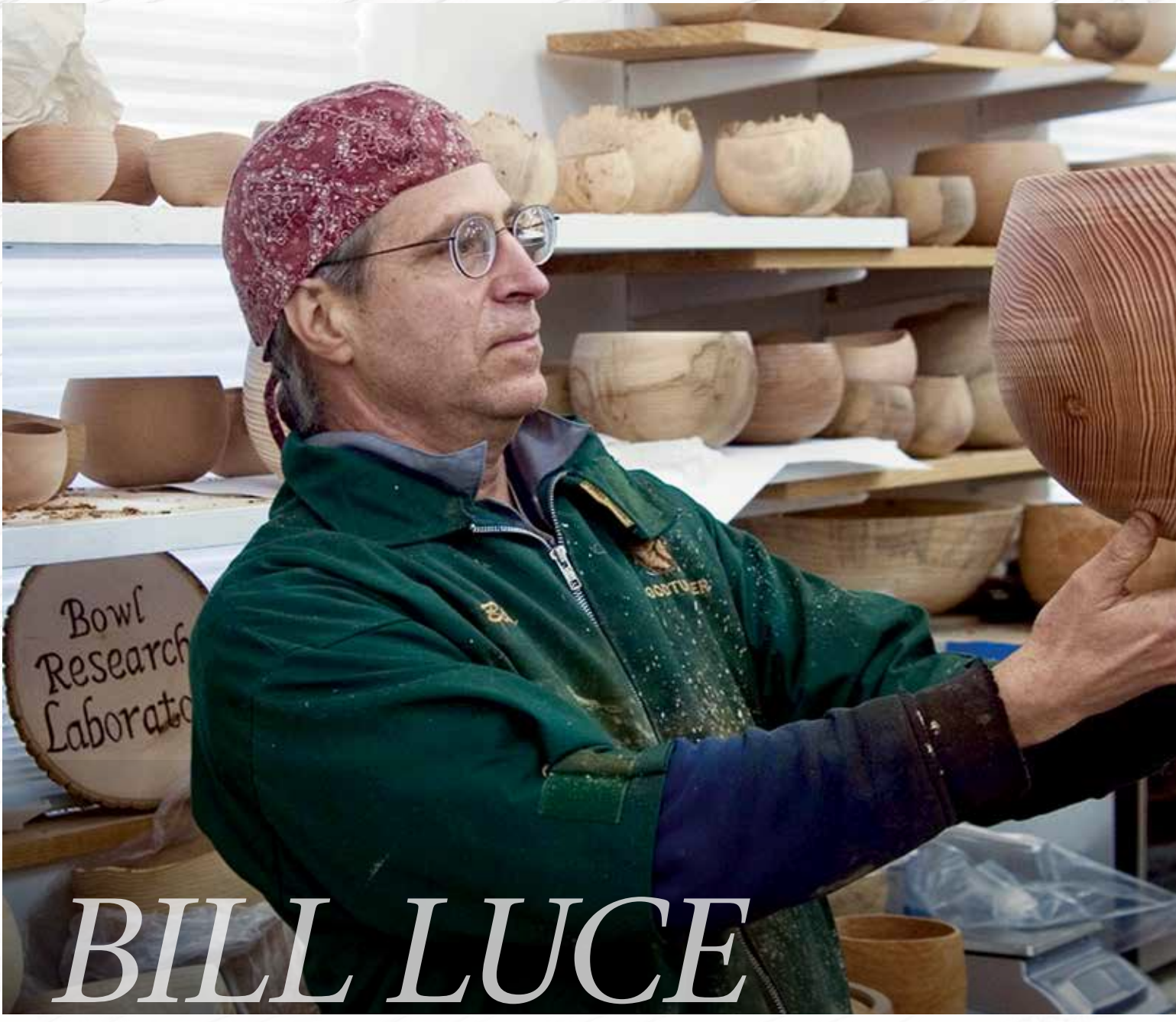

BILL LUCE

THE QUIET POWER OF UNDERSTATED FORM

Malcolm Zander

Photos by Bill Luce unless otherwise noted.


