

SPOONS TO STIR THE SOUL



IN THE EARLIEST YEARS OF HIS CAREER AS A WOOD SCULPTOR, NORM SARTORIUS '69 MADE HUMBLE KITCHEN SPOONS THAT SERVED THE SPAGHETTI OR STIRRED THE SOUP.

Nowadays, he creates spoons that serve a higher purpose: “to stir the soul.” They are snatched up by collectors at juried, high-end craft shows and displayed in 12 major museum collections, such as the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, The Museum of Art & Design in New York and The Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C.

In April, he participated for the eleventh time in the annual Smithsonian Craft Show, the nation’s most prestigious exhibition and sale of contemporary American craft, where some of his pieces sold for more than \$3,000. He also celebrated 25 years of marriage to Diane Bosley, whose encouragement, business savvy and support in the form of a full-time job with health insurance “provided the context in which I could have the luxury to experiment and develop my rather odd work,” he says.

Terry Martin, a writer and fellow wood sculptor based in Brisbane, Australia, chronicled the evolution of Sartorius’ art for *Woodwork Magazine*. We reprint an edited version of the article here with its permission. —The Editors



JIM OSBORN (ALL)



JAGGED



ASSATEAGUE SPOON



AMERICA 2008

I FIRST MET NORM SARTORIUS AT A CONFERENCE SOME YEARS AGO AND WE DEVELOPED A LONG-DISTANCE FRIENDSHIP, EXCHANGING PIECES OF WOOD AND FRIENDLY MESSAGES ACROSS THE GLOBE.

From time to time we saw each other at woodworking events and I had a good chance to talk with Norm when I visited him at his home in Parkersburg, W.V. Norm is a genial man, a stocky figure with a full beard and a strong, resonant voice that belies his gentleness. It was a pleasure to sit with him for several days and talk about how he traveled the road from being a humble maker of kitchen spoons to a respected and sought-after artist.

After graduating with a degree in psychology, Norm worked for a few years as a psychiatric social worker. It ultimately proved to be an unsatisfying career for him, which he explains in a way that many of us can relate to: "It was desperately difficult to get a feeling of accomplishment. I got to the point that I envied the woman I used to see every morning sweeping the stairs. At least she had a result. After five years I quit to find something where I could have a clear, visible result for my efforts."

Although he had no thoughts of woodwork, Norm met a couple in Baltimore who owned a craft store, and they offered him a position as a trainee woodworker. "I had never done any woodworking of any kind, but it felt really good right from the start. I made cutting boards, knife racks, light switch plates, bracelets, pie servers — anything small out of wood." Eventually Norm bought a cabin in West Virginia and continued making the same small wood objects to sell at local craft fairs. An old barn that cost \$50 became his source of wood. "A lot of it was beautifully weathered chestnut, and I made kitchen utensils out of it. I was selling spoons for \$7. It was a very simple life with not much money."

A few years later, Norm met Bobby Reed Falwell, a well-known studio furniture maker. "He liked my spoons and bought three. We kept in touch, and in 1980 he encouraged me to come and work with him. I stayed with him for 18 months." Even at that early time, Norm had developed his signature style of using the natural features of a piece of wood. Falwell encouraged this: "He was particularly impressed with my use of raw material, such as the contrast between heart-

wood and sapwood, and he was the first person who told me that there was a sculptural quality to my work."

Norm moved to Parkersburg, W.V., in 1982, and that's about the time his work started to become more sophisticated. He began to notice the way other woodworkers were creating fine bowls that were viewed as art, and he wondered if he could take his spoons to that level. He began using higher-quality finishes and woods and built a different booth for the craft shows that displayed his work the way a gallery might. Norm noticed that the public response to his spoons was also different than to all his other work, and he started to consider that maybe he was, at heart, a spoonmaker. "This was probably a reflection of the fact that I really liked making spoons," he says. "It had always been that way, right from the beginning."

