

# MICHELLE HOLZAPFEL

Albert B. LeCoff  
and Tina C. LeCoff

*Photos by David Holzapfel,  
unless otherwise noted.*

Michelle Holzapfel turning  
wood on her metal lathe,  
Vermont, 1985.

## 2021 POP Merit Award Recipient



**T**he AAW's Professional Outreach Program (POP) has awarded Michelle Holzapfel its prestigious Merit Award for 2021. Receiving the award delighted and surprised Michelle, who modestly quipped, "Why? I'm retired. I'm past the main part of my career." But her resume reveals an extensive legacy of over fifty museum and gallery exhibitions, thirty museum collections, and stacks of publications. In 2019, she was awarded the United States Artists Fellow in Craft. As a storyteller, technician, woodturner, and carver, she has entertained unusual ideas in wood art and has been able to manipulate her materials in remarkable and profound ways to convey strong, haunting messages. Her body of work—spanning five decades—is personal, story-driven, and beloved by viewers.

### **Early on the scene**

Michelle Holzapfel has spent her long career in wood art working

from her home studio, Applewoods Studio & Gallery, in Marlboro, Vermont. I (Albert) became aware of Michelle's work early in my career of studying, organizing, and promoting wood art through the Wood Turning Center (now The Center for Art in Wood). In 1981, Michelle applied to participate in my very first exhibition, *The First North American Turned Object Show*. Michelle's piece was a thin-walled, cherry-burl bowl with small natural holes retained in it.

Only a handful of women were turning wood in the 1970s. Although woodturning was largely dominated by men, Michelle had already launched a world of work, made from her soul, body, and hands. She presented booths of her work at craft shows from the late-1970s to the early 1990s. At events such as the American Craft Enterprise's (ACE) Craft Show, she was often asked when her husband would return to the booth

and talk about his work. Imagine their surprise when she revealed that *she* had created the entire body of work and could tell them about every inch of every piece.

Veteran wood artist Merryll Saylan remembers early shows, saying, "I first met Michelle and her husband David at an American Craft Show in the early 1980s. I was selling turned bowls and sculptures, David was selling furniture, and Michelle turned vessels. There were so few women in those days and I loved meeting them."

Michelle and David, a teacher and woodworker, started a business at their rural homestead to sell work along the busy highway past their property. Their first business name was Applewoods Tables and Treen. Michelle says, "There may have been some intermediate names, but the one we've been using for the last twenty years or so is Applewoods Studio & Gallery. Surrounding the



*Cherry Burl Bowl #1*, 1980, Cherry burl, 5½" × 8¼" (14cm × 21cm)

Albert and Tina LeCoff Collection

Photo: Mats Nordstrom



Michelle and David in their Gallery, 1985.

Photo: Peter Mauss

homestead in summer are acres of tall sunflowers and long bands of birch trees, the peaceful natural surroundings that nurtured much of Michelle's work.

### Art and technique

Their quiet, rural homestead facilitated Michelle's studio work while they raised their family. David was a full-time teacher and did his own woodworking on the weekends. He often cut big pieces of local wood for Michelle to work with. She roughed out her turned pieces on a metal lathe she inherited from her father. Like all metal lathes, it was equipped with a tool holder and carriage with slides to move the cutter on multiple axes. This is how she turned wood, rather than using a wood lathe and holding the tool by hand. Michelle's metal lathe was described in a 1982 issue of *Fine Woodworking*, and is now included in the digital archive she is creating to document her career.

David says Michelle has an uncanny ability to visualize forms in 3D. She often sketches an idea and then turns with that full vision

in mind. The vision, or story, is her motivation, and she masters her metal lathe to rough it out. Imagine the manual dexterity required to manipulate a cutter on a metal lathe, steering the tool on multiple axes simultaneously to make the cuts she wants. Then the piece is removed from the lathe for carving.

Inspiration comes not from unfamiliar commissions, but from her life—her

emotions, observations, and experiences—and the natural surroundings near her home. Michelle also sought to capture the history and anthropology she read about. She recounts as influences the life and growth forms of plants, including the practice of vegetable gardening, domestic family life, the photographs of Karl Blossfeldt, the illustrations of zoologist Ernst Haeckel, women's history, Roman and Greek ▶

## Thought Becomes Object



*Elemental Vase*, 1992, Cherry burl, 7" × 15" (18cm × 38cm)

Boston Museum of Fine Arts Collection, Gift of Carolyn J. and Robert C. Springborn

"In making *Elemental Vase*, I've taken some liberties with aspects of both of Eastern and Western thought. When I first encountered Chinese cosmology, I was immediately struck by its concept of five basic elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, water. In contrast to the foursquare structure of Western thought, this more circular concept mirrored the interiority of Eastern thought. This sense of fiveness I transposed onto the four traditional elements of the West—earth, air, fire, and water—by adding a fifth, wood. This piece suggests that wood is an embodiment of the other four elements. The figures on the surface are familiar mythological symbols: the Mermaid of water, the Dragon of fire, Zephyrus the west wind, the Adder with its ear to the earth, and the Green Man, who embodies the fusion of the tree with the human." —Michelle Holzapfel



(Left) Michelle creates patterns on her work using a pencil grinder.

