



STEVE SINNER

Master Woodturner

FIGGE ARTS + PRODUCTS

Cover image, left to right:

990 Yellow Boxes, #1375, 2005, Courtesy of the Artist

Dancers and Warriors, #1252, 2002, Courtesy of the Artist

Sunspots #1240, 2002, Figge Art Museum, 2007.40.53

Steve Sinner and Joe Meirhaeghe, Untitled #229, 2017, Courtesy of the Artists

STEVE SINNER

Master Woodturner

FIGGE ART MUSEUM
February 17-June 24, 2018

Steve Sinner: Master Woodturner has been generously sponsored by:



The Singh Group

**J. RANDOLPH AND
LINDA LEWIS**

Media Sponsor: WQPT-TV

COPYRIGHT MATERIAL



Ant Form III, #1335, 2003, Gift of the Artist, 2005.74

“Simplicity and repose are the qualities that measure the true value of any work of art.”

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Sources of inspiration often come from unexpected places. A tree downed by a summer storm, or perhaps a log provided by a friend. Steve Sinner sources his wood from such instances of chance and through friends who know he will appreciate the material. The individual qualities found in a piece of wood are essential to the woodturning process. Whether it is the straight-grained and dense sugar maple or the delicately colored walnut, Sinner transforms the raw beauty of wood into elegant works of art.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1942, Sinner had an early interest in craft, “As far back as I can remember, the process of making has fascinated me....”¹ This affinity evolved into a lifetime of making, through a career in the manufacturing industry and later as a master woodturner. In the basement of Sinner’s childhood home, he created everything from chess pieces to wooden scooters. While in school, shop class furthered his interest and, after college, Sinner made furniture and clocks and experimented with woodcarving. It was not until the 1980s that he seriously pursued lathe-turned objects.

Sinner credits *Creative Woodturning*, written in 1975 by Dale Nish (1932–2013), with igniting his passion for woodturning. Nish was an influential mentor for an entire generation of woodturners, and his book remains an important guide for beginners and experts alike. After earning a degree in industrial education from Iowa State University, Sinner worked in manufacturing for decades. As he stated, “My work and interests in manufacturing are often reflected in my work. You can see repetition, precision, and quality....”² The process of taking a raw material and transforming it into a finished product is a consistent thread in Sinner’s life story.

**“I love wood because I can communicate with it;
no other material has given me much of a response.”³**

STEVE SINNER

The woodturning process begins with a rough wood block secured horizontally on the lathe. As the block rapidly spins on the axis, a sharp blade is pressed to the surface. The carving gradually removes ribbons of wood until a graceful contour takes shape. The rotation allows for a perfectly symmetrical shape. After the exterior of the form has been shaped, the interior must be hollowed. The deeper the vessel, the more difficult it is to hollow. Sinner created his own tools in order to achieve more precise hollowing. That evolved into a business: Advanced Lathe Tools, LLC. His hollowing bars use a laser monitoring system for consistent wall thickness.

After the shaping and hollowing process, Sinner concentrates on intricate surface decoration. His interest in repetition and mathematics is evident in many of his gridded and pierced works. For example, in *990 Yellow Boxes* (cover image, left), nearly a thousand perfectly geometric boxes decorate the exterior of the vessel with the natural woodgrain showing through.

Sinner often discusses his artistic progression in relation to other woodturners and their influence on his practice. Through descriptions of his interactions with fellow woodturners and the many workshops he has given, it is clear he has a deep desire to exchange knowledge with others.⁴ In 1998, after decades of working with wood in his spare time, Sinner left his job to turn wood full-time. Through his association with the Chicago Woodturners, Sinner was introduced to such artists as Frank Sudol (1933–2006) and Binh Pho (1955–2017).

Sinner considers Sudol, a Canadian woodturner known for his delicate, pierced vessels with brightly painted surfaces, as a significant artistic influence. It was Sudol who encouraged Sinner to fully embrace his role as an artist.⁵ Sinner attended workshop sessions with Sudol, organized by the late Binh Pho, a Vietnamese-American artist also known for his intricately pierced forms that often integrate glass work. Sinner looks back on these sessions as extremely important to his development: “While time was certainly spent working on technique, the greater value of these sessions was the constant dialogue about line and form, artistic expression, and all the associated material. We critiqued each other’s work as well as that of any other work we came across.”⁶

The late 20th century was an exciting time for woodturners. There was increased attention among museums and galleries, and many art collectors began to invest in the art form. Experimentations stretched boundaries, integrated materials like paint, metal and glass, and incorporated novel processes, including fire and sandblasting.



