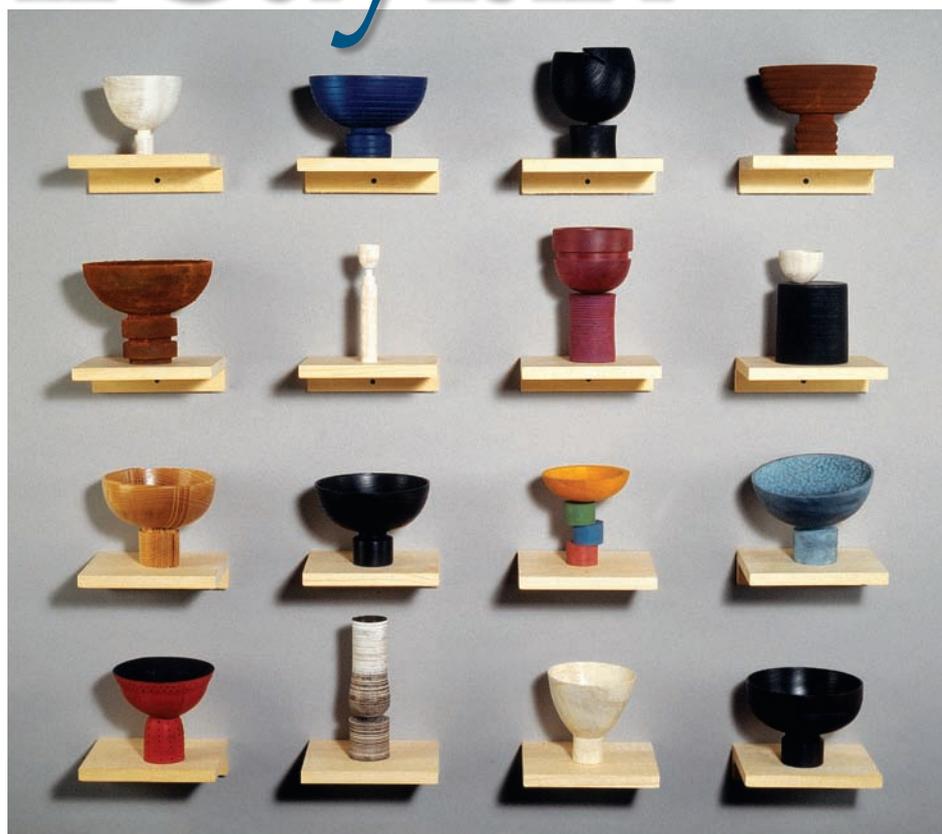


# Merryll Saylan

Kevin Wallace

**M**erryll Saylan's works have been exhibited in numerous museums and galleries and her writings on art and woodturning techniques published in books and magazines. She's been a sought-after instructor for decades and has served on the boards of the Wood Turning Center and the AAW. Beginning her career with a bachelor's in design from UCLA and a master's in art from California State University, Northridge, led to an approach that was not the norm in woodturning at the time. As a woman interested in art and design, entering a field dominated by men who created work driven largely by tools and technique certainly brought with it challenges.

"Art school exposed me to so much," Saylan says. "When I taught furniture design or woodturning, I found that people had great skills at making but didn't know how to look at what they made. They didn't have ideas or knowledge to draw ideas from. People think you are born an artist, but I think it takes practice, like getting in shape to hike at altitude."



*Tribute to Hans Coper, 2001, Various woods, polychromed, 49" x 47" x 9"*

"In graduate school in the '70s, women outnumbered men and I never felt any discrimination," she recalls. "There were a couple of us [women] in woodturning early on—we did the same shows and museum exhibitions—but we were not encouraged in the same way, we were not on the teaching rosters and our work was not recommended to collectors. But, I learned

that you could still get in museums, galleries, and exhibitions by getting out there and meeting the curators."

Ultimately, it was the quality of the work that mattered, as Saylan learned when she was approached at a craft show by a fellow woodturner who told her, "You should go see this guy's work—so delicate, beautiful forms, amazing." "I came to find it was *my* work," said Merryll. "The guy had seen my husband booth-sitting for me and assumed he was the artist."

## Series

Though there is crossover between series, Saylan's work can be divided into two approaches. One concerns concept or narrative in the use of juxtaposition of everyday objects. In works such as *Breakfast Tray*, form, contrast, and familiarity cause the ▶



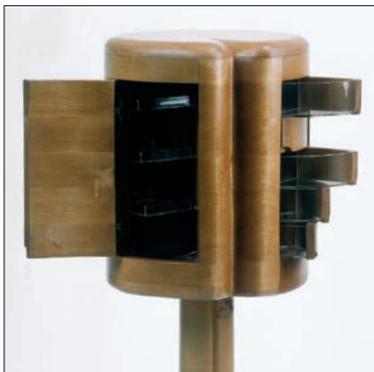
*Breakfast Tray, 1996/7, Maple, 5" x 17" x 23½"*

Photo: Ed Saylan

Photo: Hapo Sakawa

*Collector's Cabinet*, 1976,  
Alder, acrylic, 45" × 24" × 24"

*Collector's Cabinet open (detail)*



Photos: Ed Saylan

viewer to find levels of meaning on both shared and personal levels.