(Right) Woven Birch Platter, 1984, White birch burl, 3" x 14" (8cm x 36cm)



mythology, the sewing arts, art histories of the world, everyday life, everything, and anything.

In modesty, she recalls, "I just wanted to make things and help the family. The selling takes energy, but it's just part of the deal." But it is clear she was also committed to her creativity. A friend recalls Michelle writing, "I'd hate to see the quirky, idiosyncratic bunch of people who work hard to make imaginative, beautiful, well-crafted objects in wood become tamed and domesticated by the powers of commerce."

### Beyond the lathe

Michelle's trajectory didn't stop at woodworking. Long after she began

turning, she embarked upon the Bachelor of Arts degree she had deferred as a wife and mother of two boys. By this time, she had created work in her home studio and sold it at craft fairs and through galleries. The Applewoods Studio & Gallery she ran with David provided lots of fodder for her curriculum. Michelle's first semester of credits was earned by presenting and dissecting the workings of their business. She realized her wood career had taught her documenting, bookkeeping, advertising, and taxes. Michelle says, "That semester was like getting an MBA in small business." To complete her degree, she read post-modernists, wrote for hours, and ultimately wrote

a history of her own life. Her college degree led her, ultimately, to her current work, including the creation of an online archive of her career.

### The respect of her peers

By participating in craft shows, exhibitions, and publications starting in the 1970s, Michelle met other makers, as well as collectors and curators, who learned about her technical mastery, her multi-faceted artistry, and her signature storytelling.

### David Ellsworth (wood artist, AAW co-founder)

"I first encountered Michelle Holzzapfel's work at the mid-1980s ACE



Cauliflower, 1982, Cherry burl, 5½" x 5½" x 6" (14cm x 14cm x 15cm)

David Ellsworth Collection



XL Screw Wall Necklace (in progress), 1995, Sugar maple, walnut, gold leaf, 12" x 12" x 96" (30cm x 30cm x 2.4m)

Collection of Ron Sackheim, XL Screw Corporation

Craft Shows in Baltimore. What I recall most were her turned and carved plates, where she had manipulated their surfaces, sculpted if you wish, that broke the definition of what a plate 'should be' into a feeling of, 'Wow, a functional plate that no longer functioned in the traditional sense.' As I watched her work evolve over the next few decades, it became clear that Michelle's art was to invent a language in wood at a time when most other woodworkers were focused on good design adjacent to good ideas. In effect, Michelle's work was a blend of both image and content. Her ideas became a manifest of expressions of ideas in a three-dimensional context: a 7' (2.1m) necklace not meant to be worn; a wooden pillow that defied being used; a wooden cauliflower that drew on humor—all personal expressions that caused the viewer to consider her creative mysteries, and caused artists to ask questions relative to their own ideas."

#### **Curt Theobald (wood artist)**

"The first piece I studied was a wooden bowl being cradled by carved oak leaves [*Oakleaf Bowl*, 1989]. The oak leaves appear to be holding, protecting, presenting, or offering up the bowl. Another work I remember is a wonderfully turned maple bowl sitting on what looked like a beautiful, embroidered pillow with tassels at the corners, complete with braiding surrounding the cushion. Upon closer examination, I discovered what I thought was a pillow was actually wood carved to resemble a pillow."

#### **Betty Scarpino (wood artist)**

"I first heard of Michelle through a 1982 article in *Fine Woodworking*. Discovering a contemporary woman woodworker/carver/artist/sculptor made a huge impression in my early career. She was a role model I could relate to. I saw her work frequently in museum exhibits, gallery shows, and magazine articles—



*Oakleaf Bowl*, 1989, Oak, 7¼" × 14½"  
(18cm × 37cm)

Museum of Fine Arts Boston Collection,  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William White Howells

*Cushioned Bowl 1*,  
1991, Sugar maple,  
7" × 12" × 12"  
(18cm × 30cm × 30cm)

Hajims Collection



always splendid and serving as a role model. The piece of hers I like the most is *Lockheart Vase*. Vessels are very much part of the turning field, yet there is so much potential for exploring ideas and concepts of what vessels represent, which is still only beginning to happen in the turning field. With *Lockheart*, Michelle combines the concept of a wooden vessel with human hearts, both containing so much potential, yet there is a lock. The significance and meaning of that lock is to be interpreted by the viewer."

