

WOOD AS CANVAS

Looking for art in woodturning

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IN THE LAST TWO YEARS I HAVE TAKEN a new direction in my woodturning. Four factors directly influenced this change:

- I realized that much of the turning I was drawn to was made by turners with education in the arts.
- By taking watercolor, pottery, and design classes, combined with visits to galleries and museums, I intensified my study of art.
- I attended lectures of artists in many fields.
- I organized an art show featuring the best local artists, from painters and sculptors to glass blowers.

These experiences helped define for me the differences between craft, sculpture, and art, three creative terms all applicable to woodturning. As I use them, these terms describe areas of a continuum within which specific pieces may be difficult to categorize.

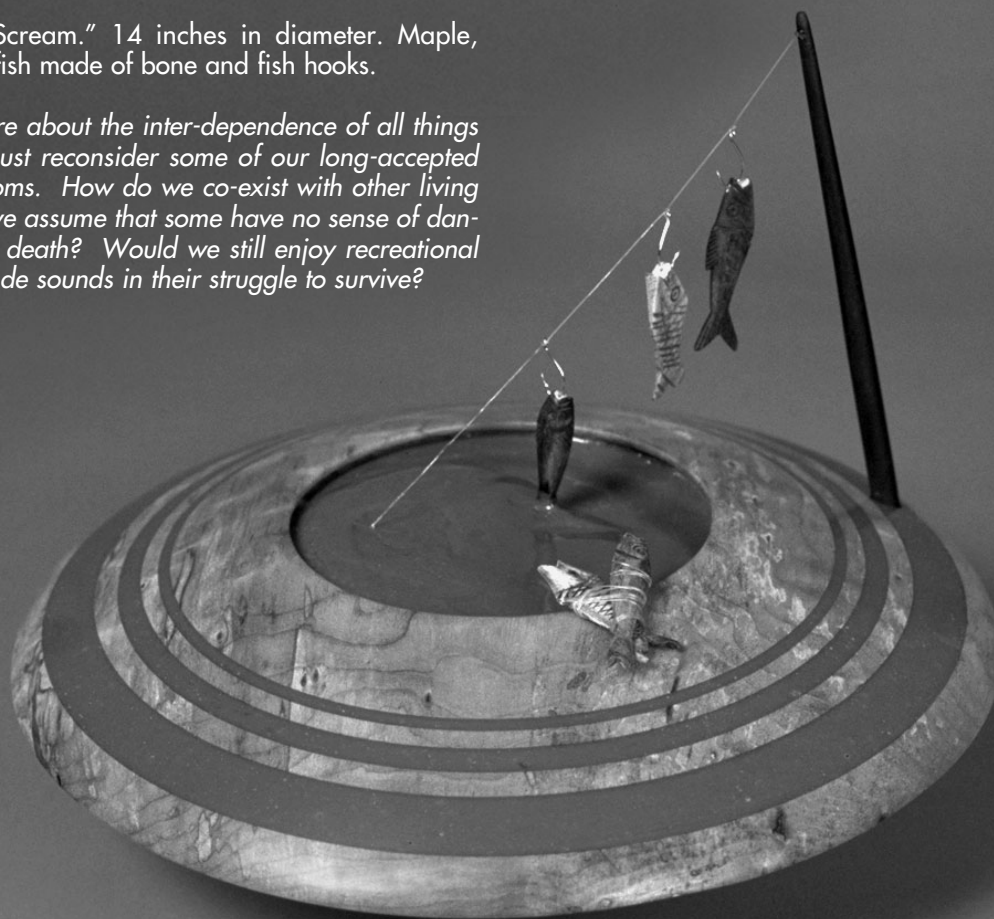
I compiled these ideas to help focus my own direction as a woodturner, realizing that definitions of this sort are controversial and vary for different media. I present them only as a guide that has worked for me, realizing that scholars have debated these distinctions for decades.

In the final analysis, probably all that is important is what the viewer or buyer likes.

Craft: A craft piece exhibits technical expertise, including the command of form, line, color, texture, and finish. Viewers (and users) of craft will appreciate it as having intrinsic beauty. Traditionally, craft has a utilitarian purpose, although actually many objects of craft are not used for their intended purpose. Nor are many objects of contemporary craft intended for use at all.

