



Betty Scarpino's inner journey

BY ASA CHRISTIANA



Diving beneath the surface. Betty Scarpino's turned and carved sculpture "From Within Our Own Bodies," which is in the collection of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum, is emblematic of her approach to work. "I've always felt there were infinite possibilities in exploring something below the surface of the plate or pod or other shape," she says. "It's like the way the layers peel back when you get to know a person."



Editor and artist. Scarpino served twice as the editor of *American Woodturner*, the journal of the American Association of Woodturners.

As a wood sculptor, Betty Scarpino is interested in going beneath the surface to find the beauty that lies within. She turns objects on the lathe and cuts them apart—carving, texturing, and reassembling the parts. The exploration beneath the surface mirrors Scarpino's inward journey as she creates. "When I work I feel like I'm connecting with some sort of universal creative energy," she said, "and I need to let my mind get out of the way. If I start thinking I want it to be this or that, it gets in the way of channeling that energy straight into my hands and the wood."

"I'm working on a subconscious level, I think. I doodle a bit after turning, but I don't really draw my pieces. I'm just carving and connecting, and playing and doodling, and connecting the lines and the forms. When I start to recognize relationships, and the forms and the flow

of it, it starts getting exciting. Only then do I more consciously start connecting the parts."

While collectors and writers have commented on common themes in Scarpino's work—such as masculine and feminine archetypes and the yin-yang symbol—she says, "I often miss things in my work that other people point out or I notice only later."

Moving on is part of the process. "Then I just turn another piece and do something different," she said. "If something doesn't work, I set it aside. Sometimes I come back to it later, even years later. Some pieces are just more interesting than others."

Determination and integrity

An inward search for meaning and truth is also reflected in Scarpino's career path. "I didn't set out to do this stuff," she says. "I took a woodworking class because it



From industrial arts to fine arts. While majoring in industrial arts at the University of Missouri, Scarpino convinced a sculpture instructor to let her take classes. “Reaching Out” was the first wood sculpture she made, in 1981. Its forms and curves have reappeared in her work throughout the years.



Deconstructed disks. Much of Scarpino’s lathe-turned sculpture begins as turned disks, “which contain multitudes of possibilities for cutting and carving,” she says.

looked like fun, and I liked working with my hands.”

That class led to her majoring in industrial arts at the University of Missouri, and subsequently to the fine arts department, where she was immediately attracted to sculpture.

When she asked the sculpture instructor, Don Bartlett, about taking classes, he said he had tried before to have industrial-art students come over

and take sculpture classes, but it didn’t work out because the students had no background in art.

So Scarpino took all of the prerequisite art classes Bartlett suggested. “It turned out that he was right: I didn’t know about line or form or any of that.”

Her first sculpture assignment was to make an abstract bust using only cones and cylinders. Bartlett placed hers last in the row of best to worst,

his uncompromising way of grading assignments. “But a light bulb went off for me,” Scarpino said. “I got it.”

On her next assignment, to sculpt a classical nude based on a live model, Bartlett spent more and more time with Scarpino as she worked, giving tips and suggesting refinements. “This time, my work was at the other end of the row, ahead of his graduate students,” she said.

Seeing an unused lathe in the back of



Double Entendre, 2007. Like a number of Scarpino’s sculptures, this one can be displayed as nested pieces or two standing apart.



Portal to Joy, 2017. For this piece, Scarpino turned a sphere, cut it in half, turned grooves on each inside face, and then cut a wedge out of one half, to use as a gateway for viewing the inside. In the grooves, she wrote positive words and thoughts to represent the joy that resides within all of us.

the craft studio, she asked Bartlett about making sculpture from turned pieces. “He said it wasn’t possible,” she recalls. “Everything that comes off that is round,” he said.” She learned to use the lathe, but didn’t use it for sculpture.

Years later, at a 1994 workshop taught by Michael Hosaluk at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Tennessee, Scarpino created her first lathe-based sculptural object, cutting apart and carving a wood turning. Setting up shop in her garage soon after, she began turning out the pieces that have earned her renown in both the woodworking and art worlds.

The person behind the piece

Scarpino credits her time with fellow artists—at exhibitions and symposiums—with showing her what was possible and inspiring her to dig deeper. It also showed her a way she could give back to the craft. “I remember my first woodworking symposium, outside Seattle,” she said. “It was my first immersion into the wider world of wood turning, and I sat on a bench overwhelmed with what turners were doing and showing.”

The way demonstrators talked about their work was striking, too. “When guys presented themselves, it was all about

the work, and they acted like they had done everything on their own. But there was a woman who was a production turner doing architectural work, and she talked a bit about her personal story and her family,” Scarpino recalled. “That meant something to me.”

