

Q&A DEAN LAHIKAINEN

At Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Mass., the beauty and sensuality of wood art has been on view this winter. International in scope and diverse in form, “Audacious: The Fine Art of Wood from the Montalto Bohlen Collection,” on view until June 21, showcases more than 100 singular works of contemporary wood art, a presentation



Previous Page: Ron Gerton, "A Tree Runs Through It," 1998, spalted maple burl, bronze, 28 by 40 by 30 inches. The Montalto Bohlen Collection. © 2014 Peabody Essex Museum. Walter Silver/PEM photo

Right: Dean Lahikainen, Carolyn and Peter Lynch curator of American decorative art, Peabody Essex Museum. (Click image to see full size)

sparked by the donation of 47 works by collectors Bob and Lillian Montalto Bohlen. Through the use of lathes, turning, carving, painting, even blowtorches and chainsaws, the featured artists push the boundaries of the medium while taking into consideration the unique characteristics of wood grain, tone, color and texture. Dean Lahikainen, the museum's Carolyn and Peter Lynch curator of American decorative art, recently spoke with *Antiques and The Arts Weekly* about putting together an exhibition that is surprising as well as beautiful.





What was the impetus for this exhibition?

We started collecting contemporary craft in 1998 to complement our older historic collections. When we reinstalled the new galleries in 2003, one of the goals was to juxtapose contemporary and historic works together to showcase continuing artistic traditions. I began collecting works that fit into the existing collection of this, the oldest continuously operating museum in the country — the collections go back to 1799. One of the first pieces I bought was a wooden bowl by Michael Mode, who is in the exhibition. And I started by going to crafts shows, such as SOFA [Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art and Design] in Chicago.

Stuart Mortimer, "Squid Series #2," 2002, pink ivory, ebony, 22 ½ by 7 by 7 ¼ inches. The Montalto Bohlen Collection. Dirk Bakker photo

Tell us about the Bohlens' involvement.

They came through the museum and saw that we had a couple of wood pieces. I ended up being invited to their home in Andover in 2011 to see their collection, partly because they were thinking about doing another exhibition of their collection. Their pattern has been that they allow their collection to be shown and they end up giving a



*Mark Bressler,
"Superman Mini,"
2009, comic
books, 4½ by 5½
inches. Peabody
Essex Museum,
gift of Lillian
Montalto Bohlen.
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Silver/PEM photo*

portion to the institution. That's part of their philosophy and interest in elevating wood art to a fine art status since they began collecting in 1997. They've already given away about 860 pieces, and the 107 pieces in the show represent about one-third of their remaining collection. Another facet of their collecting is their direct financial support for nearly two dozen contemporary wood art artists, providing them the freedom to take creative risks and deeply explore their practice.

Hal Metlitzky, "Double Helix," 2012, black walnut, yellowheart, pernambuco, satine, holly, imbuia, old growth East Indian rosewood, East Indian ebony (6,500 pieces of wood), 10 by 19 inches. The Montalto Bohlen Collection. © 2014 Peabody Essex Museum. Walter Silver/PEM photo



Binh Pho, "Seven Poppies," 2009, box elder, acrylic paints, 10 by 6 by 6 inches. The Montalto Bohlen Collection. Terry Martin photo



How did you personally become interested in contemporary wood art?

I've had a long association with wood. My family owned a furniture company that I worked at when I was in high school and summers. And then I became a curator of decorative arts, which is largely dealing with the furniture collection. But I've always been fascinated with woodturned things, so I really welcomed the opportunity to learn a lot more, and while I knew some of the artists, I didn't know many of them.

David Ellsworth, "Intersphere" from "Solstice Series," 1991, burned ash and pigment, 14 by 16 by 9 ½ inches. Peabody Essex Museum, gift of Lillian Montalto Bohlen. Terry Martin photo

Is there a counterpart to, say, a Dale Chihuly in the woodturning world?

The first-generation practitioners were a bit locked into the traditional lathe turning and vessel form, celebrating just the natural wood. Whereas the Bohlens cast a very wide net about what they



wanted to collect and got into some “funky” things, which I believe helps to redefine wood art, but also breaks away from the traditional. I would say at the

moment Binh Pho, an American artist born in Vietnam, may be one of the most

successful. ([Continued on page 1 inside the E-edition](#))

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