"If Fish Could Scream." 14 inches in diameter. Maple, turquoise resin; fish made of bone and fish hooks.

As we learn more about the inter-dependence of all things in nature, we must reconsider some of our long-accepted beliefs and customs. How do we co-exist with other living creatures? Do we assume that some have no sense of danger or imminent death? Would we still enjoy recreational fishing if fish made sounds in their struggle to survive?



Sculpture: In addition to the characteristics of craft, a piece of sculpture elicits some type of response from the viewer because it is aesthetically pleasing, though it presents no "message." In sculpture, *form* is most important.

Art: In a work of art, the *idea* is paramount, with the *medium* of secondary importance. A work of art should have "soul." Viewers should respond to it emotionally; they may laugh or cry, be enlightened, be passionately moved, or have their beliefs challenged.

A work of art is a personal reflection of something important to the artist, such as a social, political, or personal issue. But the message may

not be obvious. Different viewers will interpret it differently. Some may find it mysterious, while others may not relate to it at all.

My own work

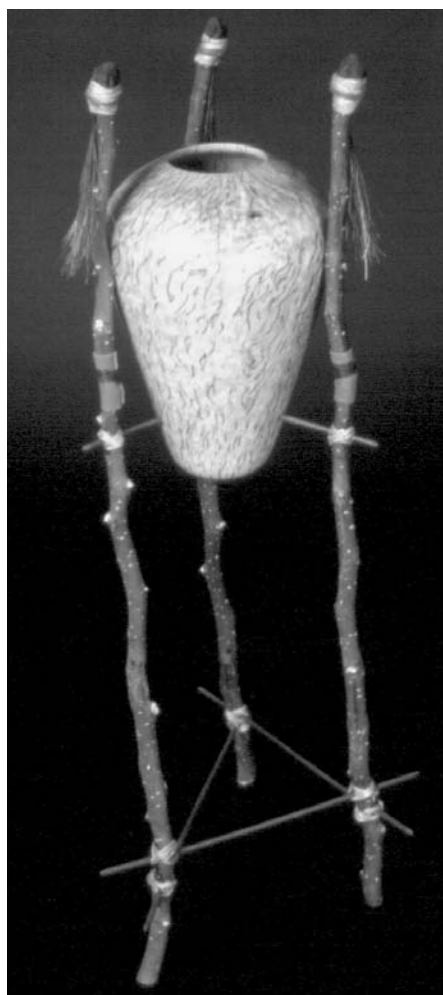
Clarifying that art was what I wanted to do, after producing craft for a number of years, my woodturning took a new direction. I wanted my pieces to be a stronger form of personal expression, much like the work of artists I have met in other media. The pieces I am currently making are reflective of my thoughts on societal issues. Daily activities and observations suggest potential pieces, and visits to shows featuring pottery and glass inspire new methods of implementation. I also look

for inspiration in magazine articles and ads, such as in *American Craft*.

I usually start with a name for the piece and then make some sketches where turned wood is incorporated into the design. I think of the wood as my canvas, the basis for the finished work. Although I want the turning to be well executed, it is secondary to the idea. This concept is quite different from that of bird carving, for example, where "craftsmanship" is of prime importance.

Although I include a statement with each piece, I hope each viewer has some personal experiences which make the message more meaningful.

Gary Zeff is a writer, photographer, and woodturner in Boulder, CO.



"Pierced Sanctuary." 22 inches high. Masur birch, leather, horsehair (left).

Pierced Sanctuary is symbolic of a current social condition—the continuing loss of spaces where we feel safe and secure. Representing "home," even this last bastion is under increasing attack.

The idea for this piece came when viewing an evening news report of innocent people killed in their home in a random drive-by shooting. The horizontal support pieces pierce the cocoon-like turned vessel.

"Mayan Soft-Drink Container, circa 872." 10½ inches high. Carob, stained and sandblasted; top is from a V-8 can (right).

We believe the Mayans were very advanced for their time. How advanced were they?

Subtle satire is my favorite form of humor. Part of the "joke" was to create a surface color and texture that appears to be aged pottery. This feel was achieved by multiple coats of three colors of stain, sandblasting the surface between coats.