Photo: William Edwards

A personal pursuit

Bill Luce had been invited to demonstrate at the 25th anniversary Utah symposium in 2004—his first ever symposium as a demonstrator. He had two topics: "Turning a Round-Bottomed Bowl" and "Bowl Design: Pursuit of Form." For the second topic, he brought a series of about ten bowls, holding them up in sequence and asking the audience for comments. Each looked a little better than the previous one. He put the last and best one, made from monkey puzzle wood, on a glass sheet, and seemingly one or two atoms of wood touched the surface. Bill stated that it had taken him 4,000 bowls to achieve this form.

Wood artist Ron Gerton was in the audience and thought, "Wow, that is surprisingly beautiful. I have to meet this guy." After the session, he sought out Bill, who invited Ron to see another bowl in the instant gallery. It was 15" (38cm) in diameter, also of monkey puzzle wood, larger than the first, with a price on it. Ron offered to buy it, but Bill said he had never sold anything at a symposium and was not sure if he wanted to sell it. Ron insisted, so Bill then went to his car and brought back a third bowl in the same wood, intermediate in size. Ron offered to buy all three. Bill was speechless but finally agreed.

At the end of the symposium, Bill asked if he could buy back the three bowls. Ron demurred but agreed to bring them to Bill's house so that they could at least be photographed. He had a good visit, toured the shop, and came to the garage. It was lined with shelves and all 3,999 of the not-quite-perfect bowls were there. Bill had not been exaggerating. Ron had never seen so many bowls together in his life. Bill explained that he hadn't sold any of them because they were not good enough.

Early years to retirement

Bill Luce was a meticulous, innovative, and highly talented woodturner. The fifth of twelve children, he was born in 1952 in Stuttgart, Germany, where his father was stationed with the U.S. military. Shortly afterwards the family returned to America and spent seven years in Baltimore, and then in 1959 moved to Okinawa, Japan. The six years in Okinawa left a lasting impression on Bill, which surfaced many years later in his aesthetic views and approach to wood art.

High school was in Spokane, Washington. Bill was an excellent student. After graduating, he spent a couple of years in college, then worked in a mine and laid railroad tracks to earn money to support his musical interests. For about ten years, he played multiple instruments with several musician friends (saxophone, banjo, guitar, fiddle, vibraphone, piano) but eventually decided he was "never good enough" to do so professionally and enrolled in Western Washington University to study education. He had nearly completed the degree when he switched into math and computing science. He graduated, married his girlfriend Monica, and subsequently joined Microsoft as a systems programmer, where he worked until an illness led to his retirement in 1996.

Upon retirement Bill considered woodworking and became fascinated with hand planes while building a workbench. He acquired many. One, an antique, had a broken knob, so he decided to restore it and make a new knob. Knowing nothing of woodturning, he bought a small lathe and used a flat-bladed Stanley wood chisel to try turning a knob. It did not go well. That was the point at which Bill transitioned from planes to lathes.

A turning career

The woodturning journey began in 1997 in the local library with videotapes and books, especially those by Richard Raffan, whose emphasis on form had a powerful effect on Bill. Neighbor Bonnie Klein, an accomplished woodturner, helped Bill turn a bowl in his garage and mentored him. He discovered the AAW, took a ▸

Untitled Bowls, 2004, Monkey puzzle, Largest: 9" × 15" (23cm × 38cm)

Bill in his booth at the Bellevue Arts Fair.

course at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts with David Ellsworth, and built a 2400-square-foot workshop on his Renton, Washington, property. He showed his turnings at the Bellevue Arts Fair for two or three years, but it was not the right venue for him—his work was priced too high.

He did some public demonstrations, notably a "Mutt and Jeff" show with good friend and woodturner Dave Schweitzer. For a club audience, the two of them worked simultaneously on turning a log from opposite ends. It was great fun.

