

Michael Peterson

2022 POP Merit Award Recipient

Photos courtesy of Jean Peterson, unless otherwise noted.

The AAW's Professional Outreach Program (POP) grants the Merit Award to individuals who have shown exceptional development in their careers as artists and whose artworks have directly influenced or had a significant impact on other artists within the field of woodturning. This year, this prestigious award goes to Michael Peterson.

Watching someone grow creatively is one of the great benefits of hanging out in the art-and-craft world for nearly forty years. I first met Michael Peterson when he was an assistant in my class at Arrowmont in 1988. At that time, he was experimenting with making hollow forms with an emphasis on natural-edge designs, using madrone burl, which, as many of us know, changes shape once turned as a result of the extreme tension within the fibers. It was clear that Michael had the technical and design skills to grow in numerous directions. When I see someone begin to make these creative spurts, I can only guess how long it will take for them to find their true voice. The real thrill is when they begin to balance the growth of technique with the power of aesthetic intuition and come up with what appears to be a giant leap in their work, rarely knowing where they're headed when they begin, or if there will be a safe landing with their ideas once manifested. It's always a good question: Do they even



recognize this shift when it's happening? Possibly. Everyone's different. And that's the beauty of making art for the "self" first, all of which helps to define one's personal path, which includes the courage to take that first step.

If we look at Michael Peterson's evolution—from his early hollow forms to his present stacked forms—it is clear he has not only mastered his use of the chainsaw, he has engaged the unique complexities of his materials to a point where *change* is a necessary, integral part of the process. Put simply, madrone burl *moves*,

not only after the work is completed, but also while it is being cut. The ultimate goal remains: How does one predict this movement during the making process such that it supports the original idea? Or does this change actually help define the original idea as the material evolves? In either case, Michael has a wickedly powerful sense of magic that I'm sure a lot of other makers would like to tap into.

I also love how Michael's stacked pieces challenge our understanding of the term *beauty* in vessel design, especially since these new forms—at once

conceptualized vessels as well as sculpture—border on architecture. Imagine the wonder of living in a full-sized structure where every surface appears to be carved instead of pre-fabricated; this is exactly what Michael is doing in exposing surfaces cut with a chainsaw.

It will likely take time to develop an adequate language suitable to accurately reference this body of work. In the meantime, we can simply enjoy the wonder of its existence and how each of us interprets the beauty through our own life experiences.

—David Ellsworth, POP Committee

Joe Seltzer, Wood Art Collector

I first met Michael Peterson in the 1980s. In those early years, Michael was primarily making hollow forms in native American pot shapes. What was distinctive about his work was that he used mostly burls—Western maple, madrone, and black locust—and created an opening in the pot with a natural edge. His shapes often incorporated natural voids at the widest part of the vessel. After admiring these for many years, I acquired one from the Irving Lipton collection in 2013, *White Stone Desert III*. The natural void extends about 270 degrees around the piece.

But I do get ahead of my story. In 1991, I visited Michael and his wife Jean at their home, along the Washington coast north of Seattle. They were renting a large but basically one-room cabin. Michael had set up a lathe outdoors, under a tarp, and he was making some of the best turnings in the world there. A second distinctive aspect of his work was his attention to the surface of the piece. I distinctly remember he had just finished some pieces and had them sitting in the sun on his front steps. I thought it was a mistake to leave them in the sun, but he explained that he was trying for a particular surface look. He also used

pigment to achieve the color and very organic feel to these items in what he called his *Stones* series.

I really wanted to acquire a piece of Michael's work and looked at several pieces set on shelves in the cabin. I found a small, egg-shaped piece that was open at one end. Michael said, "It isn't finished. It has a hole in it." I couldn't see the hole until I looked through the piece and saw a little sliver of light. From the outside, it was a very small void in the center of a burl eye. I said I didn't mind the hole, but Michael got some sandpaper and began working as we were talking. After a while, he got some wax, rubbed it in his hands, and then gently rubbed the piece, which made the grain suddenly stand out. I told Michael I wanted to buy the piece, and he quoted a very reasonable price.

Several years later, Michael and Jean moved to Lopez Island off the coast of northern Washington. In this new setting, his work gradually changed. He did more pieces that looked like the stones and shells you could find on a nearby beach. He also did more carving and began using a chainsaw to create "boxes" that fit together into what Michael called his *Coastal Stack* series. These also incorporate the attention to detail in the surface treatment and a very organic feel.

