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# The Spoonish Sculptures of Norm Sartorius

BY TERRY MARTIN

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 in September 2005 I had a good chance to talk with Norm when I visited him at his home in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

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 travelled the road from being a humble maker of kitchen spoons to a respected and sought-after artist. The list of his achievements is extraordinary, with his work held in eleven major museum collections, almost every major private collection of wood art in the country, and shown in a wish-list of important exhibitions across America. What is different about this established wood artist is that he still exhibits regularly in craft fairs. For example, since 1991 he has shown his work nine times at the Smithsonian Craft Show, as well as eleven other regular events. So how does a humble spoonmaker end up spanning the whole craft/art spectrum to build such a wonderful career?

Norm was born in 1947 and, after graduating with a degree in Psychology, he 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."

Norm hit the road in search of his future. Although he had no thoughts of woodwork, he 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 kept on making the same kinds of things 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 eighteen 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 heartwood and sapwood, and he was the first person who told me that there was a sculptural quality to my work."

Norm moved to Parkersburg in 1982, and he feels that was when his work started to become more sophisticated. "The quality of my finish and my choice of woods certainly improved. I built a different booth for the craft shows." 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 art work, not just as functional spoons?" Norm sent fifteen spoons, and instead of his usual mineral oil finish, he put a permanent finish on them.

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Norm Sartorius finishes a variety of spoons in progress in his West Virginia shop.

“That was the first time I did that; her call helped me complete that change in my thinking.” Norm showed me the flyer for the show; below the list of all the famous turners’ names, it read “Featured artist: Norm Sartorius, Sculptural Spoons.” 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 influ-



PHOTO BY TERRY MARTIN

ence. But the other, probably more important, factor is the years of steady, hard work he has put into developing his skill and design sense. Norm 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, collectors, 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 fifteen 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.

Of all the early pieces, I was most taken

with a maple spoon which he made in the late 1970s (1). It is a beautifully simple artifact—the bowl is deep enough to hold a good mouthful, the handle is curved nicely to fit the hand, and its proportions are just right. What is more interesting, though, is the way the line of the edge of the bowl continues through the handle and widens to form a facet along the handle’s length. It gives the piece a visual and physical unity that is very satisfying. All of Norm’s early spoons were like this: functional and elegant. Significantly, this work also attracted the attention of people who encouraged him to give free rein to his creative instincts.

I particularly admire Norm’s marvellous 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, as in that early piece, 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.”

It might be the handle which dominates, such as with “Bird’s Nest” (2). The handle splits, enclosing the bowl that hangs like a nest in a forked limb, which was what inspired this piece. In “Lilac Spoon” (3) 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.”

One of Norm’s best-known spoons is “Lacewood and Imbuya Spoon,” which was used in the early 1990s for the cover of the Woodcraft Supply Company mail-order catalog. Norm also used this image for his first postcard (4). He does not often use two contrasting woods, but it works particularly well in this example. In “Scoop” (5), which is now owned by the Museum of Art and Design, 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

1: "Maple Spoon" (c.1978); maple; 12" x 4½" x 3½".

2: "Bird's Nest" (1990); partridgewood; 8" x 2½" x 1¼".

3: "Lilac Spoon" (1985); lilac; 9" x 1" x 1¼".

4: "Lacewood and Imbuya Spoon" (1989); lacewood, imbuya; 14" x 5½" x 1".  
[Collection of Jim Osborn].

5: "Scoop" (1995); African blackwood, American smoketree; 17" x 2" x 1¼".  
[Collection of the Museum of Art and Design].

6: "Scoop—Amboyna Burl" (1997); amboyna burl; 6" x 2" x 1½".

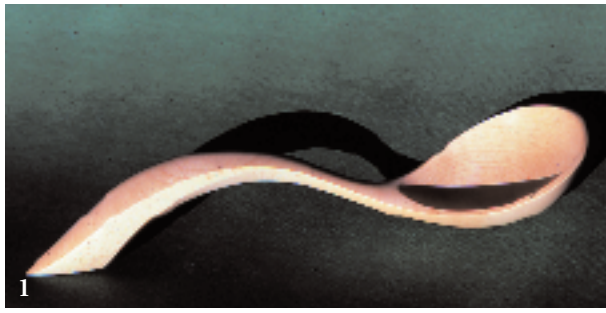
7: "Flame She-Oak Spoon" (1999); flame she-oak; 10" x 3" x 1½".