Sunspots, #1240, 2002, Gift of an Anonymous Donor, 2007.40.53

Sinner and other turners from this period consider themselves third-generation woodturners. The first generation of modern woodturning artists emerged following World War II, when lathe turning outside of manufacturing was a popular hobby. They challenged assumptions about woodturning and created forms that easily could stand alongside modern sculpture. During this period, James Prestini (1908-1993) turned thin-walled bowls and other vessels, which highlighted the grain of the natural material while embodying the clean lines of midcentury aesthetics. In the 1960s and 1970s, the students of that first wave of woodturners moved beyond traditional norms. They integrated varied materials and embraced technical innovations, including turning on multiple axes to create unique sculptural works. By the time Sinner began his serious woodturning endeavors in the 1980s, there was a great variety of work being made and exhibited. While he has engaged with innovative surface decoration and piercing, Sinner has remained dedicated to the vessel form.

“Line and form are the most important elements in any vessel...”⁷

STEVE SINNER

The vessel is a familiar form. Japanese urns, Greek amphora and Egyptian stoneware fill the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other institutions, while water pitchers and vases sit on the shelves of private homes. As Sinner stated, “The vessel is classic, and needs to be explored as much today as it was two thousand years ago.”⁸

Dancers and Warriors (page 10) is an elegant representation of Sinner’s work. The form is tall and refined while the design is rich in concept. The vase is covered in hand-inked bricks with dimensional archways and figures inside. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers spin through space as a soldier thrusts his bayonet in the archway next door. It is a work that rewards those willing to look closely: a tower of familiar silhouettes relating the choreography of battle to that of dancing. Sinner created the silhouettes using a gilding and oxidation technique. After affixing silver leaf to the wooden surface, he used a mild-acid solution to transfer images on to the metal surface. The solution causes metal to change color, or oxidize, giving the figures their distinctive tone.

Steve Sinner’s passion is apparent in his work. His hand is alive in every contour, gold rim and inked line. The generosity of woodturning artists in collaboration and in the exchange of ideas is evident in the evolution of his artistic career. While his work ranges from thimble-sized goblets to large-scale vessels, they all share qualities that set them apart. The shape, contour and surface of each object reveal the passion of the artist and the precision of a quality craftsman.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Kevin Wallace speaks to Steve Sinner...,” *Woodworkers Institute*, June 17, 2011, p. 1, <https://www.woodworkersinstitute.com/wood-turning/features/profiles/north-america/steve-sinner/>.
- 2 Author interview with the artist, 11/8/2017.
- 3 “Kevin Wallace speaks to Steve Sinner...,” *Woodworkers Institute*, p. 2.
- 4 Steve Sinner, “How I Became a Woodturner,” October 2017.
- 5 “Kevin Wallace speaks to Steve Sinner...,” *Woodworkers Institute*, p. 1.
- 6 Steve Sinner, “How I Became a Woodturner,” October 2017.
- 7 Author interview with the artist, 11/8/2017.
- 8 “Kevin Wallace speaks to Steve Sinner...,” *Woodturning Institute*, p. 1.



Feather, #1517, 2014, Courtesy of the Artist

COPYRIGHT MATERIAL



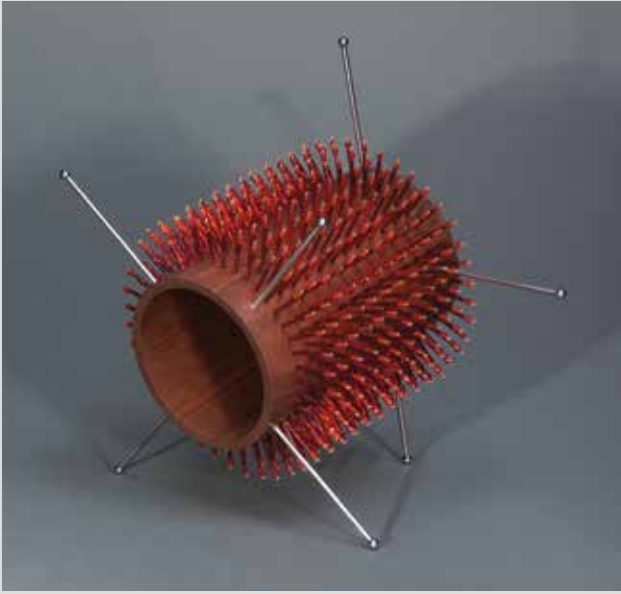
Dancers and Warriors, #1252, 2002, Courtesy of the Artist



Transition 1-60, #1482, 2009, Courtesy of the Artist



Autumn Woods, #1191, 2001, Courtesy of the Artist



Hedgehog I, #1457, 2008, Courtesy of the Artist



Steve Sinner and Katie Kiley, *Kiley's Lewis Chessman*, #1454, 2008, Courtesy of Katie Kiley



Along the Trail, #1523, 2012, Courtesy of the Artist



Steve Sinner and Joe Meirhaeghe, *Untitled*, #229, 2017, Courtesy of the Artists

COPYRIGHT MATERIAL

List of Works in the Exhibition

990 Yellow Boxes, #1375, 2005

Cherry, acrylic, gold leaf, ink
15 7/8 x 9 3/8 x 9 3/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Along the Trail, #1523, 2012

