

## Wood Dreaming

An exhibition of Australian wood successfully promoting contemporary woodturning to a wider audience



Paul Tiernan, Rosewood Burl Bowl, 1997. Rosewood. 33 cm dia.

Twenty five years into the woodturning revival, this Cinderella craft is still often stereotyped by functional chair legs and chunky, polyurethane-caked grotesques sold at Sunday markets by aging hobbyists. The handful of professional contemporary turners producing for the gallery market have to struggle against misconceived ideas about what they do, plus a public obsession with functionality: "You're a woodturner! Look, I've got this broken chair...". The army of hobby turners are usually obsessed with technique, to the detriment of design and sensitivity—"And how do you sharpen your skew chisel then?" Even those who profess to some kind of awareness of the woodturning phenomenon frequently indulge in pseudo-redneck fantasies, seeing wood instead of art—"I got a burl like that up Manangatang way. It was so big..."

In the face of such insensitivity to their achievements, some of the good turners have simply withdrawn into their workshops, hoping the world will beat a path to their door. Others have thrown their energies into events organised by the hobby turner fraternity in the forlorn hope that their micro-slice of fame will filter out to the wider world. A very few have shown some awareness of a more sophisticated market and promoted themselves through exhibitions and publications.

It was the need to promote contemporary woodturning to a wider audience that led to this touring exhibition. The first *Wood Dreaming* exhibition was held at the Contemporary Art and Design Gallery in Brisbane in May, 1996. For the first time, it brought together work by many of the best turners from every state in Australia and inspired an offer of support for a state-wide tour from Arts Queensland. By 1997, with last-minute help from the private sector, it was on the road to nine Queensland venues—crated, catalogued and demonstrably successful. It was a short step to obtaining funding from Visions Australia for a national tour. Now the exhibition is scheduled to visit every state in Australia, travelling until September 1999 under the auspices of the Regional Galleries Association of Queensland.

### Wood Dreaming tour dates:

**Dalby Regional Gallery (Qld) 1 - 31 Aug 1998**  
**Burnie Regional Art Gallery (Tas) 2 Oct - 1 Nov 1998**  
**Designs Australia, Melbourne 20 Nov - 20 Dec 1998**  
**Horsham Art Gallery (Vic) 5 Jan - 7 Feb 1999**  
**Latrobe Regional Art Gallery (Vic) 13 Feb - 14 Mar 1999**  
**Craft West, Perth 28 Mar - 30 Apr 1999**  
**Pemberton Pioneer Museum (WA) 9 May - 7 June 1999**  
**South Australian venue (tbc) 25 Jun - 6 Aug 1999**  
**Grafton Regional Gallery (NSW) 19 Aug - 26 Sept 1999**  
**Craft ACT, Canberra (tbc) 8 Oct - 7 Nov 1999**

It is particularly appropriate that this exhibition is visiting many regional centres. Many of the woodturners themselves live in remote areas among the trees that are both inspiration and resource. Also, interest is high in the regions where traditional timber industries are often being closed down due to environmental concerns and small-scale, intensive value adding to salvaged timber is an attractive alternative for some.

This is where the *Wood Dreaming* tour is strongest. It brings many people into galleries who would normally never attend exhibitions, partly because of the lure of wood, which is a universally appreciated medium, and partly because of the perceived accessibility of the craft. Aside from the pleasure it brings to the viewing public, there are so few advanced practitioners in Australia it would not take many newly inspired entrants to the field to return a handsome dividend on the tour. Until now, those who had such ambitions have largely relied on magazines for inspiration, but this exhibition sets a high benchmark for technique and quality of finish that can only be appreciated by close inspection of the real thing.

There are thirty three pieces in the exhibition, representing the work of twenty one turners. The spread of turners reflects the distribution of the Australian population, with seven of them coming from NSW, five from Victoria, three from Queensland, four from WA and two from Tasmania. Unfortunately there is no representative from SA.

And what does this show tell us about the state of contemporary Australian woodturning in the late 90s? Although the exhibition is intended to represent non-traditional turning, it could be said there is still an obsession with pseudo-functionality. In recent years the thin-walled hollow vessel has come to represent the highest achievement of turning skill and, not surprisingly, nearly half of the pieces fall into this category. Bowls and platters account for most of the remainder. This reflects both the functional heritage of the craft, fashions within the turning community and the need to sell to a public with preconceived notions about what is acceptable in wood.

There is no doubt that the appeal of many of these pieces depends on the sensitive use of wood grain, which is reasonable in a wood show. But are any

of the pieces breaking new ground? Victorian turner, Stephen Hughes, has collaborated with artist Margaret Salt to produce a turned and painted wall piece, *Dream Shield*, which defies the functional paradigm. For many, the use of colour on wood is sacrilege, but it has liberated Hughes and led him in completely new directions. Equally, patternist Liz Scobie has enhanced the work of her turner husband Neil with evocations of the bush and sea in *Waves of Fantasy*.

While much of the charm of turning is found in the simple curve, many turners are challenging the tyranny of the circular form by carving their pieces off the lathe. This is the kind of change that has taken woodturning far from its roots as a simple technique for the rapid production of furniture components. Now a piece is valued for how long it takes to make, not how quickly it can be churned out. This is most evident in such pieces as *Erosion Series* by Neil Scobie, *Coreolis* by Vaughn Richmond and *Rocking Bowl* by Andrew Gittoes.

