

Artforms

Pushing The Limits: Wood Sculptor Betty Scarpino

by Diana J. Ensign

As wood turner Betty Scarpino says (see right), “Be as creative with the market as you are with your artwork.” In this issue, we profile three local artists who have found their niche in the marketplace. These individuals invited us into their workshops to discuss the struggle to stay employed while they produce the products they’re compelled to create.

Despite over 30 years of woodturning and exhibits in such prestigious museums as the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, Betty Scarpino’s approach to art remains as earthy and practical as the medium with which she chooses to work. As she says, “When I was growing up, I didn’t even know what an artist was.”

She adds, “Once, early in my marriage, we visited a professor and his wife and someone asked her what she did for a living — I think just to include her in the conversation — and she said, in this rather haughty voice: I am an artist.” Scarpino shakes her head. “It was like she said she was from Mars. I didn’t relate to it at all. And I still have trouble relating to the title.”

Though she may not be quick to claim the title, the quality of Scarpino’s work speaks for itself, with exhibitions in galleries across the nation, a Creative Renewal Fellowship, numerous awards and international recognition. She admits, “I didn’t start off as an artist. But many people consider me one now.”

The evolution of woodturning

Scarpino explains that wood turning began with artist craftsmen in the ’70s making bowls. She says, “As these things happen, more and more people started doing this work and organizations formed: the AAW [American Association of Wood turners] and the WTC [Wood Turning Center].” She continues, “It’s similar to what happened in the glass and ceramics fields over the last 25 or 30 years, which came out of the craft field and into the art field. Photography is the same way.

“What helped me,” she adds, “was that it happened in the wood turning field at the same time I was in it.” Scarpino first became interested in wood turning by taking a night class in woodworking.

Eventually, she ended up with a degree in industrial arts with an emphasis on woodworking. As she notes, “In the ’70s, there was maybe one other woman in the field. In the late ’80s, there were more women. I was doing wood turning then, but I wasn’t a known name in the field. There are not very many women in the field even today, though we’re well-represented in exhibits.”

Art as a practical matter

Wood turning is lathe based. “Which basically means you stick a chunk of wood on a lathe and make it round,” she says. “But it’s also more than that.” Explaining why she focused on lathe work, she says, “I did lathe work because I had children, a family, and we moved a lot. It was inexpensive and I could do the work quickly.

“Around the same time, AAW formed. It’s like when everyone ends up in the grocery store at the same time. A movement started. I am very much a part of that direction, change and maturation in the field.” Traditionally, art departments have not accepted the lathe as a valid mode of expressing the self because it can only make things that are round.

Yet, Scarpino emphasizes, “If you can accept the limitation of lathe work and think of it as a challenge, then you can come up with many things people haven’t thought of with lathe turned objects.”

Blue nest egg vessels

What Scarpino came up with on her lathe were blue nest eggs. She says, “The making of nests and eggs came in a flash of inspiration. As I got to thinking about nests and eggs I thought of three things: a blue egg in a bowl; a blue bowl with eggs; and an egg-shaped bowl painted blue. I made one of these things and called it ‘Blue Egg Bowl.’” She adds, “Nest egg vessels became a metaphor in many ways.”

Scarpino says that it wasn’t until after the work was finished that she began to explore what it meant. “If I was trying to seem like an Artist, infallible, I would say I had an idea and I executed it. Art is often seen as idea based. But for me, it was a flash of inspiration, a gut feeling. Then later I researched why the ideas came.” She says, “I read Ahab’s Wife and went to see the author speak when she was here. She talked about presenting an egg to a friend and said it represented new beginnings.”

Scarpino researched further, asking, what does this piece represent about me, my work and my relationship to my work? What she discovered was that her work related to the

changes in her body during menopause. “I missed that cycle. It grounded me and made me feel alive, and with that, you miss the eggs, shedding the eggs every 28 days. So, it dealt with fertility, new beginnings. The nest means home, shelter and family. But eggs and nests together are women’s bodies, a vessel. The ones I make are solid and full of life.”

She says with a grin, “I’ll give a slide show on my work and say, ‘These are my nest eggs,’ and women know I’m menopausal and want to know more about the eggs and the men in the audience may laugh, it makes them a little nervous. But they come up and want to know, too.” She laughs. “I’ve shocked the wood turning industry!”

Paying the bills

Even though well established in her field, Scarpino must still contend with practical matters such as health insurance and mortgage payments. Divorced and living on her own, she does not have the luxury of a second income to help boost things along when the market is slow.

But, she says, “When I maintain enthusiasm and commitment, the way to stay in the field financially is always there. It’s really important to make that happen as well as the actual wood pieces. I truly believe the universe will give you what you need if you are committed to it. You may not always know you need it. Your life may take a direction that is not expected. A lot of things in my life happened that I was not happy about, but it was just what I needed at the time for my life to take another direction.”

She advises, “Be as creative with the market as you are with your artwork. Financially, it’s a struggle. But it’s a worthwhile struggle.”

Art is in the doing

Scarpino readily admits, “I don’t know what art is. I don’t know if it matters. It’s fun to discuss, but if you start adding words and definitions, you begin limiting yourself and it doesn’t leave you open to exploring the possibilities of something not previously considered art.” She says, “What inspires me is the process of working with my hands and actually creating. Something clicks in my brain when I work with wood — the smells, the feeling. It’s an allure. I could do other things, but I wouldn’t be as happy.”

For more info:

<http://www.bettyscarpino.com>

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