In the early 2000s, Bonnie Klein brought Richard Raffan to visit. She wanted him to persuade Bill to get his work into public view. Richard writes, "He had hundreds of wonderful pieces in a storeroom, none of which he deemed good enough to go on display anywhere. Most were way better in all respects than anything I've seen in instant galleries at numerous symposiums."

Bill and Richard corresponded. A website went up. Bill wrote to Richard, "Thanks for looking at my website. It does seem that nobody is successfully selling any kind of 'art' online. I believe my work is of the nature that one must touch and hold the work to eventually want to own it. I am hoping to use the site as a sort of online business card, although I am still struggling with whether or not my woodturning voice will ever have something significant to say." Bill's goals were to have his work recognized and appreciated, to have photos of his work in books, and to be an invited artist to exhibitions. Two years later, he had accomplished all of those goals. On his website, he summarized his ethos:

I spent much of my formative years living on the island of Okinawa, now part of Japan. Many years later, well after I had begun turning bowls, I realized that I had long-forgotten yet vivid memories of certain aspects of that culture that continue to influence me today. I remember as a young boy examining in detail ceremonial lacquered wooden bowls, admiring their simple excellence and the wonderful way they felt so natural in the hand. These many years later I have found welling up in me the passion to create objects that have a similar quiet power both when viewed and held. The shapes I am drawn to are not the same as those first bowls in my memory, but my overriding zeal for excellence at all costs may be due in part to those Ryukyuuan craftsmen who dedicated their lives to making the absolute best vessels possible.

A screenshot from a video shows Dave Schweitzer (left) and Bill Luce doing their "Mutt and Jeff" show for the Woodturners of Olympia, c. 2006.

Bill had been a software engineer/computer scientist at Microsoft, and that scientific approach carried over into everything he did, including his photography. He owned thousands of dollars in cameras. Any time he bought a new lens he would set up a tripod and shoot three images of a complex pattern of lines and fonts at a fixed distance; he would do this for every aperture. He then picked the best of the three and studied them to determine the best compromise for aperture and depth of field. (In Bill's language, there was no perfection, only compromise.)

> "The study of how small nuances in simple forms relate to the emotional impact of the piece is now my life's work." –Bill Luce

Bowls of all kinds

How does this meticulous attitude translate to bowls? Bill took a tree and studied its grain, its ring structure, the width of its rings, and the nature of the shapes it would produce. And from there he turned a bowl and studied the result. Then another, slightly different—maybe taller or more open or closed. From there another, slightly different again, until he had turned some two to three dozen bowls from that tree, each a progression toward the most satisfying compromise. He would hold a bowl in his hand and evaluate it, then set it on a flat surface and view it again. Look high, get down low. Pick it up again. Evaluate it some more. Examine the rim—if the rim fails, the entire bowl is lost. Look at the belly, too high or low and it's unbalanced. What about the texture? Bill spoke about the textures and how they interacted with the viewer's experience; it was very important to him that people not only see, but also hold and feel the mass and the tactile balance in the hand. His goal was to create vessels with the greatest emotional impact on the participant/viewer.

Bill was always exploring. He could chuck a half log onto the lathe and turn an amazing bowl in twenty minutes. For him, it was just an exercise in getting to know that particular tree. Beyond the 10,000 pieces he left behind after his death, another 3,000 to 5,000 rejects were tossed holus-bowlus into the trees on the three-acre Renton property. He called it "feeding the woods." A visitor to the Renton shop said at the end of his visit, "This is not a woodturning shop. It's a bowl research laboratory."

There was a whole study of turnings in Douglas fir that started very flat and then curved up ever so slightly, then more so. Bill was looking to see when one crossed the threshold from a platter to what might be called a bowl. Where is the transition point? And taking it further, where is the transition from a bowl to a hollow form? *Open and Closed* was part of this series.