The other body of work is more concerned with pattern, texture, and color. While traditionally turned bowls or platters are designed to display the natural beauty of wood, Saylan's platter forms serve as a canvas for the exploration of surface. Yet it is the nature of wood, with its inherent differences in color, grain, texture, and density that opened the door for her experimentation with pigments and texture. Cross-media exploration has been an important part of the process. "A friend who created wearable art shared fiber-reactive dyes," Saylan recalls of one breakthrough.

Many works by Saylan fall between these two approaches, including her Recycled Packing Crate series and *Tribute to Hans Coper*, works that utilize



juxtaposition, as well as color and texture.

### Merryll's path

To fully understand Saylan's work, it is best to look at the path that led her to her highly original approach. She was encouraged by her family in her creative pursuits. She played the viola in junior high school and won several orchestra competitions.

Switching to piano in high school, she concentrated on Bach, intending to become a concert pianist.

This early interest in music still informs her work, although everything changed with her first art history class. She also became increasingly interested in craftsmanship and credits her grandfather as a great influence. A tailor of fine women's clothes, he taught her about detail, fabrics, materials, and the importance of fine workmanship.

Saylan attended college after high school, but left after two years, married, and had three children. In 1969, Saylan went back to school at the University of California, Los Angeles, majoring in design. Her studies

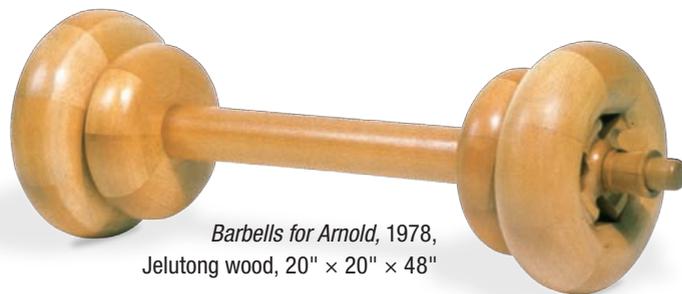
included art history, architecture, environmental and industrial design, crafts, and fine art. A landmark exhibition of Italian design produced by the Museum of Modern Art was touring at the time and some of the designers did presentations at UCLA. These experiences had an impact on the work she would explore for the rest of her life.

Following graduation, Saylan took classes in Chinese cooking and wood-working. The result was a set of rice bowls. Meant to be utilitarian, they checked when filled with rice. The experience was positive, as it made her more interested in wood's qualities. When she attended the California State University, Northridge, for her postgraduate studies, students were encouraged to learn to use all of the equipment available in order to increase their vocabulary as artists. Saylan chose to focus on the lathe, creating furniture, bowls, and sculpture.

One of her student works was curated into the final presentation of the seminal California Design Shows, a series of exhibitions that included objects designed for industry, as well as individual works by craft artists. Saylan's work was purchased by Joanne Rapp, an early dealer in contemporary woodturning with her Hand & Spirit Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona.

"I was thrilled and surprised to have been selected and almost embarrassed when fellow students and artists were not," Saylan recalls. "I was also utterly excited to have my work displayed alongside a vessel by ceramist Laura Andreson, whose work I admired."

Soon after, Saylan created *Collector's Cabinet*, the first in a new series, born of an assignment to reinterpret some element that students saw or that piqued their interest while traveling to school.



*Barbells for Arnold*, 1978,  
Jelutong wood, 20" × 20" × 48"

Photo: Ed Saylan

Photo: Hap Sakwa



*Sailing to Safety*, 2002/3, Various woods, polychromed, 6" × 7" × 36"

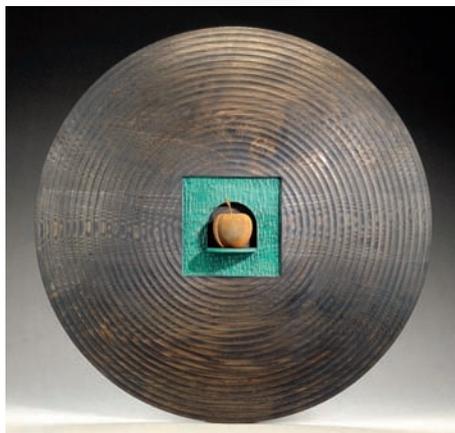
"The traffic signal boxes fascinated me since I was a child—their strange shape, sounds, and connections to the pavement," she says. This led to a series of lamps based on connector forms, which in turn inspired a piece titled *Barbells for Arnold*, inspired by seeing wheels laying around her studio and the movie *Pumping Iron*, featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Somehow, this in turn led to *Jelly Doughnut*, inspired by a lifetime of dieting.