In 1986 Norm was contacted by the head of Craft Alliance in St. Louis. She said, "I've heard you make really beautiful spoons. We're having a show called 'Wooden Vessels: the Art of Woodturning.' Would you like to show spoons as artwork, not just as functional spoons?" Norm sent 15 spoons, and instead of his usual mineral oil finish, he put a permanent finish on them. "That was the first time I did that; her call helped me complete that change in my thinking." All of his spoons sold, and he says that it led to a major change in his self-image.

The story of how Norm became both a well-respected artist and a distinguished participant in the craft circuit revolves around two factors. Certainly, one is meeting the right people and being open to their influence. But the other, more important factor is the years of steady, hard work he has put into developing his skill and design sense. He told me that many people don't realize how much is involved. "Often people come into my booth and tell me that my work seems quite romantic. They're probably comparing it to their office jobs. I tell them that an awful lot of what I do is just work. If you took 40 hours of my work, probably 35 of those hours are cutting, sanding, filing, or endlessly rubbing."

So why does Norm persist? "That's not the part that I work for. The addictive moment comes when you see the potential in an idea and then make it happen.



When I see the look on people's faces, that's the thing I work for — the communication between the idea, the piece of wood, and the few people out there who actually see what I have seen. It's worth all the rest, always."

Like many woodworkers, Norm works in a solitary environment, so being at craft fairs compensates in many ways. "At shows I am around other makers, collec-

Norm Sartorius turns out spoonish sculptures at his workshop in Parkersburg, W.V.

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tors, the public. I get ideas from people who make other wonderful things, not just in wood. It's become my community of friends over the past 15 years. Also, I love it when someone comes into the booth, then runs out to the rest of their family and says, 'Come here! You gotta see this!' It doesn't matter if they are knowledgeable about the field, because it shows I am communicating with them in some way. That's nourishment for me, and that is as important as dollar support."

On the first morning I stayed with Norm we ate breakfast in a beautiful glassed room overlooking a path that leads under enormous spreading trees to his workshop at the bottom of the garden. While soft rain dripped from the leafy canopy, we ate and talked about spoons. Watching Norm explain how he makes spoons is fascinating, as he becomes so excited. While he spoke, his hands flexed around an imaginary piece of

wood. Eventually, frustrated at the inadequacy of words, he snatched up the uneaten half-melon from his plate and pointed to the rind. "Here's the sapwood..." he started. Suddenly he leapt up from his chair and rushed into the kitchen, came back with a kitchen knife and started cutting up the melon. "You see, I don't like that little part where the stem was,

so I'm going to cut that off. Now I've completely changed the shape. I couldn't see this potential as long as that was attached. See, I cut here and here..." In moments Norm has made a "melon spoon" and he has also made all the points he wanted to tell me about how to carve spoons. For quite a while we both sat and sipped coffee while we looked at his new spoon.

We spent some time in Norm's workshop while he showed me how he works, then he spent the rest of the day showing me his spoon collection, which not only includes special pieces of his own, but spoons from around the world. As we reviewed Norm's work I started to realize just how many spoons you can make in 30 years and how different they can be. But I did start to see patterns emerging, and it was by dividing his work into themes that I began to make sense of it all.

I particularly admire Norm's understanding of the mechanics and design of the transition between the bowl of the spoon and its handle. Sometimes it is a smoothly flowing link seamlessly letting the bowl grow

from the handle, or vice versa. Norm agreed that this is important. "The transition between a handle and a bowl is really significant. It's not something I can even successfully draw because it's at the feeling level. If I'm working on that I'll stay up late into the night rather than interrupt the flow of work." In "Lilac Spoon," the handle reaches out gently to hold the end of the bowl. It is as if the bowl grew out of the stem of a "spoon tree," so natural is the transition. The simplicity of the image belies the time it takes to visualize this design and to carve it out of the single piece of wood. Norm described this as an "early attempt to create joinery illusions where the bowl and handle meet."

