



'Black Jar', 1992, ht 33 x 25.4 cm. Collection: Smithsonian Institution



'Black Vessel Trio', 1992. Waterbury Collection

True to Form and Material

THE LIFE WORK OF JOHN JORDAN

The work of John Jordan is born of an aesthetic philosophy. Freshly cut wood, that would otherwise be burned or buried, is utilized to produce elegant and subtly textured vessels that speak of traditions of containment and the mystery of the space within them. Profile by Kevin V. Wallace.



JOHN Jordan's contributions as artist and teacher are difficult to separate. He became a woodturner in what now appears as a Golden Age of artistic woodturning, when pioneering artists Bob Stocksdale, Ed Moulthrop and Mel Lindquist were appearing in publications alongside the next generation, which included David Ellsworth and William Hunter. A new language of lathe-turned vessels was emerging, with works defined by an embrace of simple form, exploiting the natural beauty of the material. In a world where woodturning exhibitions, featuring dozens of artists and hundreds of works, are presented at symposia, it's difficult to imagine a time when the field was not crowded and the practice was just beginning to gain attention.

Looking back on his early exploration of the turned wood vessel, Jordan said, 'It all seems to me like a huge fortune of timing. When I started there weren't many people doing gallery woodturning and the field was small enough to allow me a place to get my foot in. Just because you are making nice work, you don't always have the opportunity or good fortune to be in the right place at the right time. I feel like I was to a large extent.'

As an artist, Jordan soon found his voice and throughout his career his work has remained free of radical change and experimentation. A new John Jordan work is easily identifiable to those who have followed his work over the years. The forms are deceptively simple and utilise texturing and carving to create visual and tactile contrasts.

'My work tends to evolve rather than take quantum leaps,'

'Bottle on Stand', 1990, box elder with forged iron stand by Joe Miller, ht 38 x 16.5 cm. Permanent Collection: The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu. Gift of the Lipton Family

he says. 'What I feel is most important is the intangible quality – that the piece is right – which comes with putting emotion and feeling into the work. A simple object can be very powerful and emotional just for what it is. My works are simply decorative vessels that reflect my interest in surface textures, contrasts and form and the personal responses that I have to them, which I suspect are similar to the feelings that makers of decorative objects have felt for thousands of years.'

Jordan's easily recognisable early works include end-grained bottle forms with radial flutes carved on the shoulder, lidded jar forms and tall textured forms. Recent works are often side-grained oriented vessels with a "looser" quality and feel, and typically feature-carved, textured and wire-brushed surfaces. He sometimes re-visits earlier forms and techniques combined with the application of more recent textures surfaces. The organic aspect of a piece of wood has never overpowered the form and often the works are either bleached white or dyed black to accentuate the line of the form.

The dyeing of some of the pieces removes their "wood" aspect – which Jordan is aware disturbs some purists – but he maintains that the finished pieces aren't just about the wood, but rather the object. 'I am, however, connected to the material of wood just as a potter is connected to the clay – it's what I do and who I am,' says Jordan.

He uses fresh cut material that would otherwise be buried or burned and finds wood is a very direct and responsive medium. With an extensive knowledge of the material, he is able to exert a great deal of control over the desired result, utilising surface textures and shapes that would be difficult in other materials. The use and balance of grain and colour, and particular focal points, such as sapwood highlights, are an important aspect of the work.

His first exposure to woodturning occurred in a seventh grade shop class, during which he created the requisite



'Magnolia Vessel', 1988, ht 25.4 x 15.2 cm



'Carob Vessel', 2010, ht 22.8 x 17.8 cm. Collection: Arkansas Art Center



'Honey Locust Vessel', 2008, ht 20.3 x 20.3 cm

rolling pins and candlesticks and enjoyed making the few items which the class allowed him to explore. This initial exposure to tools and equipment were limited to a typical industrial arts lathe and scraping tools.

On graduating from high school Jordan studied electronics and embarked on a professional career in that field which lasted for 16 years. During that period he developed an interest in furniture making and started collecting his own timber. 'I clearly remember my first visit to a country sawmill and watched them saw open a gnarled log. I was just amazed when the first cut fell off the log and I could see what was inside ... It was a magical experience for me and probably started my connection with wood.'

Becoming increasingly productive in creating contemporary furniture, Jordan utilised a small lathe to make knobs or occasional parts and became interested in the lathe's



'Graphite Vessel', 1991, ht 28 x 17.8 cm. Collection: Fuller Craft Museum



'Red Maple Burl Vessel', 2005. Collection: Carnegie Museum of Art

potential. With time, he became aware of the individuals who were exploring artistic woodturning and was intrigued by the idea, yet hesitated to follow this direction.

'I knew in my heart that if I got started working with the lathe, I'd get completely sidetracked' he says. 'And that's exactly what happened – but fortunately, it suited me right away,' says Jordan. I liked the subtractive process of working into the wood and orienting it to achieve a required outcome. I never really struggled; once I started turning it always made sense and one thing led to another.'