The initial exercise—reinterpreting an element experienced in everyday life—ultimately proved a major influence on her life's work. "Household things, architecture, well-designed dishes, lighting—all interest me," she says. "Sometimes I think that, because life can be so complicated, there is much to be gained in the quiet, subtle detail in a form."

Other assignments at UCLA assisted her in expanding her aesthetic vocabulary. One concerned personal space and how to build an object to represent it, while in another the students designed a house to match how they woke and moved throughout the day.

"I later considered that many of these exercises were similar to what artists explored in conceptual and performance art," she says. "Today, I frequently give myself exercises."

Examples of how these exercises manifest as artworks includes *Tribute to Hans Coper* ("A central form and then how can I vary it—change the base, change the color.") and *Tower of Bowls*, which features 15 bowls, each fitting into a 4" × 4" space, each with a different design. ("At first I knew what



*Forbidden Fruit*, 2001,  
Ash, maple, polychromed, 27" × 5"

I wanted, then I wondered what else can I do, and finally I just played.")

### San Francisco Bay area

Having completed her master's degree, Saylan settled in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband Ed. She shared a studio with furniture makers John and Carolyn Grew Sheridan and needed income to pay her share of the rent.

"My large sculptures, though accepted at an ACC exhibition, at the Wood Turning Center, and in Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia, weren't exactly flying out the door," Saylan recalls. "My studio mates suggested that since I knew how to turn, I might make some things that might sell. I had created the rice bowl set and began to explore bowl forms."

Saylan became increasingly aware of the studio woodturning movement, attending woodturning conferences and meeting Dale Nish, Alan Stirt,

Albert LeCoff, and Stephen Hogbin. She began to focus on smaller pieces, including rice bowls and sushi trays as limited production items. Having traveled to Japan while in her twenties, she was interested in the tea ceremony and Japanese ceramics. This interest led her to study ceramic publications, as a means of improving her forms.

"I started working with multiples because frankly, I thought it was a way to help people see differences," she says. "They are like families, you can see their connections but they are also separate. I did a bunch of experiments with the same form, changing texture and color and how that would change the whole nature of the piece."

The resulting works were exhibited at a new breed of craft shows appearing across the country, exposing the public to work by contemporary craft artists. "Doing the craft shows exposed me to a lot of different work and ideas," Saylan recalls. "Mel and Mark Lindquist, David Ellsworth, and Michelle Holzapfel did these shows."

She also began teaching furniture design at the University of California. "In my furniture class, I forced students to sit through a lot of history," ▶



*Service for Two*, early 1980s, Satinwood, walnut, acrylic, dye, 14" × 9" × 9" (cabinet)

Photo: Hap Sakwa

Photo: Diane Paetys

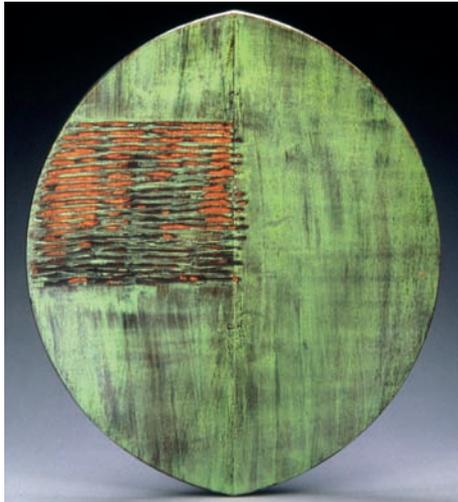


Photo: Hap Sakwa

*Vessel, 2002, Mahogany, milk paint, 21" × 18" × 2"*

she says. "We did both team design and individual items. I made them draw and even team draw. Things happen in collaboration that you might not think of on your own."

It was during this period that she met John Kelsey, Albert LeCoff, and Stephen Hogbin. She also searched out women furniture makers, including Gail Fredell and Wendy Maruyama.

### Residency in England

In 1990, Saylan was selected for a residency at the Lakes District in England, where she also taught at the Rufford County Crafts Centre and Thwaites School. The experience made clear to her the effect of environment. While she had been working in an industrial area in Berkeley, she now found herself driving past the country homes of John Ruskin and Beatrix Potter.

"The textures, colors, and architecture were so different," she recalled. "Beautiful dry-stone walls with ferns growing in the crevices. The crafts residency was in Grizdale Sculpture Park, a place with nine miles of sculpture trails. I needed a map to be able to locate them. I took many a lunchtime walk looking for them."