#### **Andi Wolfe (wood artist)**

Andi Wolfe says she discovered carving through Michelle's work. "When I first started exploring techniques for going beyond a simple turned form (about twenty years

ago), I discovered the work of Michelle Holzapfel, first through the Renwick Gallery during a visit to D.C., and then via a nice article in *Fine Woodworking*. I was gobsmacked by the realism in her carving and how she integrated it with the turned form. I knew nothing about carving and had never attempted it ▶



*Lockheart Vase*, 2002, Red maple burl, Yale lock, 7" × 13" × 13" (18cm × 33cm × 33cm)

Fuller Craft Museum Collection, Gift of  
Michelle and David Holzapfel





myself at that time. However, in Michelle's work I saw the potential of going beyond the form, which led to my adventures in teaching myself to carve."

**Craig Nutt (furniture maker)**

"A decade or so ago, I was reading an essay by Michelle Holzapfel in which she described someone as a polymath. I thought, 'It takes one to know one.' Michelle not only knows a lot about a lot of things, but she has the hand skills to do something about it. Her formidable carving skill is well known, but she can also sew up a bespoke shirt, and I have seen a photo of her sewing salmon skins together. A recent email signature referring to herself as a 'compost maker' is only half in jest—her vegetable garden is a veritable agro-lab. Among my strongest olfactory memories is being met at the Holzapfel front door by the perfume of a half-dozen varieties of heirloom apples baking in the oven. By the time dessert dishes were cleared, the table was strewn with books referenced during a meeting with a wide-ranging agenda but no particular purpose. I see it all in her art—her knowledge, her skills, her



*Quercus*, 1998, Red oak burl, 15½" × 12" × 11" (39cm × 30cm × 28cm)  
Mint Museum of Craft + Design Collection, Gift of Jane and Arthur Mason

Michelle Holzapfel in her Vermont studio, 1991.



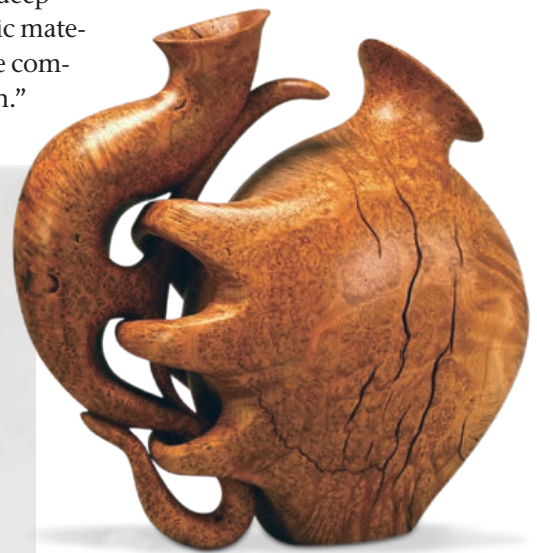
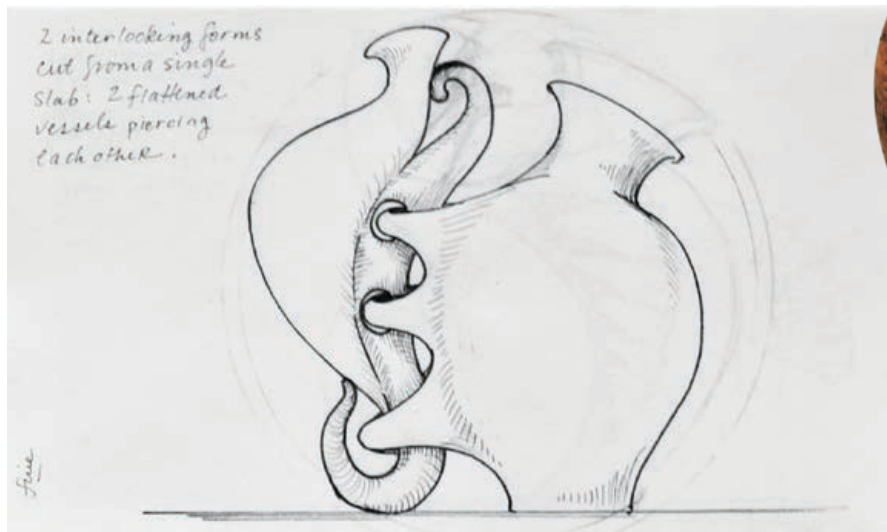
curiosity, her keen intellect—her polymathy."