In "Scoop," which is now owned by the Museum of Art and Design in New York, he used his lathe skills to join two pieces of wood with a turned tenon. It is not surprising that a prestigious museum should include a piece of such superb craftsmanship in its collections.

Many of Norm's spoons are a celebration of grain and color, not so much a spoon as a palette for expressing his love of wood. This love affair with wood has led him from being primarily an interpreter of the natural qualities of wood. "It's not often I come to a piece of wood with a preconceived idea. About 75 percent of my spoons are very powerfully influenced by something about the wood. It may be a weathered part of the wood, a little area of burl, or a color contrast between heartwood and sapwood."

In recent years the spoons that seem to give Norm the most satisfaction are those which take advantage of the natural features in the wood, especially the heavy scars of nature's hand. As an example, Norm speaks with pride of one of his favorite spoons. "I made 'Primal' in 2005. I had a show coming up and I wanted to take a great spoon. I thought that piece of wood had the most potential, but I couldn't see it. I had it at my feet for a couple of weeks, and I'd take a break from working on another piece and lift it up, turn it over. It was really electric when I finally saw it. Then it was quite quick and smooth. Nothing could shake my confidence that this piece is great. It practically made itself."

Another nature-driven spoon is "Shard," which is held by the Mint Museum of Craft and Design in Charlotte, N.C. Norm says this spoon "suggests a remnant of a whole spoon, perhaps eroded over time and discovered in a ruin."

Sometimes the natural wood charms Norm so much that he leaves whole parts untouched. "Lift Off" is a marvelous contrast between the finely carved

spoon and the untouched extension. I say "extension" because it is not really a handle, but more an understood reference to where the handle would be in a functional spoon. In some pieces the rough beauty of the wood overwhelms any idea of imposed design and the carving is merely a token reference to what Norm calls "spoon-ness." As a celebration of unrefined wood, "Jagged" is a fine example.

Many of the spoons Norm crafts are explorations of the sculptural potential of the handle. "Assateague Spoon" is an example of figurative work, using seashells as inspiration. "Assateague Island is where I used to beachcomb for shells when I was boy," says Norm, who grew up nearby in Pocomoke City, Md.

One way to describe many of Norm's spoons is simply "unexpected." He calls these spoons "really weird — they might be very abstracted, or cartoonish, or exaggerated in form, extremely asymmetrical. I want to surprise people so they think they have never seen a spoon like that before. I suppose I'm working at my best when I find a way to make a departure from what is expected."

"Geometry," one of eight spoons recently acquired by the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh for its permanent decorative arts collection, is not instantly recognizable as a spoon; rather it seems to be an abstraction of a spoon.

"America, 2008," among new works recently shown at the Smithsonian Craft Show, is the first spoon he's ever crafted with a political theme. "It's a spoon that's split in half, and that's the condition our country seems to be in during this election year," he says.

"Spoon Dreams II" is from a series of work that more strongly resembles traditional sculpture, but still incorporates his hallmark spoon motif. "It sort of represents the unconscious; it's where the spoons live in my imagination," he explains. "There is an infinite variety of forms and bowls and textures, and this is an attempt to represent the well where I go to find the spoons."

Norm best explains his own work with these words: "How a spoon fits in your hand and how it fits in your eye are only part of why a good piece works. There is also a 'feeling level' of consciousness, a quick gut reaction that is very different to an intellectual reaction. Perhaps it's partly made up of touch and sight, but there's more than that. When I'm making a piece, there comes a point when I just feel that it is finished — no more shaping, no more adding and subtracting. It's just done. That's a mildly magical moment." —Terry Martin



PRIMAL

SCOOP



SPOON DREAMS II



LIFTOFF



LILAC SPOON

NOT SO
MUCH A
SPOON AS A
PALETTE FOR
EXPRESSING
HIS LOVE
OF WOOD.