The serenely simple *Selene*, named after the Greek goddess of the moon, was also an exploration. After Bill died, his good friend William Edwards and Monica packed up Bill's huge inventory and found the lineage of *Selene*. It was very clear. There were maybe ten bowls from one tree, each slightly different. The bead would move up or down, the opening more or less closed, each a progression leading up to *Selene*. ▸

Bill Luce's *Open and Closed* series (2007, Douglas fir) explored the distinctions between platters and bowls.

Selene, 2002, Holly, 4¾" × 6½" (12cm × 17cm)

Reunion (*Strata* series), 2007, Douglas fir

Untitled Natural-Edge Bowl, 2005, Curly maple (bleached), 6" × 10" (15cm × 25cm)

Selene is a classic example of what Bill wrote on his website:

My personal mission statement: "The exploration of the quiet power of understated form."

That passion is a major focus of my life, and I devote myself full-time to the various aspects of woodturning as an art form and a business. I am dedicated to the ongoing goal of expressing myself in shapes that are a balance of harmony and tension. The harmony in the form gives a sense of comfort or pleasure while some tension is needed to add interest and surprise. The study of how small nuances in simple forms relate to the emotional impact of the piece is now my life's work.

Of all the pieces which Bill left, 90% were round-bottom bowls. He felt that this form can create a statement of elegance and refinement.

Bonnie's Bowl

One day when Bonnie Klein was touring Bill's shop, she spotted a finished, signed bowl in the gallery room. She picked it up and was drawn in. The form, the curve, the balance... it all spoke to her on a very emotional level. However, Bill would not sell it to her. He must have enjoyed it too much. The bowl was put in a show, and then about two years later, he went to Bonnie's house in Renton, handed it to her, and announced its title was *Bonnie's Bowl* and that it was meant to be with her. There were tears in his eyes—and in Bonnie's, too.

Square bowls

In a minimalist series, Bill explored square bowls and sometimes sandblasted them for texture. He wrote, "The shape contains a certain intrigue for me in the flatness of the partial rim, the straightness of the sides, the near rectangular outline of the bowl when viewed from above, the simple curve when viewed from the side, and the power of the grain running the long way in the bowl." This led to a series of unique variations on the square-bowl form.

Sales

Most of Bill's sales were at symposia. They were few. One of his contradictions was that while he wanted to show his best work, he had a very hard time letting it go. He would show a bowl in an instant gallery with a price on it, but when approached for a sale would often say, "No, no, I don't think so." He tried to buy back Ron Gerton's three monkey puzzle bowls several times, offering far more than the original price. When David Ellsworth asked to buy a bowl, Bill first checked with Monica as to whether he should. Those bowls that did meet his Olympian standards he preferred to keep for display in his own

Bonnie's Bowl, Madrone, 5" × 11" (13cm × 28cm)

gallery room. Given the enormous amount of research, development, time, and energy spent making a piece culminating in something like *Selene*, Bill's reluctance to part with it is perhaps not surprising. Consequently, his work was less widely known than it merited.

Wood

With Dave Schweitzer or William Edwards, Bill would find fallen trees listed on craigslist.org and then go out, maybe once a month, buck the trees, and load up to 4,000 lbs. of rounds into his trailer, custom-made with a large box in front to hold chainsaws and other gear.

Elm was a huge favorite, as was madrone. He turned some wet madrone burls that wrinkled and morphed into crumpled paper bags that he really enjoyed. His *Entropy* series is an example. ▸

Essence: #3, c. 2006, Douglas fir, colored rim, 4¼" × 13" × 8¼" (11cm × 33cm × 21cm)

Serie Facetta, 2011, Douglas fir, 8" × 14" × 10" (20cm × 36cm × 25cm)

Entropy series, 2006, Madrone, 4½" × 6" (11cm × 15cm)

Harvesting wood

Harvesting blocks from a Douglas fir tree. The blocks cut from it are meticulously planned, measured, and chainsawn.