Maple, acrylic, gold leaf, ink
16 1/4 x 6 3/8 x 6 3/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Ant Farm III, #1335, 2003

Maple, gold leaf, pigment
26 1/2 x 11 5/8 x 11 5/8 in.
Figge Art Museum
Gift of the Artist, 2005.74

Autumn Woods, #1191, 2001

Cherry, crystal lacquer, plique-à-jour
10 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Bound in Black III, #1411, 2007

Maple, acrylic, gold leaf, ink
31 x 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.
Private Collection

*Cello for the Quad City
Symphony Orchestra*

'100 Years, 100 Cellos' Project, 2015
Silver leaf, patina, acrylic
Collection of Heidi Parkhurst and
Steve McCann

Celtic Dream, #1173, 2001

Maple, silver leaf, gold leaf, patina
16 x 8 5/8 x 8 5/8 in.
Figge Art Museum
Gift of an Anonymous Donor
2007.40.51

Dancers and Warriors, #1252, 2002

Maple, silver leaf, gold leaf, patina, ink
25 1/2 x 8 x 8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Feather, #1517, 2014

Maple, gold leaf
11 1/2 x 5 5/8 x 5 5/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Hawkeye, #1177, 2001

Fiddleback maple, black dye, 22K gold leaf
15 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 7 1/2 in.
Figge Art Museum
Gift of an Anonymous Donor
2007.40.52

Hedgehog I, #1457, 2008

Walnut, glass beads, brass wire,
stainless steel
11 x 11 x 11 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Jackpot, #1152, 2000

Cherry
9 1/8 x 4 x 4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Lake Tahoe, #1474, 2008

Maple
7 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Loreto, B.C.S., #1378, 2005

Maple, acrylic, silver leaf, patina
Courtesy of the Artist

Off Track, #1460, 2008

Maple
8 1/4 x 4 7/8 x 4 7/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Polychrome Tower I, #1497, 2010

Maple
4 1/8 x 2 3/4 x 2 3/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Sasha II, #1433, 2008
Cherry, acrylic, gold leaf
26 1/2 x 13 1/4 x 13 1/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Sunspots, #1240, 2002
Maple, silver leaf, patina ink
5 1/4 x 7 7/8 x 7 7/8 in.
Figge Art Museum
Gift of an Anonymous Donor
2007.40.53

The Storm II, #1385, 2006
Maple, acrylic, silver leaf, gold leaf, patina
10 3/8 x 6 7/8 x 6 7/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Transition 1-60, #1482, 2009
Maple
8 3/4 x 3 7/8 x 3 7/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Transition 1-60 II, #1488, 2009
Maple, acrylic
12 7/8 x 4 5/8 x 4 5/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, 1995
Russian Olive
4 x 6 x 6 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, 2005
Maple
4 x 1 x 1 in.
Figge Art Museum
Gift of an Anonymous Donor
2007.40.54

Untitled, #1511 (kinetic piece), 2010
Maple
4 1/2 x 7 1/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, #1064, 1999
Walnut
3 7/8 x 5 1/4 x 5 1/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, #1143, 2000
Madrone
5 1/8 x 3 x 3 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, #1533, 2016
Walnut, gold leaf
24 x 11 x 11 in.
Collection of the Trimble Family,
Trimble Pointe Companies

Untitled, #G1012, 2004
Maple
4 x 1 5/16 x 1 5/16 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, #G1054, 2005
Maple
4 1/2 x 1 1/4 x 1 1/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Untitled, # G1061, 2005
Maple
2 1/2 x 1 3/8 x 1 3/8 in.
Courtesy of the Artist

Collaborative Works

Steve Sinner and Katie Kiley
Kiley's Lewis Chessman, #1454, 2008
Maple, acrylic, gold leaf, ink
14 1/2 x 7 x 7 in.
Courtesy of Katie Kiley

Steve Sinner and Joe Meirhaeghe
Untitled, #229, 2017
Maple, acrylic, reactive metal paint
16 1/4 x 8 3/4 x 8 3/4 in.
Courtesy of the Artists

Photography credits: Courtesy of the Artist: p. 9-16; Figge Art Museum: cover, p. 4, p. 7

This exhibition was organized by Figge Art Museum Assistant Curator Vanessa Sage
and Assistant Registrar and Preparator Joshua Johnson



Steve Sinner (American, b. 1942) is a distinguished woodturner living and working in Bettendorf, Iowa. A graduate of Iowa State University with a degree in industrial education, Sinner has been interested in the process of making since he was a child. His wood-turned vessels are internationally recognized for their artistry, precision and elegance.

FIGGE
ART MUSEUM

www.figgeartmuseum.org | 225 West Second Street | Davenport, Iowa

COPYRIGHT MATERIAL