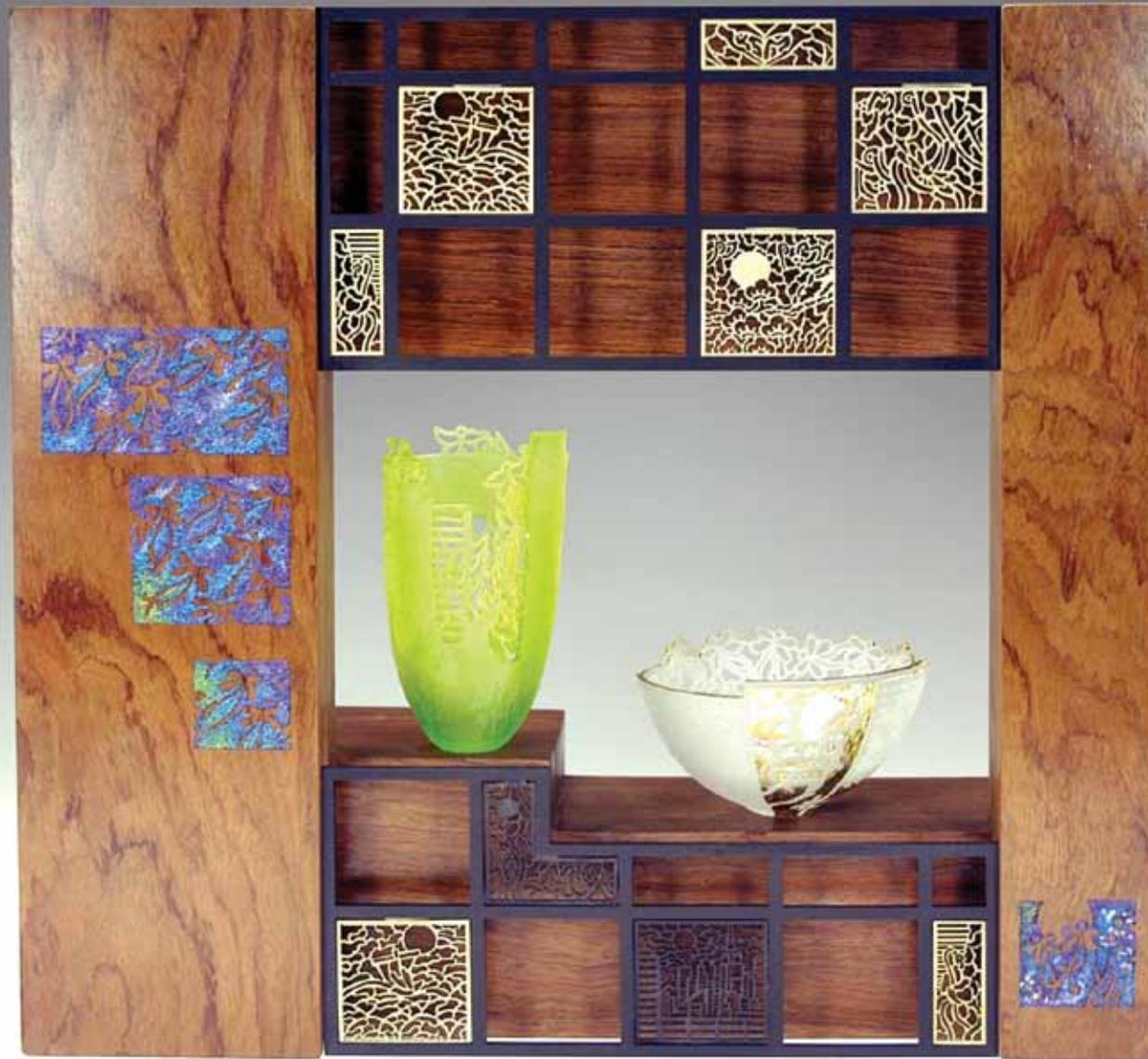




# Binh Pho: Woodturner

February 25 — April 10, 2011

Robert T. Wright  
Community Gallery of Art  
College of Lake County



*Blue Angels, 2010, Bubinga, aluminum, cast glass, acrylic paint, 15"H x 15"W x 3"D*

*At the center of your being you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want.*