Holly, laburnum, and black locust were also favorites—the grain in black locust was magical and the sapwood had a nice contrast. Fir came later; it had to have the right rings and no pitch pockets. All were candidates for wet-turning, though Bill did dry-turn some maple and madrone. To keep the wood wet, he stored it in log form or as half logs immersed in giant tubs of water or in one of several freezers. When turning wet bowls, he strove to control the drying using various methods—from storing them in plastic or wet shavings-filled paper bags to soaking the wood in alcohol to microwaving it. He also sometimes boiled his bowls.

Tools and equipment

For his gouges, Bill tried many different brands and steel types. He would grind them and, if the quality was not up to his standards, send them back. Those he really liked he stocked up by the case. He used a series of gouges with four or five different grind angles for taking out the interior of a bowl.

Bill had multiple chucks, as he did not like changing jaws. When he bought a new chuck, he'd true it on the lathe, tightening the jaws and turning them to ensure they ran true. Who else does this?

Bill had as many as forty chainsaws—electric, gas, hydraulic—and some of the largest one could buy, from dime-tip saws to monsters with a 5-foot (1.5m) bar. He had chainsaws in all different weights and brands, not because he was a collector but because he had to know the best compromise between weight, horsepower, and balance. He was meticulous with them. There were different widths and grinds of chains, which he maintained and kept in top form, super sharp, with an electric chainsaw sharpener. He always wore Kevlar chaps and a full-face mask and helmet any time he was cutting. He would talk to anybody about chainsaws—how many cc, what size chain to use, how long it would last, what you cut with it, and which in his view were good or bad. When D-Way Tools owner

Bill Luce, September 2008.

Photo: Richard Raffan

Many gouges!

Photo: William Edwards

Exploring sandblasting

(*Left*) Untitled Natural-Edge Bowl, 2010, Douglas fir (exterior textured by sandblasting), dye, 6¾" × 7¼" (17cm × 18cm)

Photo: Malcolm Zander

(*Right*) Untitled Bowl, 2009, Douglas Fir (both exterior and interior textured by sandblasting), dye, 5" × 6½" × 6" (13cm × 17cm × 15cm)

Photo: Malcolm Zander

Dave Schweitzer had a client with a chainsaw question, he referred that person to Bill, who would share his knowledge on the phone for hours at a time.

Sandblasting

In the early 2000s, Bill began experimenting with sandblasting to highlight grain patterns in Douglas fir. He found that he could abrade the softer growth rings and leave a very tactile surface texture. William Edwards recalls, "He would have you pick up a smooth bowl sanded out beyond 800 grit. Feel it, rub it, put it down, and then feel a sandblasted bowl about the same size. Feel the texture with your fingertips. Then go back to the first bowl and marvel at how dead it felt compared to the other."

Sometimes Bill would even texture the inside or rub dye into the grain to enhance the visual elements of texture and color.

Around 2004 to 2006, when French turner Pascal Oudet and Philadelphia-based turner Michael Brolly were independently experimenting with the same technique, Bill discovered that if he sandblasted further, the softer rings could be completely removed, leaving a skeletal form. This led to a series which he called *Bones of the Tree*. It was a painstaking process. The fine 180-grit glass or garnet beads made barely a dent in the wood. He had three sandblasting cabinets, so he could use different media at the same time, and it took up to twelve hours to finish a piece. Many did not survive. He had to take breaks for the cramps in his arms and legs. Ribs were created using blue painter's masking tape. He invested a tremendous amount of time, labor, and money into refining the art and did not give up his secrets lightly. When asked how he did it, he generally gave a smile and a non-committal answer.