A pivotal event was Jordan's participation in a craft show in Memphis where he encountered for the first time the enthusiasm and energy of a peer group – people who were creating similar kinds of objects but in different media. This experience led to him quitting his job and embarking on a new career as a professional woodturner. However, success didn't just depend on the type of work being made but on selecting the shows with an appropriate audience.

'The first shows were local or regional craft shows and I exhibited work which more or less appealed to the people who frequented such venues,' continued Jordan. Gallery people would come along and were sometimes interested in that level of work. As I got better and started doing the high-end shows, such as the Smithsonian Show and the Philadelphia Museum of Art show, the quality of the buyers and gallery people who came along were appropriate to what I was doing. I made many connections with curators during this time, which led to several acquisitions by the museums. It was an important formative part of what I do and I wouldn't trade that experience for anything.'

Jordan finds inspiration in the world around him – trees and plants, rock formations, coral reefs, sea life, ancient and modern architecture and ceramic pots, baskets, and textiles from all cultures and time periods.

'I frequent museums in my travels, and enjoy everything from antiquities to modern art,' he says. 'I like paintings and sculpture, ethnic objects of all sorts, as well as custom, antique, restored and fabricated motorcycles and cars – anything with pattern, repetition and texture – including music in many forms. While I don't often incorporate a direct influence right into what I do, I believe everything about life does influence one's work. As Clay Foster says, it may appear that some people just pull ideas out of their pocket, but it's important to note they have spent a lifetime filling that pocket.'

Yet for Jordan the most powerful influence at any given



The Jordan family home

time is the work that he is currently making, which never fails to provoke and provide further ideas. He is continually motivated by curiosity to see what comes next.

'People have always supported the work I make, so I've stuck with creating vessels,' replies Jordan when asked why he began teaching. 'I knew potters had to make mugs, or woodworkers had to make weedpots or letter openers, in order to survive. I always considered the teaching to be a replacement for my having to do production work.'

If Jordan simply fell into teaching woodturning, in order to making his living as an artist, the opportunities grew at an astonishing rate. Soon after beginning his career as a professional woodturner, he was asked to give a demonstration at the Appalachian Center for Craft in Smithville, Tennessee. Soon he was teaching weekend workshops at the Center, followed by week-long classes.

When he demonstrated for the first time at Arrowmont in 1990, the who's-who of woodturners were on hand, recalls Jordan. 'The whole back of the room was lined up with people like David Ellsworth, Michael Peterson and Todd Hoyer. I figured if I was comfortable demonstrating there, I'd never worry about being nervous working for a crowd.'

Jordan has demonstrated in over 40 states in the US for clubs, universities, woodworking shows, art shows and has taught classes at leading craft schools, such as Arrowmont, Anderson Ranch, John C. Campbell, and the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. He has made multiple teaching trips to England, France, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and Australia. One would be hard pressed to identify another artist who has taught, lectured or demonstrated for more woodturners over the past 25 years.

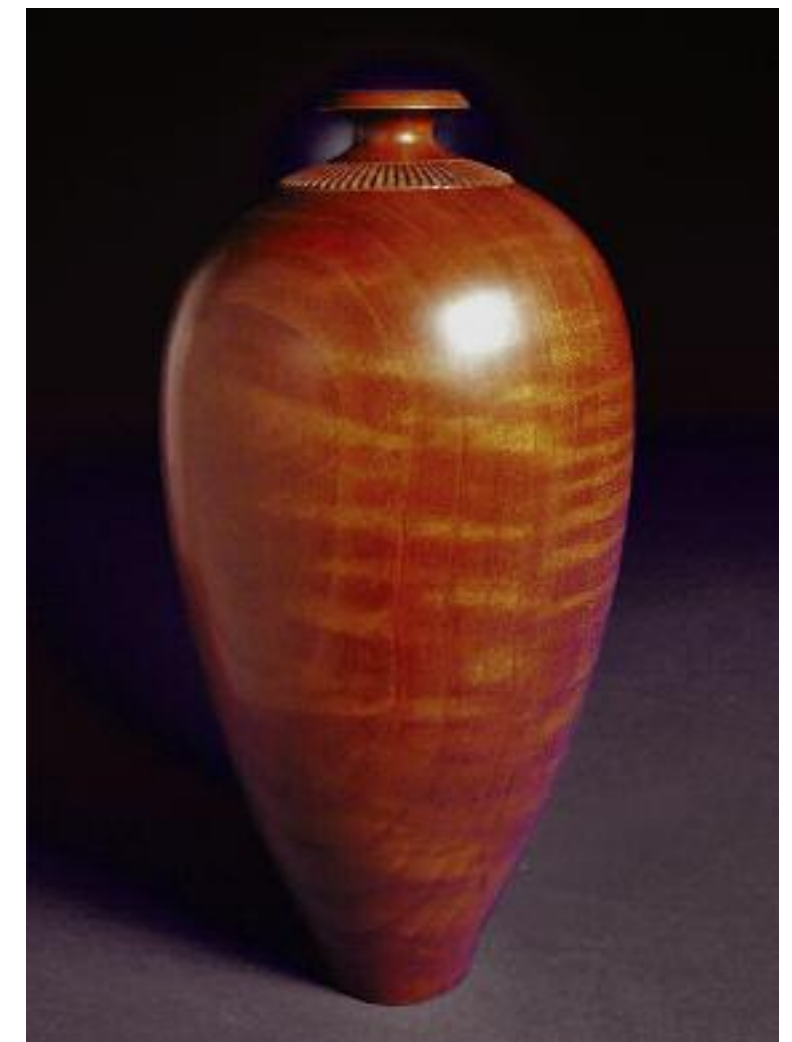
'Teaching probably accounts for one-third to one-half of my year, every year,' he says. 'I've been to about 10 different countries. I was recently invited to Bogota, Columbia, where I'll be teaching in a school with young people who are learning a craft to make a living. I'll be there at least a month. That's pretty exciting to me.'