After that experience, she began to share more about her life when she presented work. At a 1996 conference, while talking about “In Lieu of Housework,” an altered plate, Scarpino included a few slides of her family, explaining that she was able to get much more done when her husband and kids were away on a trip. That revelation connected with several women in the audience, one of whom came up afterward and said, “I didn’t know you were married and had kids.”

“I wanted to share my whole story because I know that’s what it takes for other women to find themselves and find their path,” Scarpino said. “Role models are really important, and I saw myself as someone who could encourage other women in the making of artwork.”

After her divorce, Scarpino supplemented her income with journalism work, as a contributing editor for *Woodworker’s Journal*; and two stints as editor of *American Woodturner* (AW), the journal of the American Association of Woodturners (AAW). She also served two residencies at the acclaimed Center for Art in Wood’s Windgate International Turning Exchange (ITE).

In her second term at AW, Scarpino revolutionized the glossy magazine, expanding the diversity of its authors and topics, running articles by 15-year-old and 90-year-old members, and covering everything from the very basics to the artistic heights of the craft.

Advice for prospective pros

To woodworkers thinking about going pro, Scarpino places work over image. “Don’t think, ‘I want to be an artist,’” she said. “The important part is to make work.”

As for social media, she recommends emphasizing finished pieces on your feed—not your process or daily life. Highlighting your work will set you up



Body Language: Dancing Around the Obvious, 2017. This piece is 12 in. dia., made of maple and colored with acrylic paint.



to attract buyers and patrons—not fellow woodworkers. She further cautions that sharing too much of your process and experience will place posting, likes, and followers between you and your own sensibilities.

While social media has its place, Scarpino recommends in-person opportunities for learning, meeting peers, and attracting buyers. She advises starting with local exhibitions. Apply for fellowships and residencies, she added, and attend conferences. “Almost every show has an opening night,” she said. “Talk to the people who are looking at your work.”

“Hang around with other artists and read about art,” Scarpino added. “That’s what keeps me curious about what else I can make.”

An unexpected blessing

Seven years ago, at 65, Scarpino had retired from editing the AAW journal, and was demonstrating, teaching, and making at a slower pace, when she received an email invitation that would lead to one of the most rewarding experiences of her life, rekindling her artistic flame and rebooting her career.

The invite came from famed Australian wood artist Terry Martin, asking her if she would be the American representative at an eight-day wood carving competition in Dongyang, China, sponsored by World Crafts Council. There she would join 19 other internationals and 20 Chinese carvers, and be surrounded by “crowds of students, TV crews, and newspaper reporters,” she said.

Knowing she was out of shape for doing the large-scale carving required by the competition, Scarpino threw herself into a workout regimen that included weightlifting, biking, and yard work. “As my plane lifted off, I felt strong and ready for the adventure,” she said.