I consider Michael Peterson to be one of the finest wood artists of his generation. ▶



Untitled maple burl vessels, 1983-1985



White Stone Desert III, 1988, Maple burl (bleached), 5" x 9" (13cm x 23cm)

Photo: Joe Seltzer



Untitled, 1991, Madrone burl, 3" x 6" x 2¾" (8cm x 15cm x 7cm)

Photo: Joe Seltzer

Albert LeCoff, Executive Director Emeritus and Co-Founder, The Center for Art in Wood

Michael Peterson's extraordinary work became known to me in 1988, when he was accepted to the Wood Turning Center's International Lathe-Turned Objects Show (ITOS). I was the coordinating curator and executive director of the Center (now the Center for Art in Wood). Michael's entry, *White Stone Desert*, was turned with a shoulder that included the natural burl surface of the wood. This shoulder set him apart from other turners of the time and reflected his love of his environmental surroundings, specifically the upper elevations of mountain ranges. The piece was bleached and sandblasted, which stood out against other work at the time, although James Prestini had sandblasted pieces as early as 1933. Much of Michael's work reflects his deep love of and inspiration from nature, often credited as part of life with his beloved wife, Jean, on an isolated island off the northwest coast of the U.S.

Michael evolved into a master sculptor, utilizing hollow turning, bleaching, sandblasting, and chainsawing. In 2006, he was among a small group selected by guest curator Mark Richard Leach for the Craft Alliance of St. Louis,



White Stone Desert, 1987, Maple burl (sandblasted and bleached), 8" x 14" (20cm x 36cm)

Collection of John and Robyn Horn

Missouri, and the Center's *WOOD NOW* exhibit. Michael's *Earth and Stone Series III* sculpture featured his beloved hand-size stones as part of an experimental landscape series, which he chainsawed to hollow out the madrone burl. In the catalog for this show, Michael said of this series, "They explore the potential of green material through a subtractive approach to sculpture. This approach allows me the contemplative nature of direct carving along with experiencing the dynamic transformation made by the material as it grows from the geometric into the organic."

By 2010, Michael was featured in a major retrospective, *Michael Peterson: Evolution/Revolution*, organized by

the Bellevue Art Museum (Bellevue, Washington). Curators Michael Monroe and Stefano Catalani also created a powerful, large-format book to feature the evolution of Michael's work. This set up the Wood Turning Center to take the exhibition and feature Michael's work on the East Coast from November 2010 to February 2011. This also gave me an opportunity to present Michael's work to curators at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Once they reviewed the work, the museum purchased a large, multifaceted stack. Michael and Jean traveled to Philadelphia for the formal acceptance ceremony at the Center, a very happy occasion for all, and a major accomplishment of my career.



Earth and Stone Series III, 2006, Madrone burl and blackwood (sawn, carved, and pigmented), 9" x 34" x 10" (23cm x 86cm x 25cm)

Elisabeth Agro, The Nancy M. McNeil Curator of American Modern and Contemporary Crafts and Decorative Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art

My relationship with this talented artist began in 2010, when Bellevue Art Museum's *Michael Peterson: Evolution/Revolution* exhibition traveled to the Wood Turning Center in Philadelphia (now the Center for Art in Wood), giving me the opportunity to see the full range of Michael's output, including his larger sculptural explorations. Leading up to the exhibition, conversations with Michael were frequent and wide-ranging in subject; I found them extremely meaningful. Those who know him will agree, he is a kind, humble, and peaceful human being. What I was unprepared for was the visceral response I had when encountering Michael's work directly. His sculptural work is strong and singular within the field; it personifies the man. *Coastal Stack V* (2008) was the latest example in his *Coastal Stack* series on view in the exhibit; I was drawn to it by its sheer beauty, impressive volume, and mastery, but also its ability to transport the viewer emotionally. Purchased directly from the show for Philadelphia Museum of Art, it became an important teaching tool about contemporary craft and woodturning's trajectory in the recognizable blur that was stirring within contemporary art in the early 2000s.

Michael took up the chainsaw in 1994; his work departed from turned vessels to double-form sculpture, piled and stacked assemblages, and monolithic work either on pedestals or mounted on the wall. It is hallmarked by his returning interest in solids, voids, and orifices, created to engage the viewer's eye to both plane and space. Michael began to address formal issues of support and position in his work. His sculptures became infused with issues of ecology,



Photo courtesy of Bellevue Art Museum, Rex Rystedt, 2011

Coastal Stack V, 2008, Madrone burl (carved, sandblasted, bleached, and pigmented), 46" x 34" x 30" (117cm x 86cm x 76cm)

Collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Leonard and Norma Klorfine Foundation Endowed Fund for Modern and Contemporary Craft and Windgate Charitable Foundation, 2010-192-1a--q

animism, the figure, and preservation of wildlife habitat.