Saylan wanted to extend her stay in England and soak it all in. Initially

intimidated by the English turners, she focused on mastering the use of the gouge. This mastery of technical skills led to greater ease with her materials and permitted a looser style and a sense that works could be left rough. Soon after, the colors and surfaces in her work changed.

Moving home, Saylan and her husband relocated, moving into a home adjacent to a salt marsh, where she could watch the patterns left by the tides and water birds. "Environment has always affected my work and living next to a salt marsh with its movement and patterns is reflected on my surfaces," she says. Interpretation of these images from nature was driven by both her experience of wood as a material and her interest in modern painting.

### Fits and starts

Looking back, Saylan sees her career has been plagued with fits and starts, largely caused by illness on the part of herself and her husband Ed, who lived with heart disease for two decades. For Saylan, a bout with arthritis of the spine caused her to set aside her work for years, though she took the time to improve upon her drawing skills. Eventually, she had surgery and was able to return to work.

"My doctor simply calls it medicine," she says. "I call it a miracle and I've been working ever since. Throughout my career, there have been times I'd lose two years but looking back, they just run together and seem insignificant."

Her own health issues led her to create narrative works that concerned home and health, including *Breakfast Tray* and *Tea Cup*. Exploring issues of strength, she created *An Apple a Day*, and a set of oversized dumbbells.

Today, Merryll lives and maintains a studio in Berkeley. Her current works concern functional objects, combined with autobiographical themes, as well as platter forms that reflect the influence of color field painters,

including an aunt, who encouraged Saylan's bold use of color. The platters, which also concern material and surface, are suggestive of manhole covers, recalling the student experience of basing works on objects she passes every day.

The importance of her work has become easier to view in retrospect. "Along with Stephen Hogbin, Merryll was an early practitioner of the contemporary artist's approach to woodturning, wherein she would explore an idea rather than a wood species or vessel silhouette or useful function," notes John Kelsey. "She used the lathe almost incidentally, as a mechanism for solidifying her ideas. She made lots of things that didn't look like other people's turnings, which caused some to think and experiment for themselves."

Saylan has seen the field of woodturning grow and change over the decades.

"There is a big move toward other issues—people talk more about inspiration and what they



Photo: Hap Sakwa

*Tower of Bowls, 2001, Various woods, polychromed, 77" × 17" × 15"*



Photo: Hap Sakwa

*An Apple a Day*, 2001, Maple, 5" × 4" × 25"

were trying to say or do," Saylan says. "There is much more acceptance of other kinds of work."

As for the way her work fits in the field of woodturning, Saylan points to the period of time when she began working, when designer-craftsmen associations were in vogue. "I thought of all these things as cross media," she offers. "Work progresses when you're making. First you can't get started, then you do, and then the ideas come and you want to try this, and then that."

Albert LeCoff, founder and executive director of the Wood Turning Center, recalls the early impression Saylan made on the field of woodturning, "Merryll's entries in the 1981 Turned Object Show were *Barbells for Arnold* and *Jelly Doughnut*. For me, these pieces were a welcome addition to the wooden vessels and bowls that predominated the exhibition. Merryll's fellow participants questioned her use of plain wood and red acrylic. Jurors David Ellsworth and Rude Osolnik awarded *Jelly Doughnut* a Merit Award. This piece created a lot of discussion during the exhibit. It seemed like a fish out of water. I

experienced great delight in Merryll's successful use of humor and avant-garde materials."

Historically, artists are viewed within the context of their genre. Art critic Calvin Tomkins once noted, "At a certain point during the 1970s, it suddenly occurred to me that half the interesting new artists in America were women. This was such a startling realization—nothing like it had ever happened in the history of art." Saylan's entry into the art world was well-timed, even if she was ahead of her time in pursuing woodturning. If she had been promoted within the context of contemporary art, she would have fit well into the Feminist Art Movement led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who believed that "the personal is the political" and inspired women artists to create work from their experiences as women. Saylan's use of tea bowls, plates, and cups are more subtle, though. They are objects that come from and are returned to the kitchen, the historic domain of women.

Ultimately, Merryll Saylan's accomplishment has been in bridging the fields of contemporary art, woodturning, and design. Remaining true to



Photo: Tony Boase

*Tea Cup*, 1997, Box elder, paint, 6" × 6" × 6"

herself and unconcerned with fitting firmly in any genre, she continues to revisit early ideas, while evolving them.

"When I was in school, we used to wonder how Sam Maloof or Bob Stocksdale could work on the same thing for years and years," she says. "Today, I look at my work and see the continuum. Time flies when you're having fun." ■

*Kevin Wallace is Director of the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts in Ojai, California ([www.beatricewood.com](http://www.beatricewood.com)). He has authored and co-authored a number of books on woodturning, including *New Masters of Woodturning: Expanding the Boundaries of Wood Art* (with Terry Martin).*