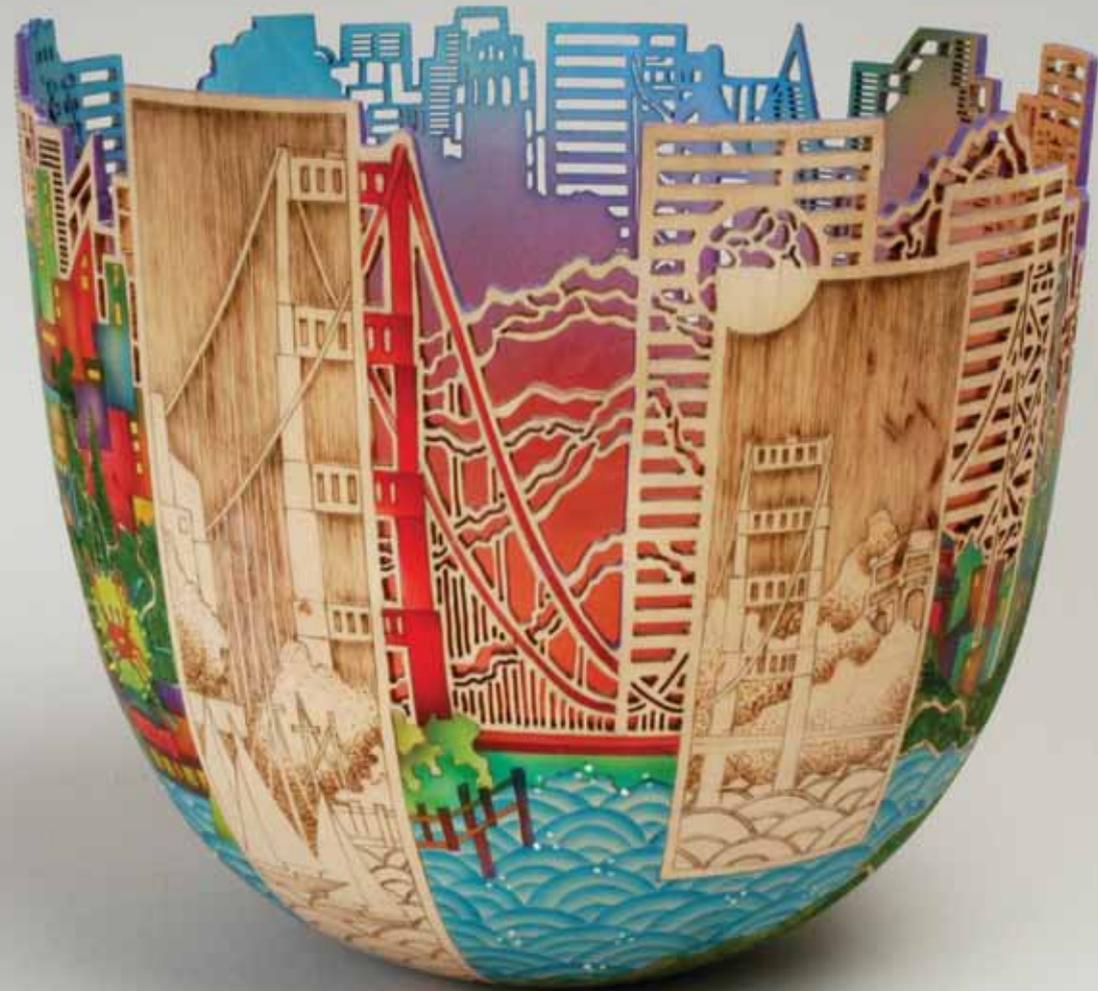
### **-Lao Tzu**

What attracts the eye first, when looking at one of Binh Pho's vessels, is the intensity of color. His use of high chroma contrasts with the delicate nature of his pierced wooden vessels and with the subtlety of his painted Asian motifs. He masterfully plays these contrasts into works that reflect a deep sense of harmony and beauty, which are not merely external attributes, but manifest the center of the artist's being. Like the two sides of a sheet of paper, Binh Pho's life and artwork are so interconnected as to be inseparable. His sculptural vessels draw upon his cultural and spiritual roots in Vietnam, as well as his dramatic escape after the fall of Saigon. Binh's four-year-long saga eventually resulted in his journey to the United States where he now resides in the Chicago area.