One of the most rewarding aspects of his teaching career is being regularly approached by individuals who tell him that they first met him years ago in a class, where they were introduced to woodturning, and thanking him for the impact it had on their lives. Many leading figures in the field today commenced their career by attending one of Jordan's presentations, which often feature a slide show sharing the wide-ranging work being created in the field.



'Walnut Vessel', 2008, 20.3 x x 22.8 cm

For the last 34 years, John Jordan and his wife Vicki have lived on a 28-acre farm in a home built in 1806. Their children are the 18th generation to be associated with the house, which represents an ongoing challenge, requiring Jordan to engage in what he refers to as "real woodworking" for maintenance. For the first few years, he created his work in a small room off the porch, but in 1990s he completed a 93 square metre (1000 sq ft) modern shop a stone's throw from the house. The building features floor to ceiling windows on the north wall with a white interior



'Cherry Vessel', 1989, ht 25.4 x 15.2 cm



'Silver Maple Burl Vessel', 2005, ht 33 x 30.4 cm



'Cherry Burl Vessel', 2012, 23 x 20.3 cm

throughout, gray floors and heat and air conditioning.

'One time while speaking with some friends – she's a potter and her husband is a classical musician in a symphony orchestra – we were talking about working spaces. I was complaining about the kerosene heater and it being cold in my work place and he said: "I don't understand why you wouldn't have a nice place to work – this is what you do" and I realised that he was right. That really struck me and I worked hard on creating the ideal shop. I added a new turning/carving room, as I started accumulating more metal working stuff. Its best to keep the wood and metal separate. I keep no wood, logs or blanks in the shop and studio which helps to keep it clean. Previously, we had a lot of lathes in the studio, because I taught classes there for awhile, but now I've dispensed with all of them except for one,' says Jordan. 'I have one small room containing a lathe and my carving bench and associated stuff. I use

a minimum amount of equipment, relying on a few good tools, rather than one of everything that comes along. It's a bright, clean space and I've found that this has a positive impact on my work and my state of mind.'

A few times a year, John Jordan sets aside time to turn his vessel forms. Anticipating upcoming shows, he acquires fresh wood and roughs out the forms.

'I try to get the turning done well in advance, because it's relatively quick compared to the carving,' says Jordan. 'People assume that I turn all the time, but I find that momentum is a fairly important part of what I do. When I return from a trip and get back to work, I always start slowly ... it's hard to just jump into turning and it's hard to get going sometimes. By the same token, when I'm really immersed in the work and I have some momentum going, it's difficult to stop. No matter what is going on in life – the house, family or business – when I'm involved in creating the work, I'm happy. I love making those pieces more than anything. It's what keeps me going.'

Woodturning is John Jordan's sole source of income. He has supported his family for 25 years with this practice, putting his two children through college (his daughter is a teacher, and his son is a doctoral student in music). He also makes specialty hollowing tools that he sells at workshops, through retailers and his website.

'It's basically a lifestyle,' Jordan says. 'Most of my friends are woodturners or artists in other media. A large part of our family life is planned around my work in one way or another. My wife, Vicki, is a partner in the enterprise, and while she doesn't get directly involved in the pieces very often, she's essential in every other aspect of the business.'

Jordan creates 50 or 60 one-of-a-kind pieces a year – all produced for a market made up of collectors. He seldom accepts work on commission, but does try to keep people in mind when he creates a piece along similar lines to what they have expressed an interest in.

'I have to produce the sort of work that I've got my heart in,' says Jordan. 'I believe this is common to most good work. When you can make things that people would like to have and that you enjoy making, and are able to make a living doing that, it's a great thing. I'm still amazed when I complete each piece – there's a sense of a wonderment and appreciation and I think, "This is a nice piece that I've made here", and it makes it all worthwhile.'

Kevin V. Wallace

Kevin V. Wallace is Director of the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts and Happy Valley Cultural Center, California.



John Jordan turning in the studio