In *Coastal Stack V*, Michael combines twelve hollow blocks and a stylized object into one form stacked like a cairn on a mountain summit. Recalling the atmospheric and geographical features of the Pacific Northwest coast, *Coastal Stack V* reflects the tranquil and simple life that Michael leads on isolated Lopez Island, in the San Juan Islands, Washington. Influenced by the effects of wind, water, sand, and sun, he observed of how nature and its geological processes took effect on the shaping of a tree's growth or the eroding of color and surfaces of rocks on the coastline. Aligned with these natural processes,

Peterson explores modulations of light and subtle arrangements of color and tonal values in his work. *Coastal Stack V* is the perfect marriage of these surface modulations and textures, with forms that are skillfully stacked and balanced. When *Coastal Stack V* was acquired by the museum in 2010, it acknowledged contemporary practices in sculpture that pushed the boundaries beyond the wood-turned vessel of past decades, a pivotal moment for the field of wood art and contemporary craft, writ large. It changed the conversation about the field itself, both within and outside the walls of my institution. In retrospect, it was a powerful moment, one that I am honored to have made happen. ►

**Sarah Myerscough,
Managing Director,
Sarah Myerscough
Gallery, London**

I first encountered the sculptural work of Michael Peterson at SOFA Chicago in 2012, and never had I seen contemporary craft look so dynamic and uncompromising. The piece, *Coastal Stack VI*, instantly reminded me of the monumental steel sculptures of Richard Serra combined with the compositional complexity of a piece by Anthony Caro, artists I greatly admire. I read that *Coastal Stack VI* was made of madrone wood and that added another layer of intrigue. This species is native to the western coastal area of North America and is apparently disregarded by industry, as it is considered too brittle and impractical. Yet, in Peterson's hands, it revealed such a munificent palette of rich character, tonal patina, and organic form that it took my breath away. This voluminous piece spoke of the difficult yet potentially



Coastal Stack VI,
2010, Madrone burl
(carved, sandblasted,
and pigmented),
24" x 34" x 10½"
(61cm x 86cm x 27cm)

harmonious relationship between nature and humanity through the artist's hand—defiant and exquisitely constructed with a poetic nuance and, it was clear to see, an exhausting process of crafted brilliance.

The process of making, I later discovered, was physically demanding. Huge madrone burls are chainsawed into roughly hewn geometric forms, which are subsequently dried to find their own rhythm and organic

shape. Each section is then carefully and sometimes precariously placed to form the artist's larger sculptural composition, stacked and balanced with a delicate and thoughtful eye. These sections are precisely constructed and held together with tiny wooden pegs which reveal such thoughtful intent that it runs contrary to the rough textured surface and irregular structures.

It seems to me now that, standing in front of that wonderful piece in Chicago, such careful execution asked a lot from the viewer and relied on an element of knowingness, which felt like an undiscovered secret. I sensed the visual intelligence, the innovative creativity, the passion, the brilliance of making, and the love of material. I was humbled by it, and this emotive response continues every time I see a new work by Michael, as it travels across the Atlantic to our gallery in London.

His work is borne from the earth and speaks powerfully of place and the expansive landscape of the Pacific Northwest. It speaks of a commitment to the natural world, and even more intimately of home: Lopez Island, much loved by Michael and his wife Jean.

“ His work is borne from the earth and speaks powerfully of place and the expansive landscape of the Pacific Northwest. —Sarah Myerscough



Where it begins, a 3,300 lb. madrone burl.



Photo: Gregg Blomberg

Michael and Jean Peterson on Lopez Island, Washington.

Jen Padgett, Associate Curator, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

It has been my honor to get to know Michael Peterson at a key moment for Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, as we've been expanding our presentation of craft in exciting ways. We featured Michael's *Coastal Stack XV* (2017) in *Crafting America*, our first major exhibition presenting a broad picture of craft, co-curated by Glenn Adamson and me in 2021.

Michael exemplifies the dynamism of an artist in tune with his material. When looking at his work, you are deeply aware of the liveliness of the wood and his transformation of the organic material into something new and expressive. While many of craft's sources come from living organisms—soft tufts of cotton, pigments made from crushed insects, leather hides—Michael's approach to wood creates perhaps the most direct and vivid awareness of a material's prior life. By carving wood while it is still green, then allowing it to twist and distort according to its internal logic

before assembling the elements into complex compositions, Michael harnesses the wood's inherent nature to marvelous effect. In seeing his work and being made aware of the life and rhythm of the material, we can feel more present and alive ourselves. For me, that's the most you can ask from art—to make you feel alive.

