in the Balance" (1992), a bat imitating a hummingbird and sucking from a flower and lavish pieces assembled from many parts, such as Michelle Holzapfel's "Domestic Violence II" (1987). It's a tree laden with household objects, many made of wood, but also a pair of scissors, which is real. The creative works can entail much extraneous material. The most brash example of this is Gord Peteran's "Untitled So Far" (1996). It's obviously a hunk of wood that has been rounded by a lathe and then wrapped tightly in leather.

The exhibition includes a demonstration room with a helpful video, as well as implements including a set of woodworking tools and an idle lathe with all its parts labeled.

Another supplement to the exhibition is some distance at the Brookfield Craft Center, which is presenting mostly very recent work "Materials and Contemporary Illusions: Innovations in Lathe Turning." Often wood is one of many ingredients, as in "A Portrait of the Artist in the Real World" by Giles Gilson. The eponymous artist is mostly an

inverted brass goblet, made by Lynne Hull, outfitted with sunglasses but has shoes made of maple, walnut and purpleheart.

Patrick Bremer's "A Tiger Beetle" is another example of wood camouflaged. The

insect is coated with a blue bronze lacquer that gives it the dynamic look of a shiny racing car.

Connie Mississippi has a large conic, mysterious work in the Yale show that incorporates black rubber and two pieces at Brookfield that are smaller sculptures include to undulating land forms. They seem to be all wood. They are cut from sheets of bird



In Brookfield: Top, "Blue Mountain Dream," (laminated Baltic birch plywood) by Connie Mississippi. Above, "A Portrait of the Artist in the Real World," (brass, aluminum, maple and walnut) by Giles Gilson with Lynne Hull.

plywood that Miss Mississippi has laminated and glued together, turned, carved and stained indigo and violet.

"Wood Turning in North America Since 1930" is at the Yale University Art Gallery through Dec. 1. Information: (203) 432-0600 or www.yale.edu/artgallery.

"Materials and Contemporary Illusions: Innovations in Lathe Turning" is at Brookfield Craft Center in Brookfield through Oct. 13. Information: (203) 775-4526 or www.brhfldcrft@aol.com.