8: "Primal" (2005); budgeroo; 17" x 7" x 2½".

9: "Shard" (2000); Texas desert root; 10" x 4½" x 2½".  
[Collection of the Mint Museum of Craft + Design].

10: "Lift Off" (2003); weathered desert ironwood root; 17½" x 10" x 3½".  
[Collection of Randy Antik].

PHOTO BY NORM SARTORIUS



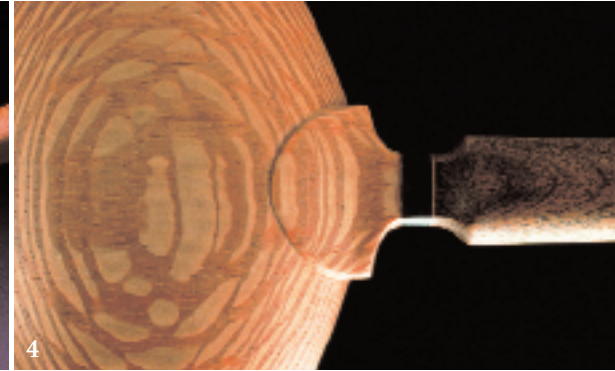
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11: "Falling Water" (2004); amboyna burl; 12" x 5" x 6" [Collection of Fleur Bresler].

12: "Collaboration with Nature" (2000); unknown Texas desert root; 9" x 5" x 2½".



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13: "Antenna Spoon" (2003); algerita burl; 9" x 3" x 2" [Collection of Fleur Bresler].

14: "Assateague Spoon" (1991); mahogany; 7" x 3½" x 1".



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15: "Bighorn" (2002); cocobolo; 11" x 6" x 3½" [Collection of Pat McCauley].

16: "Pink Boat" (2003); pink ivory; 11" x 3" x 5".



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17: "Hala" (2003); algerita, ebony rest; 7" x 1½" x 2½" [Collection of Pat McCauley].

18: "Mutation" (1999); Mexican oak burl; 9" x 4¼" x 3" [Collection of the Renwick Gallery, Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution].



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19: "Spoon" (1989); pearwood; 10" x 4½" x 2½" [Collection of the Arkansas Arts Center].

20: "Jack in the Pulpit 2" (2003); unknown Texas desert root; 16½" x 2½" x 1¼".

of grain and color, not so much a spoon as a palette for expressing his love of wood. As he picks over his wood stack and holds out pieces of wood for me to admire, he says, “I really like heartwood-sapwood contrast and I use that a lot to emphasize features of the design.” This is particularly obvious in “Scoop—Amboyna Burl” (6). Because the eye is drawn so strongly to the fascinating glimmer of the grain, it has to be a simple form. This piece is pure elegance. Sometimes the line of the grain almost decides the shape of the spoon. With “Flame She-Oak Spoon” (7), the handle swoops around to follow the line of repeating grain patterns that seem to line the bowl in ever-decreasing circles. It is a satisfying illusion that is only brought to life by Norm’s sensitivity to this natural quality.

Norm’s love affair with wood has led him from being primarily a function-driven designer to what you might call an interpreter of the natural qualities of wood. He agrees with this notion: “It’s not often I come to a piece of wood with a preconceived idea. About 75% 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 which 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” (8) 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” (9), which is held by the Mint Museum of Craft and Design. Norm feels 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” (10) is a marvellous 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 normal spoon. However, the retention of the raw edge does not always have to be there just to create a contrast. In “Falling Water” (11), the jagged sapwood edge wonderfully emulates liquid falling from the rim of a ladle, just as if you were pouring water.

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, “Collaboration with Nature” (12) must be the best example. “Antenna Spoon” (13) is another excellent example as the remnant twig almost looks like it is still growing.

Many of the spoons Norm makes are explorations of the sculptural potential of the handle. “Assateague Spoon” (14) is an example of almost figurative work from Norm, using seashells as inspiration. He explains, “Assateague Island is where I used to beachcomb for shells when I was boy.” This idea is taken even further with “Big Horn” (15), which reminds Norm of animal horn. “Pink Boat” (16) is an unexpected form with another fascinating handle, loosely based on an Egyptian oil lamp filler which Norm saw in an auction catalog.

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 very 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.” The best example I could find of this is “Hala” (17), which is almost a subversion of the spoon—a spoon which can’t be used. But there is also a logic to this piece, and in many ways this embodies much of what Norm is trying to say with his work—let it go the way it wants to go. Perhaps this is one of the reasons it is named for the yoga asana “the plow.”

