

SEVEN QUESTIONS

NORM SARTORIUS



WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A WOOD ARTIST?

Becoming a wood artist was never a decision -- a moment in time. It was a process. I've been very fortunate to meet and work with several talented wood artists and each has encouraged my growth. When I left psychiatric social work in 1974, I knew only that I wanted to work with my hands. I began a

woodworking apprenticeship in Baltimore with Phil Jirus, a silversmith, who had wood-shop skills learned from his teacher Emil Milan. I learned to make many small, functional craft items, including spoons. In the mid- to late-1980's turners were revolutionizing lathe work, and salad bowls morphed into works of art. I wondered if wooden spoons might be taken on a similar journey and in 1990 built a retail show booth to feature unique sculptural wooden spoons as decorative art. I had been encouraged to try this during an 18-month work/study in the shop of Bobby Reed Falwell, a studio furniture maker and graduate of the School for American Craftsmen at RIT. I still regarded myself as a craftsman who made artistic wooden spoons. "Artist" seemed like what others would call me if they liked my carvings. Gradually, I became more comfortable with this title. Looking back, I know I was always trying to make an expressive piece that was more than a functional spoon. Some of my spoons became comments on our culture or were attempts to stretch the limits of my chosen category. I was always trying to make a unique sculptural object that pleased both the eye and the hand. Becoming a wood artist was a result of 30 years of work rather than a deliberate decision.

WHAT ARTIST OUTSIDE THE WOOD FIELD HAS MOST INFLUENCED YOUR WORK AND WHY?

I've always sought out inspiration for my work in books and museums. Horn spoons from Northwest Coast Native Americans and ivory spoons from Africa were among the most exceptional non-wood influences, and others were made from found objects such as seashells, leaves, and even tin cans. I've also been influenced by natural forms, including views of the molecular and single-cell world of plants and animals. Seedpods and flowers offer endless variety of form, geometry, and color. Decay and weathering provide valuable contrast to highly polished surfaces. In most of these cases, the artist is Nature, and it takes only observation to see the available influence wherever you are. Last summer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, I photographed potential spoon forms in the stone sculpture from ancient Egypt. These were close-up images of fragments of huge sculptures. A fold of cloth, a piece of jewelry, a vessel or basket -- but only an element, not the entire piece. When I reviewed these images weeks later, only a few conveyed the vision I had when I was there and maybe only one or two will become spoons. Throughout my career, I've been teased that I see spoons in everything, so while I enjoy the work of many other artists, I can't identify one whose effect has been greater than Nature.

WHAT MISTAKE DID YOU LEARN THE MOST FROM? WHAT WAS THE LESSON?

I've made many mistakes but among them these stand above the rest. When I started woodworking in the mid 1970's, I lived on a remote mountain

ridgeline at 3,000 feet in southern West Virginia. It was a place of great beauty, peace, and quiet and I loved living there, but I learned I needed friends and family even more, so I left after five years. It was a stark contrast between a vivid fantasy and the practical reality of living in an equally rich world with people I loved.

Another lesson concerned refinement, time, and materials. I used to believe that unless there was a fatal flaw in the material I was using, I should finish whatever I started. I'm still fighting that impulse, but as I get older I insist that each piece excite me throughout the carving process. If I lose interest, I now take it as an indication that the piece is weak. I have three boxes of such pieces that seemed to be good ideas originally but lost their "juice". I have more beautiful wood than time will allow me to carve. I know that good ideas are unlimited. There's no reason to continue work on any piece that doesn't in some way seem great.



WHAT GIVES YOU THE MOST PLEASURE FROM MAKING YOUR ART?

The single most satisfying element is the creative process. A lot of my work is straightforward cutting, shaping, filing, scraping, sanding, etc., but along the way are moments of inspiration, revelation, awareness that make my other work clear. Why make one shape and not another? Why texture rather than leave smooth? Why curved instead of flat, why add a spout, why focus on beautiful grain, etc.? These design questions are dialogues with a part of my consciousness I call my *guide*. This isn't mystical. It's a learned aspect of good work. I *notice*, I listen, for the voice of my guide and I'm always thankful for and

trust the input. This same interaction has saved me from accidents in the shop. I believe all people have this, not just artists, and give it many names, but for me it's critical to good work. *Inner voice, sixth sense, creative spirit, intuition*, whatever we may call it is operating in most artists' process. I have danced all around the shop, yelling with excitement when a great idea arrives, when a form is realized, when I can see clearly where to go next. It's often a brief but magical moment that makes a new piece special.

The second most satisfying would be the response to finished work. Unsolicited comments via the Web, getting in a juried show, museum acquisitions, long-time relationships with collectors, making a sale, and casual comments and compliments in my retail show booth all affirm that my work has resonated with others. Any and all of these connections are pleasurable.



WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR WOOD?

While I do purchase some of my raw material, my best source of wood is and has been other woodworkers. Most of my work is small and most other makers have

boxes or short racks of beautiful woods too small for their own work but too nice to throw away or burn. I enjoy knowing the story behind these woods, as do my customers. Many artist members of the CWA have contributed wood for my spoons. In turn, I pass on my scrap to makers whose work is even smaller than mine.



WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE TOOL/EQUIPMENT AND WHY?

Most outside contours on my spoons are carved working against a 6" wide x 3" diameter pneumatic drum spinning at 3450 rpm with a 24-grit belt. I can rough out most basic forms as well as some details on this tool. The coarse belt removes wood quickly even on the most dense and gnarly woods. I can watch ideas unfold, much as turners watch bowl profiles change with each pass of a gouge. Much later in my process, I especially enjoy using a variety of custom scrapers made from old putty knives. I grind these to a variety of shapes and use them to remove carving marks and to fair concave surfaces. They are easy to

sharpen and have become an extension of my hand as I bring the inside of spoon bowls to their final shape and thickness.



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