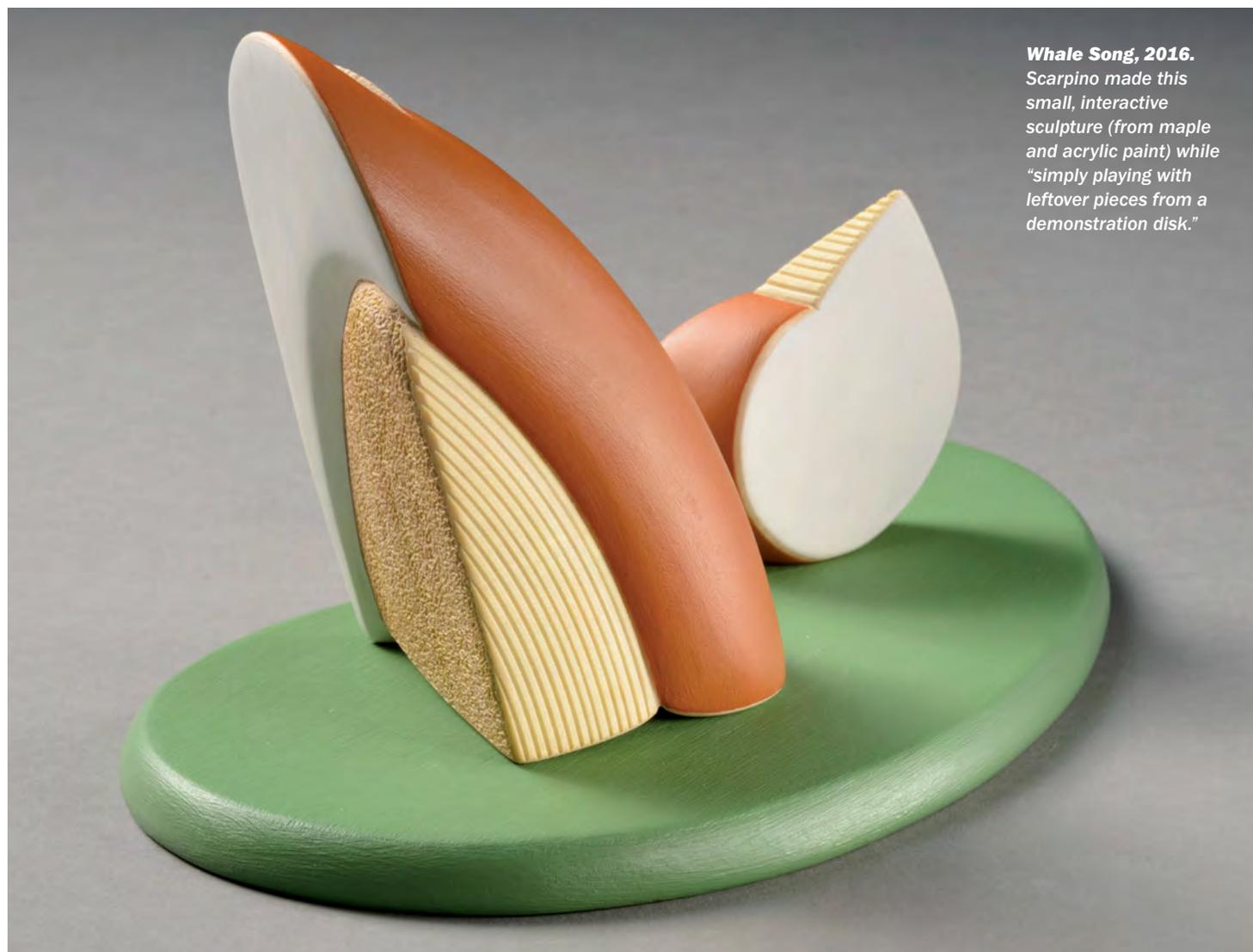
Inviolate Portal, 2007. This 14-in.-dia. piece, made from ash and oak, with dye and liming wax, will be featured in a May, 2022 exhibit at the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery.



Internal Profundity, 2018. Maple, pink ivory, poplar. Scarpino begins these pieces using sections of a greenwood log, turning a pod shape, cutting it apart lengthwise on the bandsaw, and then carving away the pith area to prevent cracking. Each half can become a different sculpture.

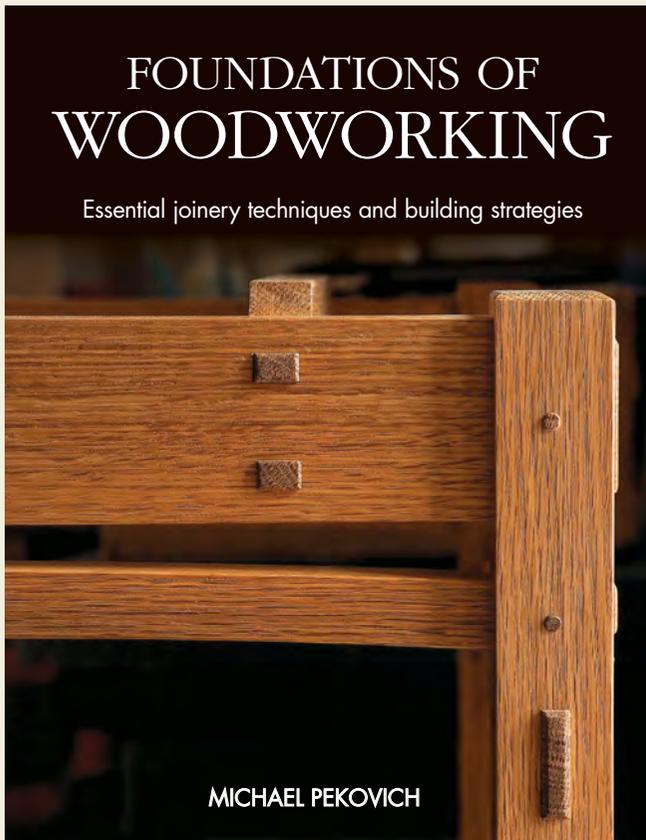
In Dongyang, China's woodcarving capital, she was provided with a big cutoff from a log of golden teak. The cutoff was of poor quality, containing weak pith wood and a fair amount of rot. So she changed her design to work around the defects and got on with the carving. After a severe allergic reaction to the wet teak, and a trip to a local hospital, she returned the next morning and got back to work.

