

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Mark Lindquist***

*The following text is the summary of an interview conducted by Jerrilyn McGregor on March 21, 2007 on behalf of the curator.*

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### **Cultural Practice**

Woodturning is most closely aligned with fine art, rather than folk culture. Mark's father, Melvin Lindquist, originated the artform from his industrial background, passing down his techniques intergenerationally. Their artistry may take the heritage within a utilitarian object and vis a vis their metaphorical rendering to create a sculpture that transcends boundaries. He speaks of slipping signifiers as a more salient feature of his art, rather than functionality.

His work continues to evolve. It spans multiple artforms, including paintings and photography. He loves working with very high technology as well as producing handwork. He enumerates mastery in numerous ways. Ultimately, what mastery means to Lindquist is: "understanding his limitations." He asserts, "Other people use the term mastery fairly easily." For him, among other things, it signifies a lifelong quest of exceeding one's own expectations, despite any difficulty and without regard merely to material necessities.



*Mark Lindquist- Atsumori (left), Yosegi I (center),  
Ascending Ichiboku Column (right)*

*Photo by John McFadden/Lindquist Studios*

### **Relationship to Place**

Lindquist was born in 1949 in Oakland, California, moving east at the age of six. Therefore, he does not privilege North/South or East/West binaries. He situates “home” as wherever he resides. Although he physically moved his studio to Quincy in 1983 and permanently assumed residency there 20 years ago (in 1987), he centers the roots of his artistic expression to Schenectady, New York. It was growing up along the Adirondacks that his father, Melvin, introduced him to woodturning. It was the natural environment of this place that provided them with the natural resources that made woodturning an expressly artistic possibility.

*Lindquist: I essentially learned to work with wood at a very early age; and my father taught me about forestry and about conservation and about working with my hands.*

Not only requiring natural by-products, woodturning also requires the creation of high technology, relying on large machine tools to craft the wood such as gigantic, robotic lathes. So, like his father, he is “a toolmaker and a tool user.” He relies on about 15 various kinds. Lindquist, then migrated South to ‘Wiregrass Country’ for the same reason centuries before yeomen farmers arrived—to acquire cheap real estate. Located in an old tobacco barn, in a locale where the shade tobacco industry used to thrive, makes his studio viable and affordable. In addition, he identifies three specific other categories that living and working in the South provide: climate, space, and light. He emphatically states these as the factors that brought and keep him in the region.

### **Innovation and Evolution**

Lindquist apprenticed with a potter who was a Zen Buddhist adherent. Therefore, one innovation engages Japanese ceramic traditions and centers Zen as another tool in the making of art. As a result, he situates Asian art as being apparent in nearly everything he creates.

The tool, the process, and maker comprise a trinity for him as well. Yet Lindquist is foremost an artist aware of the postmodern impulse, driven by the desire to understand our present culture through reconstruction of the past. His art is in constant dialogue with multiple art histories, incorporating much of classical art designs into the turning of wood. He appears to identify a great deal with Leonardo Da Vinci, as an artist with a scientific mind. He acknowledges that, ironically, as his artistic creations deviate from his and his father’s earlier established norms, purists tend to criticize his new innovations. Of course, eventually, many succumb, adding these aspects to their own wood sculptures.

### **Connections**

By popularizing the art of using spalted wood (wood discolored by fungi), Melvin and Mark Lindquist forged a woodturning movement. As a matter of fact, he and

his father erected woodturning programs at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and Arrowmont Folk School. They've played an important role in the development of contemporary artistic practices in the South.

He describes himself as demanding. Therefore, he seldom works in close affiliation with others, although he does retain a relationship with a few apprentices. He works, for the most part, with no local arts community in Quincy. There was a time when he had more cohorts at local universities, but they're now gone. Today, he prefers not teaching technical aspects, feeling (in some ways) "the field has moved on." He's found happiness in relation to his own personal techniques and choice of place.

### **Creating the object**

The Lindquists (father and son) pioneered in woodturning, using spalted wood. They refined this decaying, often-considered "flawed material" into a sculptured form. Being conservationists they elected to recycle rotting trees discarded by the forestry industry as unsound. However, for artistic purposes, spalted wood lends itself to the most attractive works of art.

*Lindquist: The term spalting comes from a New England colloquialism—the state of decomposition of the wood. Today, spalted wood is one of the mainstays of the woodturning world.*

Melvin Lindquist literally discovered the beauty of spalted wood by serendipity when he chanced upon a birch tree and noticed the magnificent features of its inner core. To quote Lindquist: "He likens it to clay for potters. He still acquires most of his materials from 'harvesting.'" To explain, he states: "not taking new wood but taking what's there for the taking" (uprooted or discarded limbs.) He enjoys working most with maple, walnut, and pecan. The wood is often aged for 10 or more years as well to allow for greater oxidation.

What Lindquist learned about the art was ingrained from childhood, even using a chainsaw from the age of 10. As a part of his belief in spiritual living, now, a special relationship exists linking him with his materials. For instance, he "views the tree as a connection between us and heaven and earth." For him, every step of the artistic process is a spiritual progression. Even when it comes to what other artists might identify as a defect or imperfection, Lindquist experiences it differently. Instead, for him, what amounts to a crack in the wood carries great significance: division and union. For him, it constitutes a powerful symbol.

While philosophical about his art, he also exhibits a great, ready wit. When asked about whether his artistry possesses a visionary aspect, he says, "Even a blind pig gets an acorn every once in awhile." He credits the quote as being one transmitted via Southern living. In the context of speaking to his creative process more

directly, he outlines both the material and spiritual components, which for him includes “a happy accident.” He acknowledges that there can be the unhappy as well. He currently has lots of work in progress, some for 20 years. One large, mural-sized painting dates back to the first Gulf War and is still awaiting completion. Timing differs from piece to piece, depending on when he decides to add the final finish.