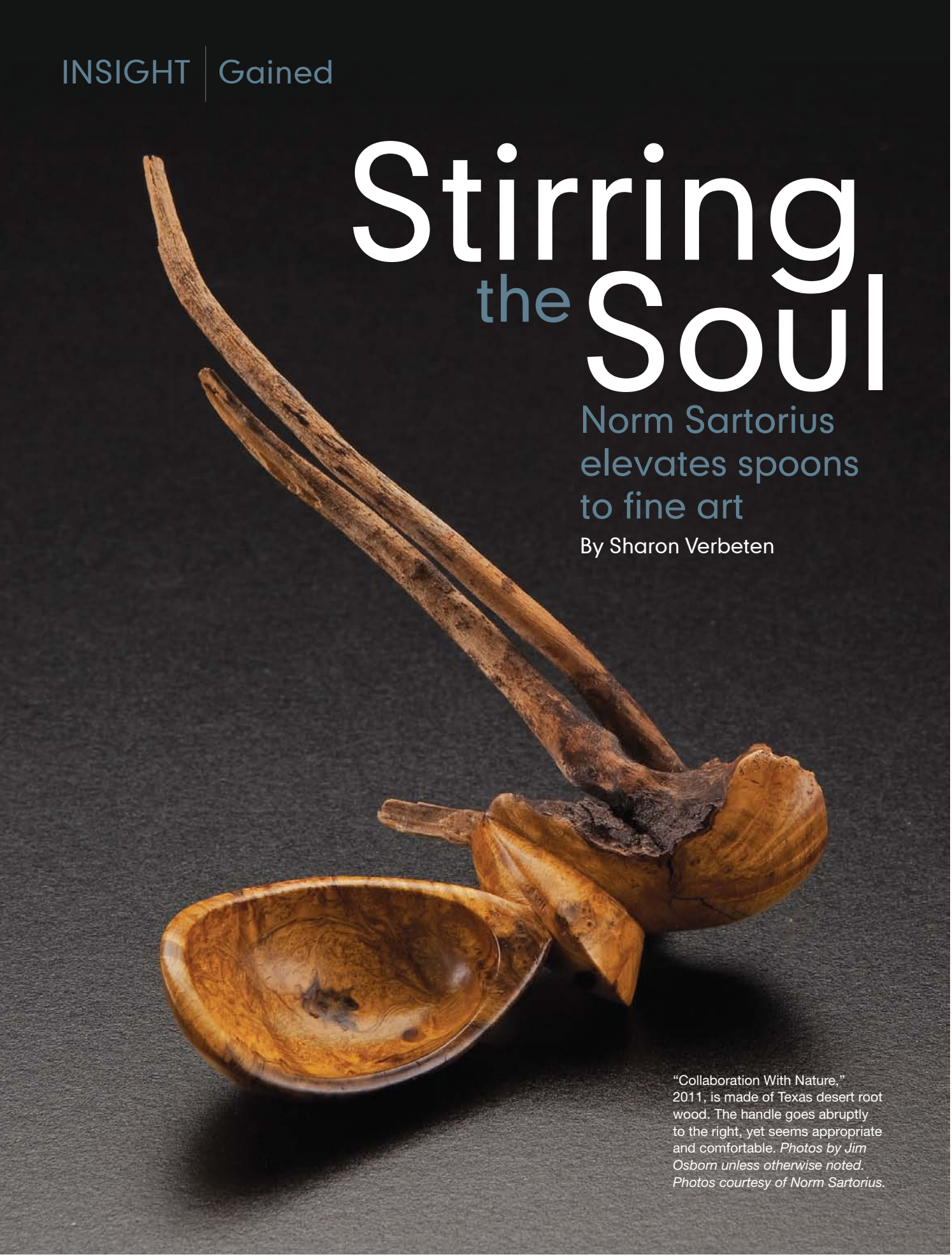
Stirring the Soul

Norm Sartorius elevates spoons to fine art

By Sharon Verbeten



"Collaboration With Nature," 2011, is made of Texas desert root wood. The handle goes abruptly to the right, yet seems appropriate and comfortable. *Photos by Jim Osborn unless otherwise noted. Photos courtesy of Norm Sartorius.*