It wasn't until 1992 that Binh began to form an interest in turning wood. Woodturning is an art form where wood, spinning on a lathe, is cut and shaped with a stationary tool. Binh attended demonstrations at the American Association of Woodturners symposiums. He also had the good fortune to take classes with some of the luminaries in the field. Eventually his unique personal artistic vision began to emerge from the depths of the wood and the paint he applied to its surface. He has stated, "I have been making pieces to tell my journey to the west, from childhood, growing up through the war, the chaos of exodus in Southeast Asia, escape from communism to find freedom, and the challenges and rewards of my new life in the United States of America." In 2007, a book by Kevin Wallace called *River of Destiny: The Life and Work of Binh Pho* was published in connection with an exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art in Long Beach, CA. This exhibition and other important shows have garnered national acclaim for Binh's work. His wood and glass vessels are in numerous private and public collections. Most notably his work is in The White House Collection of American Crafts and the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Binh Pho describes his process as "... I will often plan and sketch my piece when the inspiration comes to my mind, and then look for a piece of wood to turn a bowl or vessel, which I approach as a three-dimensional canvas. After the vessel is turned and properly dried, I sand the surface smooth and begin to sketch the design. I go on to airbrush the body of the work and pierce the form to compliment the airbrush images. It is the piercing that is my favorite element in the work, as I place messages that are not initially obvious. It is my hope that it will draw the viewer in when they see something, or sense that they see something. It is as if something is not there, yet always present. By using negative space, I explore the presence of the absence."





*San Francisco*, 2008, Box elder; acrylic paint, 9"H x 8" diameter

Above: view one

Next page, view two

*San Francisco* is a vessel that depicts the city by the bay in the round. The wood is pierced to create negative spaces that define the distinctive skyline that includes the Transamerica Pyramid and the Golden Gate Bridge. Other San Francisco landmarks include the painted hairpin turns of Lombard Street, the Painted Lady houses and Fisherman's Wharf. Binh has gone against the grain of most woodturners by painting the vessels' surfaces; most prefer the natural look of the wood. However, in Binh's case, the richly painted surface puts the work somewhere between sculpture and painting. He can conceptualize his works to express his past and his homeland. Asian motifs abound in his works, such as the depiction of the water in San Francisco bay and his use of vertical perspective.



One of the most intriguing pieces on exhibit is *Eternal Return*. This tall, conically shaped piece is pierced to create organic, branch-like forms on one side while the other side echoes the motif, but with painted patterns. There is a Taoist yin-yang element to the two sides where the negative space (yin) on one side compliments the positive space (yang) on the other. The piece can also be displayed with the two halves parted to reveal a stack of smooth, flat stones that imparts a meditative feeling. These hidden stones in the interior of the vessel bring Lao Tzu's words to mind "At the center of your being you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want." The vertical display of *Eternal Return* contemplates a return to the inner-most Self. An alternative display is to lay the halves horizontally together in a boat-like fashion. A painted azure blue water motif encompasses the forms. This format alludes to the artist's personal history when he escaped from Vietnam in a small boat. In this position the vessel symbolizes the struggle to attain freedom of both body and mind.



In addition to his wooden vessels, Binh also casts some works in glass. These delicate and translucent forms are a nice complement to his wooden pieces. He starts with a slightly thicker unpainted vessel that is pierced and textured. A negative mold is cast in silicone rubber from the wood piece that, in turn, is used to cast a wax piece. The wax form is coated with investment, which is a high temperature mold material that can withstand molten glass. When fired in a kiln, the wax is steamed out and the glass flows into the cavity left by the wax. When the firing is complete the glass piece is removed from the investment and Binh embellishes the glass. One such work is *Twomo*, a green glass bowl that is perforated with intricate patterns. The piece embues light; from the translucency of the glass to the paper lanterns painted in silhouette.

Binh Pho is a woodturner who creates vessels. Strictly speaking, a vessel is a container; but Binh's vessels do not contain anything tangible. They contain aspirations, harmony, beauty and soul. Binh says, "I put a soul into every piece I create. I don't make objects; I create characters. If the viewers can pick up on that soul, I've accomplished it."

**Steven Jones**  
Art Gallery Curator



**Binh Pho casting a work in glass**

Top left: Casting the wax piece from a silicon rubber negative mold.

Top right: Preparing the fiberglass enforcer for the investment to cover the wax piece.

Bottom right: Final clean up, removing the investment from the detail texture with a wire brush.

Bottom left: *Glass Wings — Purple*, 2010, Cast glass, acrylic paint, 7"H x 4" diameter

All catalog photos of Binh working are by Deryl Duer.



*Twomo*, 2010, Cast glass, acrylic paint, 3.5"H x 9" Diameter

*Eternal Return*, 2009, Box elder, acrylic paints, stone,  
18"H x 9" diameter

Top right: position 3  
Bottom right: position 2  
Below left: position 1



*Secret Garden*, 2007, Box elder, acrylic paint,  
11"H x 5"W x 7"D



## Artist's Statement

On April 30, 1975 the war was ended in Vietnam. It made a dramatic turn in my life. I was in my sophomore year of college majoring in architecture but the "Red Peace" ended that. At that time there were only two schools; one taught communism, the other was a re-education camp.