**Beth McLaughlin (curator)**

Fuller Craft Museum Artistic Director and Chief Curator Beth McLaughlin remembers, "I had the pleasure of working with Michelle Holzapfel during her 2014 exhibition at the Fuller, and to this day I consider her among the field's most intuitive and skilled artists. A consummate problem-solver, Michelle demonstrates a deep understanding of wood as artistic material and its potential to evoke the complexities of the human condition."

**Glenn Adamson (curator, author)**

Glenn Adamson notes, "Michelle has extraordinary storytelling capability. She can include as much narratively in a compressed space as any artist I know. And then, the way she preserves the sense of the material, even when working over its surface—interesting how she often leaves sections of wood to speak for themselves. Her objects always have a gravitas, a sense of history, in spite (or perhaps because)



*Duet Vase*, 2001, Cherry burl, 13" (33cm) tall  
Minneapolis Institute of Art Collection,  
Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury



(Left) *Ingenue Vase*, 2000,  
Butternut, 10" x 6"  
(25cm x 15cm)

Ken Spitzbard Collection

(Right) *Domestic Violence I*,  
1987, Hardwoods,  
glass, 30" x 30" x 14"  
(76cm x 76cm x 36cm)

of their everyday subject matter. She's really infusing the tradition of still life with totally new energy and providing windows of perception into the texture of daily experience."

#### **Jane Mason (collector)**

"Every summer as Washington, D.C., heated up, Arthur and I would drive north to a cooler climate to visit friends, including Michelle Holzapfel. David would greet us in the driveway and take us into the studio. One year, Michelle was looking outside at oak trees, carving them on a beautiful bowl. Even unfinished, it was magnificent! We told her we wanted to purchase it when it was finished, whatever the price. Michelle named the finished piece *Quercus*, after the genus of the oak tree. Arthur and I loved that piece so much and thought it so important that we included it in the collection we gave to the Mint Museum of Craft + Design."

#### **David and Ruth Waterbury (collectors)**

The Waterburys, too, visited the Holzapfels, saying, "Our real

introduction to Michelle was a visit to her studio in Vermont, where we were warmly welcomed by this delightful artist/philosopher and her husband, David. Michelle's imagination and creativity find expression through a spectrum of techniques, including multi-axis turning, carving, and multiple methods of surface treatments, all executed with patience and precision. A huge surprise was that all of her turning was done on a metal lathe, not on a wood lathe. We've yet to see one of her objects that we didn't want to own."

#### **Len Kreppel (collector)**

Len Kreppel, a New York collector, made a colorful discovery of Michelle's work. He recalls, "I was walking on

Madison Avenue, and as I cleared the corner of 85th Street, I saw something that would forever change me. In the window of the Carlyn Gallery, a tree branch was smashing through a farmhouse window reaching for a piece of fruit pie as if to protect it. I was amazed that this tableau [*Domestic Violence I*, 1987] was lifelike and made out of wood. I was totally blown away by the thought behind the piece and the quality of the *trompe l'oeil* effect."

#### **Ken Spitzbard (collector)**

Ken Spitzbard notes, "Michelle Holzapfel is the artist most responsible for my introduction to the world of lathe-turned and carved wood sculpture and my ultimate decision ▶

“Michelle's influence can be seen in the works of today's artists, combining turning and carving techniques focused primarily on sculptural expressions through personal creative styles. They all point directly back to Michelle's work. —David Ellsworth





*Captive Vase*, 1996, Red maple, 13" x 13" x 3"  
(33cm x 33cm x 8cm)

Ken Spitzbard Collection

to collect the field in depth. Prior to seeing Michelle's work, I had only seen and/or purchased lathe-turned vessels at a few craft shows. While I was taken by these beautiful objects and acquired a few, my motivation was primarily to decorate, not collect. Everything changed when I saw Michelle's exhibition, *Family Jewels* [Peter Joseph Gallery in Manhattan, 1996]. I acquired Michelle's *Captive Vase*, a beautiful and fascinating sculpture, which ignited in me a multi-decade pursuit of lathe-turned and sculpted wood objects. Perhaps my favorite piece is *Ingenue*. In

addition to the obvious technical carving mastery, there is a warmth about this sculpture. It reminds me of a father or grandfather relaxing on a chair, reading the Sunday paper, and watching TV."