Over the eight days of the timed competition she noticed that master carvers from China and Japan were watching—watching her fight through the difficulties and emerge with a large, curvaceous piece of sculpture. At the end of the competition, a celebratory



Whale Song, 2016. Scarpino made this small, interactive sculpture (from maple and acrylic paint) while “simply playing with leftover pieces from a demonstration disk.”

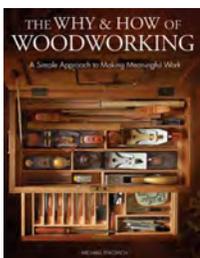
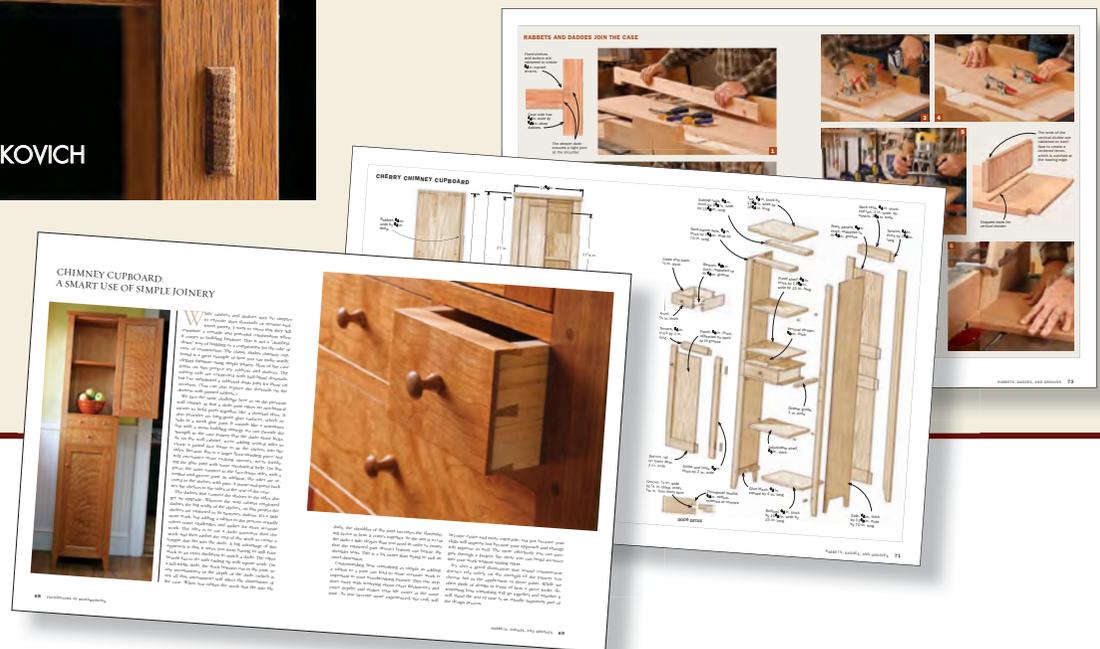
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Carving in China. At 65 Scarpino received an invitation to be the sole American competitor at an international carving competition in Dongyang, China. To prepare for eight days of work on a large piece, she embarked on a fitness regimen. As a warm up, she carved *Parallel Conversations* (left), made from spalted sycamore and acrylic paint, with metalwork by Julie Ball. The title refers to the dialogue between the soft, spalted wood and the hard steel of the frame. The competition changed her life and reinvigorated her career.

banquet was held at the studio of Master Lu Guangzheng. In China the title of Master Carver earns a craftsman wealth and status, and, Master Lu employed hundreds of workers to carve and sand his panels. Over the course of the evening, many people approached Master Lu to offer him the traditional Chinese toast to a superior: holding one's glass of liquor lower than theirs, and downing the whole thing afterward. Each time, Master Lu responded by taking the tiniest sip from his own glass.

At the end of the evening, Scarpino was surprised to see the renowned carver approaching her for a toast. He held out his glass, lowered it and clinked hers, and then downed the whole thing. "I still get chills thinking about it," Scarpino said. "In China they are just now allowing women to become master carvers. He was acknowledging that I was there, that he had watched me carve, watched me get sick, watched me make a good sculpture. I was kind, I respected the culture, I ate with

chopsticks, and he seemed so puzzled and so taken by me."

In the end, most of the awards in the politicized event went to Chinese carvers, but Scarpino had won. Now 72, she credits her experience in China with giving her a new lease on life. "I realized that I can do whatever I want for the rest of my life," she said. "What a shame it would be to just sit back and drift!" □

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