In Australia it is little known that our better turners are respected throughout the world as among the best. They demonstrate an understanding of the medium and a quality of technique and finish that has taken many years to attain. It is to be hoped that in twenty years time this exhibition will be reflected on as a cathartic influence on the incipient turning community. It shows that woodturning can be both commercially and artistically successful, while maintaining wood supplies from salvaged residue. In the search for quintessential Australian craft, it is hard to find anything more Australian than this work.

**Terry Martin** became a woodturner in the mid 80s. Now living in Brisbane, he divides his time between writing about woodturning, curating exhibitions and producing his own work for galleries in the USA, Japan and Australia. In 1996 his first book on woodturning, *Wood Dreaming*, was published and is now in its second edition.

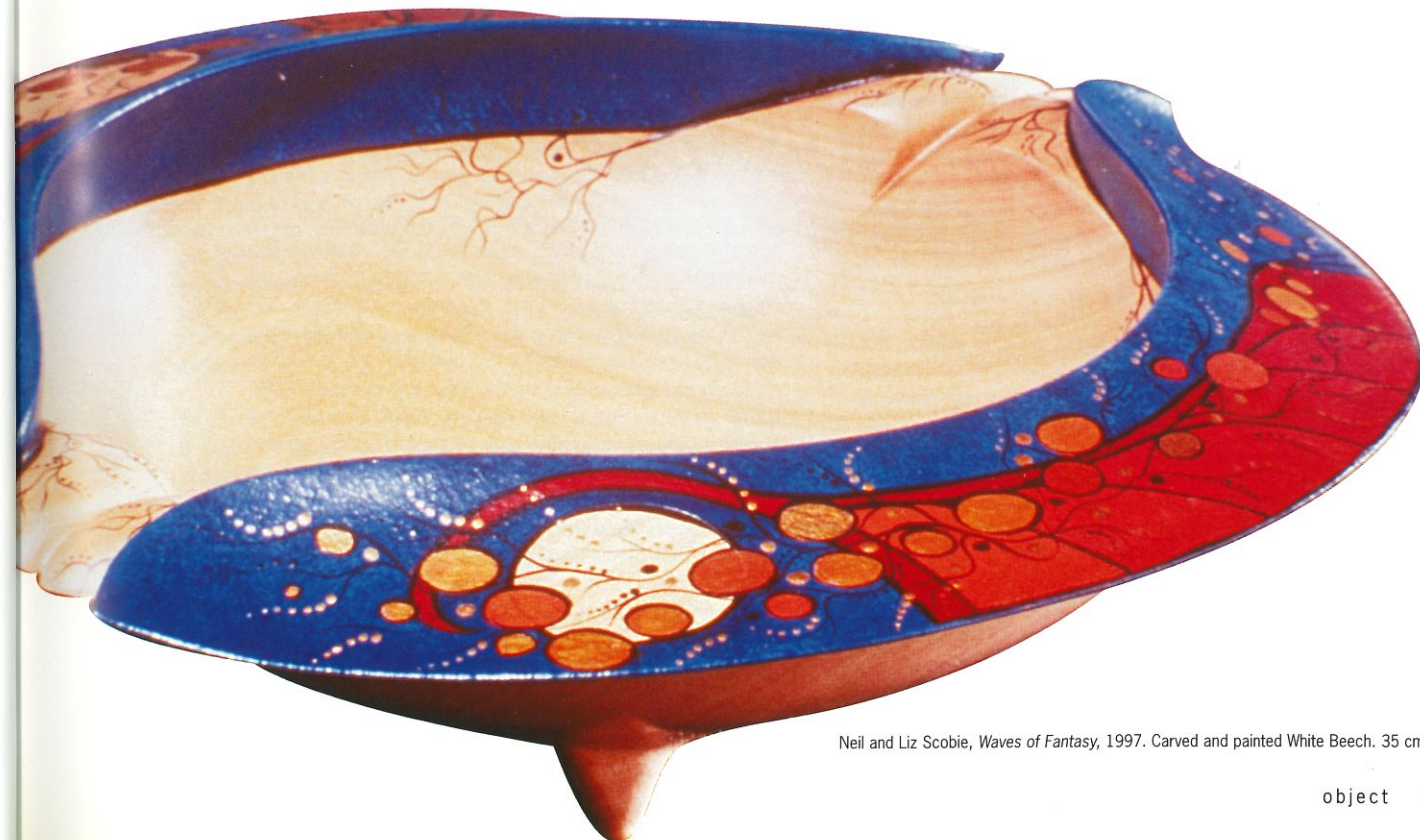
All photos by Russell Stokes.  
 Courtesy Terry Martin on behalf of the *Wood Dreaming* Tour.



Andrew Gittoes, *Rocking Bowl*, 1997. Jarrah and perspex. 30 cm dia.



Dean Malcolm, *Jarrah Vessel*, 1997. Jarrah. 32 cm dia.



Neil and Liz Scobie, *Waves of Fantasy*, 1997. Carved and painted White Beech. 35 cm dia.