**Kevin Wallace (curator, author, editor)**

Kevin Wallace, excerpted from the *20 Years—Still Evolving* exhibit catalogue and essay: "Michelle Holzapfel's *Self Portrait* [front cover of this issue] is one of the most important works in the history of woodturning. As portrait, it represents what she was doing at the time—elevating the stature of



*Domestic Violence II*, 1987, Assorted hardwoods, acrylic, 29" x 18" x 14"  
(74cm x 46cm x 36cm)

Yale University Art Gallery Collection



**Michelle Holzapfel** (woodcarver), **David Holzapfel** (photographic documentarian), **Donna Cunningham** (bookmaker), **Dan MacArthur** (cabinetmaker), **Kim Thayer** (logger), **Steve Smith** (sawyer), **Brown & Roberts Hardware Store** (hinges and clasps), *Story Book*, 2002, American walnut, wild cherry, basswood, curly maple, sugar maple, Baltic birch plywood, parchment, leather, linen, silk, paper, pencil, ink, 15½" x 23¼" x 21¼" (39cm x 59cm x 54cm)

Museum of Arts and Design Collection

the turned wood bowl both conceptually, by employing narrative, and technically, with sophisticated carving techniques. Created in the mid-1980s, it captures a moment in time when the field was being lifted into the realm of sculpture, so it is to an extent a portrait of the field at a particular point in time... Holzapfel brought the wood turned object into the realm of figurative, narrative and conceptual art.”

### **Patricia Kane (curator)**

Patricia “Pat” Kane, Friends of American Arts Curator, American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery, states, “Michelle Holzapfel’s *Domestic Violence II* was a truly revolutionary work in the field of wood art when it was created in 1987. It was sculptural but made no reference to the vessel, the norm for other contemporary work that ventured into the realm of sculpture. Largely carved of hardwoods native to New England, the assemblage of swirling elements is seemingly sucked into a funnel. Atop the sculpture is a timer in which the grains have run out. Like the hourglasses found in seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings, it is a reminder of mortality and, in the case of this sculpture, a reminder of how women’s tasks of every life—preparing and presenting food, cleaning up, sewing on buttons—consume precious time. It is a tour-de-force of carving that delivers a cogent message.”

### **Fleur S. Bresler (collector, docent)**

Collector, Renwick docent, and philanthropist Fleur Bresler states, “Throughout her career, Michelle has always made herself available to others for workshops, symposiums, lectures, and the creation of timely and informative written articles that share her talents and experiences. Michelle’s verbal and articulate

## Documenting a Career

Michelle Holzapfel encourages artists to keep documentation, photographs, text, and other materials to record their development and career, and to generate an official archive. You can view the online archive of Michelle’s career at [michelleholzapfel.omeka.net](http://michelleholzapfel.omeka.net).

writing skills are always understandable and at times, poetic. My direct relationship with her, other than collecting and treasuring her work, is in the education area. When I was serving as president of the Wood Turning Center, Michelle volunteered and served as the Center’s exhibit and program chairperson. She developed an historical concept for a wood art show, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (2003), and assisted in the development of an innovative catalogue and DVD for the exhibit that traveled to fifteen venues. The artwork Michelle created for this exhibit, *Story Book*, is now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City.”

### **The current chapter**

For the past two years, Michelle has been working on creating a digital archive of her career and art. The breadth and quantity of documentation generated over the years, both by her and others, astonishes her. Norm Sartorius, a noted spoon carver, recently discovered Michelle’s archive, and noted, “I love Michelle and her work. I took her class in Annapolis many years ago. I liked her class and carved a coconut spoon in response to her work. That is likely where I gave her the unfinished walnut spoon she has in her archive.”

As an artist and ambassador of wood art, Michelle has had a broad and lasting impact. She gently and collegially voiced her experiences and observations over decades, using wood and words as her media. David

Ellsworth notes, “Michelle’s influence can be seen in the works of today’s artists, combining turning and carving techniques focused primarily on sculptural expressions through personal creative styles. They all point directly back to Michelle’s work.” ■

For more, visit [holzapfelwoodworking.com](http://holzapfelwoodworking.com).

*Albert and Tina LeCoff, both trained in art and design, have been married and writing collaboratively since 1990. Work for The Center for Art in Wood (formerly the Wood Turning Center, which Albert co-founded), inspired joint articles for Turning Points, exhibition catalogs for the Center, and other publications covering early wood artists. Architecture, sculpture, folk art, and long-time friendships with artists are all major inspirations.*

## **Craft in America, “Nature” Video**

Michelle Holzapfel explains more about her craft, with visuals, as part of a *Craft in America* episode titled, “Nature,” recorded in 2017.



To view the video, visit [tiny.cc/Holzapfel](http://tiny.cc/Holzapfel) or scan the QR code.