One special group of spoons comprises those that have been acquired for significant public collections. He is particularly proud

of these: “At least four of the museums that have my work purchased it directly from me at craft fairs. There was no intermediary—the curator was cruising the craft fair and saw my work. That gives me a really high level of satisfaction.” They include “Mutation” (18), which Norm calls “one of the very best of my career. ‘Spoonish,’ but not a spoon, it has two bowls that are back-to-back and a handle that is not really a handle. You may see that it comes from my need to put a handle-type-of-thing on there, but it doesn’t present itself to either of the bowls in a functional way. There’s even a spout, but it doesn’t really resemble what most people think of as a spout. You could point to spout,



PHOTO BY TERRY MARTIN

handle and bowls, but they are integrated in a way that makes it an abstract sculpture. Ken Trapp [then Curator-in-Charge at The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum] chose this from my front pedestal at the Washington Craft Show in 1999.” This is a real paradox—the “spoon” which Norm thinks of as his best is not really a spoon at all. However, it does echo the universally familiar spoon shape, and probably arouses universal human memories of that simple artifact.

Although not bought by a curator, a simple pearwood spoon (19) made in 1989 was one of the most significant direct sales Norm has made. “This was the first spoon I sold during my first show with my all-spoon booth at the ACC Atlanta show in 1990. The buyers were Robyn and John Horn, and they recently donated it to the Arkansas Arts Center. Meeting them was as much of a career turning point as doing my first all-spoon show.”



IN NORM SARTORIUS' workshop he wants to show how he makes a spoon, but is frustrated that he may not do justice to the long thought process that goes into many of his pieces. He holds a fragment of wood and paces from one end of the shop to the other, saying: "I like to spend time with a piece of wood. It might sit on my bench beside where I am working. In fact I have pieces of wood like that around me all the time. Once I am clear about what I am doing, and only when it is crystal clear, then I'll dive right in. I'll make enough progress on that piece of wood so that idea is not lost. I don't need to see the whole thing, just the beginning. I tell my students that sometimes you can't see what should be there, but you can clearly see what shouldn't be there—and that's a starting point."

With that, he takes the piece of wood to the bandsaw. "Here—I don't need this piece." With quick cuts he removes several slices which don't fit his internal image, all the while preserving the sapwood-heartwood contrast that he loves (A). When he has a rough shape that he likes, he moves to the sander, which is fitted with 24-grit sandpaper (B). This quickly modifies the faceted cuts of the bandsaw to smoothly flowing lines. "I really like graceful lines, although an interruption can serve to make the smoothness of the line more noticeable. If there is a kind of detour and then the line is picked up again, it is a little more sophisticated than a simple line. A piece can be changed just enough from the expected to make it go from average to wonderful by really small shifts in the line, color, or texture. That's

what I'm laboring to do with each piece."

With the exterior lines roughed out, Norm sits down in his comfortable chair and takes a die grinder fitted with a carbide cutter to start shaping the concave interior (C). He quickly works towards the rim, resting the grinder on his leg to make the work lighter. When the bowl is nearing the form he wants, he changes to a sharp-edged cutter and starts to relieve the area at the transition from handle to bowl (D). These cuts can then be refined with a carving knife (E).

Next, Norm switches back to the grinder with a ball-shaped Kutzall™ burr mounted to refine the curve of the interior (F). When he has gone as far as he can, he puts down the spoon and smiles at me. "Here is where the hours of filing, sanding, and polishing start."

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY TERRY MARTIN

So productive has Norm been that it is almost impossible to do his work justice. I'd like to end with a personal favorite, "Jack in the Pulpit 2" (20). It is a modest piece, but it contains all the elements which I believe make Norm Sartorius's work unique. Although it resembles a spoon, in fact it would not hold anything. It contains parts of the raw wood from which it was made and yet there is a delicacy about the carved lines which link the rim of the bowl with the line of the handle. It is an artifact which fits the mind as well as it fits the hand

and it is the kind of work which will stand the test of time.

I have never met a more likeable person than Norm Sartorius and the community of woodworkers should be proud to count him among their number. 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." If you appreciate these words, you will understand why Norm is such a valuable member of the woodworking community.

You can contact Norm Sartorius at: [www.normsartorius.com](http://www.normsartorius.com).

*Terry Martin is a contributing editor to Woodwork magazine.*