



## **Collection Focus: Dorothy Gill Barnes and David Ellsworth**

November 20, 2011 – January 15, 2012

**Dorothy Gill Barnes** and **David Ellsworth** are drawn to working with wood to create sculptural forms, however each has a different approach to using the material. Both of these internationally-recognized artists are important figures in contemporary craft and are represented in RAM's permanent collection of over 3,500 works in craft media.

**Collection Focus: Dorothy Gill Barnes and David Ellsworth**—including work that is currently a part of the permanent collection as well as promised future gifts—is the latest in a series of collections-based exhibitions featuring artists whose work RAM holds in-depth.

### ***Dorothy Gill Barnes***

Although **Dorothy Gill Barnes** is usually categorized as a fiber artist, RAM's collection of her work concentrates on sculptures she has created from trees, especially from their bark and limbs. Barnes is known for developing a distinct working process that includes scarring trees that have been marked for eventual removal and, returning years later after the trees have been cut, harvesting the grown bark as a decoratively scarred skin to use in her baskets.

### **Background**

**Barnes** received her BA degree in 1949 and her MA in Art Education from the University of Iowa. While she did not major in fiber art in college, she was originally introduced to the material in the early 1970s, finding her niche in this medium in her mid-forties.

Barnes' early influences were the artist and teacher Ruth Mary Papenthein, who taught at Ohio State University, and Dwight Stump, an Ohio-based traditional basket maker. She also credits the works of John McQueen and Ed Rossbach as setting a standard for experimenting with natural materials to make contemporary sculpture.

Barnes eventually taught fibers as an adjunct faculty member at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, from 1966 until her retirement from university teaching in 1990. Throughout much of her career, Barnes has also been a sought-after teacher who has traveled across the US and around the world conducting classes and residencies.

Barnes was elected a Fellow of the American Craft Council in 1999 and received the Ohio Governor's Award for the Arts that same year. In 1993 she received the Lifetime Achievement in the Crafts award from the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC. She is a three-time recipient of the Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowship in 1998, 1986, and 1984. Barnes is represented in many art museums that are known around the world for collecting fiber art, including the Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York City; and the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian's American Art Museum.

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## Careers and Ideas

The work of **Dorothy Gill Barnes** is the realization of a combination of sources and technical investigations that have placed her at the forefront of contemporary fiber art.

Beginning with traditional basketry techniques and their dedication to the container form, she has steadfastly advanced through a career-long process of experimentation to become known around the world for her sculptures that utilize bark cultivated from trees.

Some of Barnes' pieces are vessels though many of them are not, and she has been steadily moving away from traditional basketry since the 1980s.

She is fully aware of environmental concerns and respectfully harvests from nature. This involves knowing who in her community is planning on conducting major pruning or tree removal projects for real estate development or thinning trash trees from a tree farm.

The artist has access to an Ohio basket willow grove, a pine tree farm, and a sawmill to obtain plant matter, and also grafts and wraps growing weed trees in her suburban yard for later use.

Barnes uses electric tools to expand the scale, scope, and complexity of her pieces and she credits power equipment as the source for ideas that handwork alone would not have suggested. She is comfortable employing nails, metal wire, and staples along with traditional woven assembly methods.

In all of her sculptures, Barnes seeks to create structures that honor the growing things from which they came. She highly prizes experimentation, spontaneity, inventiveness, and an openness to the wood and the process that is both intellectually playful and leaves her open to changes in the composition that nature offers.

The technical advancement that she is most known for is her *dendroglyphs*—literally, “tree drawings.” This is a process in which Barnes makes careful incisions into the bark of a living tree. Over time, it forms a scar around her designs—the tree and time both becoming collaborators with the artist, with the process taking anywhere from a few months to 17 years.

She usually begins a piece without preplanning, preferring to treat the creative act like a journey of exploration, accepting detours along the way and learning from the process. She does not seek to subjugate nature, but to guide it, amplify it, and allow the natural cycles of plants to make its own unique contribution to her completed work.

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## **David Ellsworth**

An influential presence in the modern wood turning community, **David Ellsworth** has both channeled and challenged the idea of functional turned wood vessels. At one point, he began creating his own bent turning tools to achieve his conceptual and aesthetic goals. In the last ten years, the Racine Art Museum has had the good fortune of acquiring over 40 works by Ellsworth—with a sizable number of pieces created over a broad period of time, both small and large scale.

## **Background**

**Ellsworth** worked with wood at a young age via industrial arts classes in middle school and maintained an interest in the material even while working in other media. After the early introductions to wood in his youth, the other skills he has acquired with that material have largely been self-taught.

Ellsworth enrolled in the architecture program at Washington University in St. Louis and studied fine arts at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He has a BFA and MFA with emphases in sculpture, drawing, and design from the University of Colorado.

Principles of design and working with clay have been important in the formation of his artistic concepts and approaches.

Ellsworth has long been inspired by a wide range of objects and philosophies, finding direction from artists such as sculptor Mary Frank, woodworker James Prestini, and ceramics artist Paul Soldner and valuing the design and “spirit” of Native American art and architecture.

## **Career and Ideas**

In the early 1970s, not long after college and while functioning as artist-in-residence and originator of the wood program at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, **Ellsworth** created and sold functional production wood pieces such as salt, pepper, and sugar shakers. Once Ellsworth’s skills for creating non-utilitarian objects were recognized and supported, he stopped making production pieces.

Ellsworth eventually developed bent turning tools that would allow him to hollow out the interior of a wooden form while on a lathe.

His “**blind turning**” technique, aided by the use of his bent tools, allows him to create small-necked vessels with extremely thin walls. “**Blind turning**” is a technique for turning that does not allow the artist to see the inside of the object being created on the lathe and thereby requires special tools for shaping.

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Using “**green wood**,” or wood that is not fully dry and therefore more flexible, has also characterized much of **Ellsworth’s** process. Working with green wood requires designing a piece in such a way that its change through drying is somewhat anticipated, or at least, considered.

Embracing a broader 1980s wood turning trend toward working with **burl**, or outgrowths on trees that have irregular grain patterns, Ellsworth has played with the variety and character these types of formations offer. By doing so, he has explored what he describes as the “beauty of the natural edge.”

With his stated desire to explore concepts in depth, it is no surprise that Ellsworth prefers to work in a series format.

In the last four decades, Ellsworth has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions (both juried and invitational); his work has been collected by several institutions, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Arts and Design, Mint Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as well as significant private collectors.

He has authored a guide to wood turning and been featured in many more.

Ellsworth has also received deserved accolades, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant, Lifetime Achievement Award from the Collectors of Wood Art, a Pew Foundation Fellowship Grant, and an election as Fellow to the American Craft Council.

He is a founding member of the American Association of Woodturners.

Ellsworth has his own collection of contemporary craft, numbering over 300 works by his contemporaries.

Ellsworth is also well-known as a teacher. His holistic approach includes stretching and posture exercises that allow for better control and comfort in the studio and those who participate in his multi-day workshop in Pennsylvania are served home-cooked meals.