Bones of the Tree series

Untitled Bowl (*Bones of the Tree* series), Douglas fir, sandblast-carved

Untitled Bowl (*Bones of the Tree* series), 2008, Douglas fir, sandblast-carved, 7" × 9½" × 8½" (18cm × 24cm × 22cm)

A blind visitor at the 2011 AAW Symposium in Saint Paul, Minnesota, explores one of Bill's skeletal pieces, an example of the tactile attraction of his sandblasted forms. Photographer Andi Wolfe commented, "I was intrigued about how delicate a touch this person used to explore the surface."

Photo: Andi Wolfe

More innovations—tubes

Bill turned and hollowed some tube forms on the lathe and then sandblasted them. Then one day he carved a mushroom with a chainsaw. It was an enjoyable experiment, so he thought to try chainsaws for hollowing, and his large tubes were born. Dave Schweitzer describes Bill taking a 6"- (15cm-) diameter alder log and plunge-cutting a 40" (102cm) bar straight down the log without coming through the sides, leaving a tube with walls of no more than 1" (25mm) thick. Dave made Bill some large calipers to measure wall thicknesses. Bill produced many such tubes, the goal being to create pieces inspired by the lathe but without using a lathe. Next, the artist in him kicked in, and Bill put a bend in the tubes and began to call them *Knees*.

Driven to make yet bigger tubes, Bill took even larger logs, and to hollow them he turned to hydraulic chainsaws (used by scuba divers to cut underwater piers). These have two long lines going back to a stationary engine running the hydraulics, which then turn the chain in the saw. All the noise came from the engine, housed in a shed 50 feet (15m) away. Bill ordered a custom saw with a five horsepower electric motor (quieter) and a hydraulic ▸

Turned and sandblasted tube

Skeleton Tube Series #2, 2010, Douglas fir, turned and sandblast-carved, 20½" × 5¼" (52cm × 13cm)

Chainsawn *Knees* and tubes

Bill Luce with one of his chainsawn *Knee* forms, Renton, Washington, 2010.

Photo: Malcolm Zander

Bill poses with his giant tubes cut from Douglas fir.

Photo: William Edwards

chain. With a very long bar and hydraulic holders, it was difficult to maneuver and had to be moved with a tractor, but it was much used. Once the forms were hollowed, the tube exteriors were carved.

One day Bill and William Edwards dragged a group of these tubes out onto the driveway, photographed them for fifteen minutes, and then put them all back away. He never sold one. The chainsawn tubes and the Knees were all an intentional and deliberate exploration of form.

Final days

In 2014, Bill and Monica decided to move from Renton to Gig Harbor, Washington, and bought a property in the middle of a forest. Bill built a 3,000-square-foot set of workshops. He had big plans—there was a turning area with a large lathe, a drying room, a kitchen, a photography room, a chainsaw room, and a gallery area with exactingly designed podiums and lighting to display his best work. In July 2015, as it neared completion, Richard Raffan came to visit. He observed, "One thing is for certain. Bill didn't believe in doing things by halves."

However, in 2016 tragedy struck. At the height of his powers, Bill had a horrific motorcycle accident and was severely incapacitated. The dream workshops were never used, and he never turned again. Six years later, on May 29, 2022, Bill Luce died. He once said (with characteristic humility) that he hoped to be at least a footnote in the history of woodturning. He was way more than that. He was a unique talent and an extraordinary artist. ■

The author is deeply grateful for information provided by William Edwards, Ron Gerton, Bonnie Klein, Monica Luce, Richard Raffan, and Dave Schweitzer. Their assistance was invaluable.

Malcolm Zander is a New Zealand-born wood artist living in Ottawa, Canada. For more, visit his website, malcolmzander.com.

Online Auction

In the April 2024 issue of *American Woodturner* (vol 39, no 2), we published an article about the Bill Luce Collaboration Project, where many of Bill's unfinished forms were distributed to selected artists worldwide to be completed in their own style. **An online auction of all of these collaborative works will be held on October 26, 2024**, with the AAW receiving 50% of the proceeds and the participating artists 50%. Many thanks to Monica Luce for her donation of Bill's work to this project. To learn more about the auction, visit auction.woodturner.org.