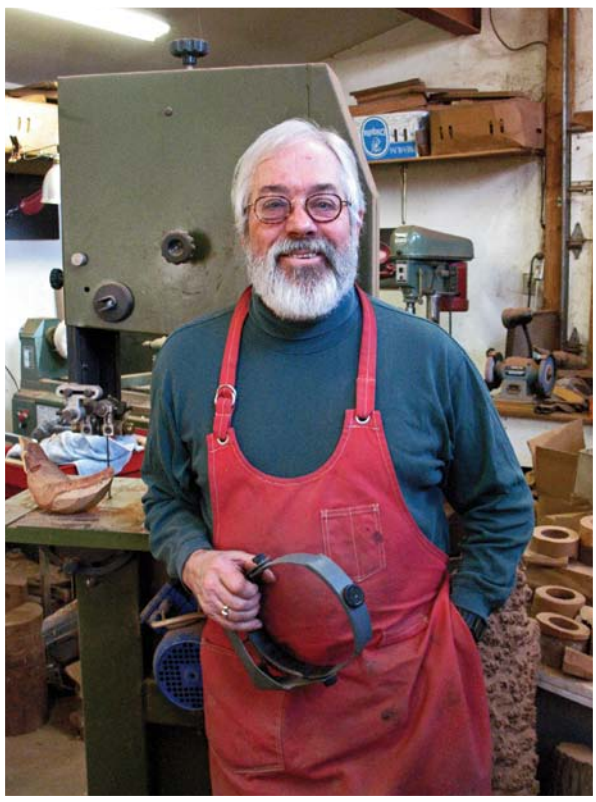
Two Moon Spoon, 2012, is made of African blackwood from Tanzania. It is carved from a single piece, isolating the sapwood for the new moon shapes on the handle.

Those who see artist Norm Sartorius' handcrafted spoons may be surprised to know he's primarily a self-taught woodworker. His designs range from the elegant to the unique, the sensual to the majestic. But as beautiful as his spoons are, they are meant to "stir the soul," in his words, not stir the soup.

"People look at me rather oddly when I tell them I make nonfunctional wooden spoons—nonfunctional in that you wouldn't use them in the kitchen, but functional in that they are objects of beauty. My spoons are sculptures; my sculptures are spoons."

Sartorius, who resides in West Virginia, has been creating wood spoons for 30 years, using the common spoon as a context for his sculptural interpretations—which are crafted from rare and exotic woods.

"It's the play of heartwood and sapwood, color, unusual grain, knots, textures, or anomalies that suggests the spoons that lie within each piece of wood," said Sartorius, 66.



Artisan Norm Sartorius at the band-saw in his West Virginia studio. *Photo by Diane Bosley.*

This 2011 spoon is titled “Classic.” It features an afzelia lay bowl (Laos) with turned Texas ebony handle. The piece showcases symmetrical and elegant design. Base by Mark Nantz. *Photo by Mark Nantz.*

Made in 2010, this "Australian Purpleheart Spoon" features beige sapwood circles on the bowl rim and a bean-like orb on the handle.

His pieces—which range in price from $375 to $7,000—begin with a rough shape on a band saw and are transformed by power carving tools, die grinders, files, and hours of handwork. "A finished spoon," he notes, "is as smooth and detailed as a fine piece of jewelry."

Finding His Way

Before artisan spoons and hours of creative craftsmanship filled his days, Sartorius—who has a degree in psychology—worked as a social worker in a psychiatric hospital. While it may have been financially secure, Sartorius said, "It was hard to feel satisfied or rewarded at the end of the day. Maybe it was selfish, but I wanted to make something tangible. I wasn't into crafts; I wasn't handy. I wasn't a do-it-yourself guy. I didn't have any background in making things at all."