I refused to accept the reality of communism. Six months later I attempted my first escape to find freedom, but instead I ended up in a re-education camp. I spent one year in there to supposedly get my brain washed, then they let me back in the city. After that I tried three more times. Finally my day had come... on September 29, 1978 I and my 38 companions reached Freedom Soil after seven days on a small boat floating across the Gulf of Siam to Malaysia. Due to vast numbers of refugees at that time, I spent eight months in a refugee camp located on a deserted island outside of Kuala Lumpur.

On May 7, 1979 I was re-united with my family in St. Louis, Missouri, after four of the longest years of my life. Now I reside in Maple Park, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago, where I designed and built a 1,500 square-foot studio next to the house.

From a heavy log of timber to a light, thin vessel, negative spaces interlock with solid surfaces. The color, grain and natural look of the wood all reflect the principle of Yin and Yang. My work comes from memories, culture, Zen mind and my own thoughts. Negative spaces inspire me, as they represent the unseen weight of the unknown, which I use to draw viewers into my work.



9 *Missing Waves*, 2009, Box elder; acrylic paint, 3"H x 6"W x 5"D

## Binh Pho: Woodturner

## Exhibition Checklist

1. *Gateless Dream*, 2011, Cast Glass, Acrylic paint, 5"H x 13" diameter
2. *Nocturnes Dream III* (Wall hanging piece), 2011, Ziricote, aluminum, cast glass, acrylic paint, 15"H x 15"W x 3"D
3. *Between Worlds – Purple*, 2010, Cast glass, gold leaf, 13"H x 8" diameter
4. *Blue Angels*, 2010, Bubinga, aluminum, cast glass, acrylic paint, 15"H x 15"W x 3"D
5. *Glass Wings – Purple*, 2010, Cast glass, acrylic paint, 7"H x 4" diameter
6. *Twomo*, 2010, Cast glass, acrylic paint, 3.5"H x 9" diameter
7. *Wings of Joy* (Wall hanging piece -Collaboration with Victoria Pho), 2010 Goncalvo alves, box elder, aluminum, acrylic paint, 12"H x 26"W x 4"D
8. *Eternal Return*, 2009, Box elder, acrylic paints, stone, 18"H x 9" diameter (position 1) 18"H x 12"W x 9"D, (position 2) 10"H x 22"W x 9"D (position 3)
9. *Missing Waves*, 2009, Box elder, acrylic paint, 3"H x 6"W x 5"D
10. *Flames in the Dream*, 2008, Box elder burl, acrylic paint, 8"H x 5" diameter
11. *Nightingales*, 2008, Box elder, acrylic paint, 12"H x 7" diameter
12. *San Francisco*, 2008, Box elder, acrylic paint, 9"H x 8" diameter
13. *Secluded Abode*, 2008, Box elder, maple, acrylic paint, 16"H x 8"W x 12"D
14. *Secret Garden*, 2007, Box elder, acrylic paint, 11"H x 5"W x 7"D
15. *Wings Across the Pacific* (Collaboration with Graeme Priddle), 2007, Cypress, acrylic paint, 17"H x 5"W x 7"D
16. *Two Mice*, 2006, Box elder, acrylic paint, gold leaf, 13"H x 7" diameter
17. *Arwen* (Collaboration with Alain Mailland), 2005 Box elder burl, bleached madrone burl, acrylic paint, 10"H x 13" diameter
18. *La Vie en Rose*, 2004, Red oak, acrylic paint, 11.5"H x 6" diameter
19. *Scarlet*, 2004, Box elder, acrylic paint, 7"H x 6" diameter
20. *Dynasty*, 2002, Spalted ash, acrylic paint, 14"H x 9" diameter
21. *Year of the Dragon*, 2000, Pink ivory, box elder, ebony, 12"H x 6.5" diameter



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**Gallery Hours:**

Monday-Thursday 8:00 a.m.-10:00 p.m.  
Friday/Saturday 9:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m.  
Sunday 1:00-5:00 p.m.

**Spring Break: March 28 – April 3**

Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m.  
Closed April 2 and 3 (Saturday/Sunday)

**Phone:** (847) 543-2240

**E-mail:** [sjones@clcillinois.edu](mailto:sjones@clcillinois.edu)

<http://gallery.clcillinois.edu>

**College of Lake County**

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The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art is a project of the College of Lake County Foundation.

Cover art: Binh Pho, *Nightingales*, 2008, Box elder, acrylic paint, 12"H x 7" diameter