Michael has a remarkable ability in explaining both his conceptual approach and process in approachable ways, even to someone (like me!) who will fully admit to being an outsider to the world of wood art. His generosity of expertise is truly a gift.

I'm thrilled *Coastal Stack XV* has joined the Crystal Bridges permanent collection as one of the first works acquired with our newly endowed Fund for Craft. As we grow our collection to include greater texture and variety through key acquisitions of craft, Michael's work is in the forefront of these developments. His sculpture speaks to themes central to the museum's story, especially the relationship between art and nature. We're excited about displaying *Coastal*



Coastal Stack XV, 2017, Madrone burl (carved and sandblasted), sumi ink, 32" x 24" x 24" (81cm x 61cm x 61cm)

Stack XV in the future with paintings, drawings, prints, and other objects in our collection to spark new visual and thematic connections. I know our visitors will be drawn to his work in our collection galleries, as they were in *Crafting America*, and I'm so appreciative of the opportunity to share Michael's vision and skill with our audiences.

Robyn Horn, Wood Artist and Collector

My husband John and I first met Michael Peterson at an AAW Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky (2006). Michael would always show up at the gatherings with little jewels wrapped up in his backpack, small turned and carved vessels that were incredible. John and I had just started collecting wood, and at the same time, I had started turning wood. It helps collectors to work with wood in order to understand the difficulty of executing what they see. It also helps them to adequately appreciate the work.

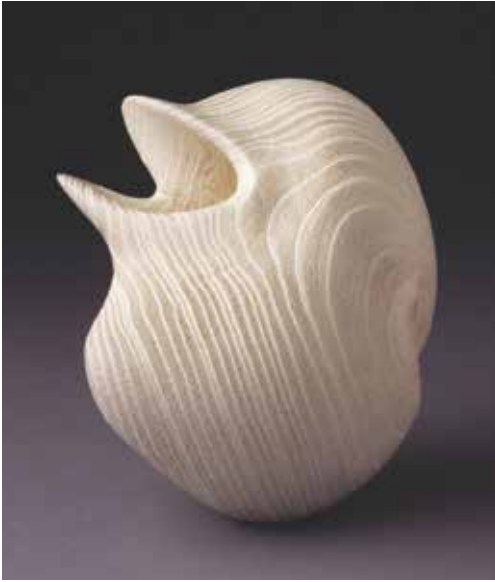
Michael would get fairly attached to his work and not be willing to sell

it on the spot. He wanted to refine it a bit more or buff it up a little more. Maybe he just wanted to sit and enjoy it for a while before sending it off. Whenever I would tell him I was interested in a piece, he would shake his head and tell me he would remember. A few months later, or sometimes a year later, the work would arrive at our doorstep. Each time, I was very glad I had told him I wanted it. I have never been disappointed in the results or the execution of any of his pieces.

Whenever you get to see a really talented artist evolve from small, exquisite hollow vessels to incredibly unique and masterfully executed sculptures, it's an extraordinary

thing. Michael has done just that over the last thirty years. I am continually impressed with his combinations of shapes, each one a little different and each stunning. His eye for form and the detailed texturing and coloring of his surfaces make a strong combination that has evolved into sculptures that astound the viewer while they ponder how these pieces could possibly have been made with a chainsaw. Having done some chainsaw carving myself, I am continually in awe of Michael's carving abilities, designs, and attention to detail. In addition to being a great artist, he is a good friend. He is truly deserving of this POP Merit Award, and I commend the AAW for selecting him. ▶

More Works by Michael Peterson



Bird, 1994, Locust burl (turned, carved, sandblasted, and bleached), 4" x 4" (10cm x 10cm)

Collection of Jane and Arthur Mason



Berg, 2013, Madrone burl (carved, sandblasted, and bleached), 21" x 27" x 13" (53cm x 69cm x 33cm)



Photo courtesy of Bellevue Art Museum

Coastal Stack III, 2007, Madrone burl (carved, sandblasted, bleached, and pigmented), 21" x 36" x 11" (53cm x 91cm x 28cm)

Collection of Jon and Diana Sebaly



New Terrain, 2016, Madrone burl (carved, sandblasted, and bleached), 22" x 15" x 13" (56cm x 38cm x 33cm)

Blocked Hollowed Split, 2017, Madrone burl
(carved, sandblasted, and bleached),
25½" × 27" × 7" (65cm × 69cm × 18cm)



Coastal Stack XVII, 2019, Madrone burl (carved and sandblasted), sumi ink, 18" × 28" × 28"
(46cm × 71cm × 71cm)

Longhouse, 2019, Madrone burl (carved, sandblasted, and pigmented), 55" × 9" × 4½" (140cm × 23cm × 11cm)