That was in the 1970s, and to clear his head for a new direction, Sartorius took off on a trip out West, passing the time, visiting some crafts shops in California. "There were these big redwood slab tables and some carved wood objects. … I remember thinking that looked really appealing," he recalls.

Upon returning, Sartorius began working as an apprentice to a woodworker near Baltimore, absorbing all he could about the trade. "I was just wanting to try something else," he said. "It seemed exciting."

He began making utilitarian wares, like cutting boards and spoons—but his spoons caught the eye of furniture-maker Bobby Reed Falwell, whom Sartorius said "kickstarted" his interest in rare and exotic woods.

> Sartorius truly enjoys the personal touch of working a show. At a gallery, "it's more impersonal; I don't know who bought the work, and I don't hear the feedback," he said.

Sartorius traveled to Kentucky to do a work study stint with Falwell. There he learned more of a historical perspective on crafts. "I knew so little about business … I started seeing what other people were doing," Sartorius said. It was happenstance meetings like that that have really moved Sartorius' career forward.

"It's been that way all through my whole career," he said. "These magic moments just sort of seem to pop up. You can take advantage of them or ignore them."

Fortunately for him, and for collectors, he has taken swift advantage of them—honing his skills into celebrating the beauty in the wood (its color, form, texture, and even its imperfections) by turning a lowly spoon shape into something magnificent.

"I have felt compelled to make spoons since I started woodworking," he said. "The character of the raw pieces

Mahogany burl wood from Honduras was used for this graceful and expressive 2012 spoon titled “Dancer.” The all-burl bowl and form suggest dancing with an attitude.

Above (from left): This "Algerita Spoon," 2012, is made of a curious and wonderful wood from Arizona with figure in the bowl and a prejudice in favor of the right hand. • This natural-edge bowl presents a jagged and illogical offering for a spoon; the 2010 jarrah burl spoon (Australia) is appropriately titled "Jagged." Base by Mark Nantz. *Photo by Mark Nantz.*

of wood and my sensitivity at the time I am working contribute more than my concern for function. Inspiration, for me, is intuitive, and so far I am unable to turn it on at will; however, I am aware when it comes. My goal is to make spoons that people will view as special objects—small treasures that give them pleasure to touch, look at, and own."

Art + Business

Sartorius' work has been hailed in trade publications, such as Woodwork magazine, as well as displayed at many art/crafts galleries and expositions nationwide—including the esteemed annual Smithsonian Craft Show in Washington, D.C. All this exposure has fueled his popularity. "My business has unfolded in a very natural, unplanned way," Sartorius said, but he never regrets leaving the world of psychology.

Business is, of course, a part of any artisan's livelihood. So, too, for Sartorius, who feels that being admitted to shows and having his pieces purchased is "an affirmation that I'm on the right track and that I should keep pursuing what I love doing. "The being paid part. … I've very fortunate that I'm not the sole income of the household."

Sartorius comments that he has felt the impact of the recent recession. In the late 1990s, he notes, new collectors were everywhere, younger and middle-age people who were enthusiastic about crafts. "It was a different sort of new customer," he said.

But 9/11 and the 2008 recession combined "clobbered the middle of the market," he said. While wealthy collectors continued to buy, the middle-income buyer stopped buying and, he posits, may never come back.

While his work is exhibited in galleries (and some items are in permanent collections), Sartorius truly enjoys the personal touch of working a show. At a gallery, "it's more impersonal; I don't know who bought the work, and I don't hear the feedback," he said. He appreciates the personal relationship he can make—and develop—with customers at a show.

And one of his favorite ways of connecting with others is through the story of the woods he uses. "It enhances the piece," he said, to be able to share a story behind the history or location of the wood.

A spoon may be thought of as a simple thing, but for Norm Sartorius, these whorled wonders are the culmination of three decades of refining his craft and exploring the beauty of wood.

"You start in the morning and through use of some tools and some wood … you have something to show for your day's work. That's exactly the kind of thing I was looking for." *TCR*

For more information, visit www.normsartorius.com.