



*Pencil Box, 2013,*  
Basswood, 10" x 46" x 13"  
(25cm x 117cm x 33cm)

# CRAFT *AND* ART:

## THE EXPRESSIVE REALM OF BETH IRELAND

Betty Scarpino

Even though I know better, it seems as though Beth Ireland and her new work represent the epitome of an overnight sensation. But success requires years of intense, focused, sustained work and Beth had to have earned every bead, cove, and complex curve of her new work from long hours and years of practice. Where has she been all these decades? Does it matter? Yes, it matters a great deal.

### From whence she came

I first met Beth about twelve years ago when she was fully involved in her architectural turning business in the greater Boston area. She developed skills and learned problem-solving

during thirty-one years in the craft, turning architectural elements, one-of-a-kind objects for toy designers, and odd elements for lighting companies and plumbers, some seemingly impossible to accomplish. Initially, she may not have known the solution to turning or recreating a particular object, but eventually she would figure it out and that persistent ingenuity would prove to be a defining trait.

You may know Beth from her relatively recent Turning Around America collaborative, where she toured America for a year in a machine-and-tool-decked-out van, teaching anyone who desired how to make small projects out of wood. Beth literally lived her

motto, “Empowering people through the act of teaching art/craft,” by interactively teaching thousands; many had never whacked a nail with a hammer or sawed a board in half. By offering simple projects where basic skills could quickly be taught, Beth planted the seeds to instill a love of making. Fun. Beth knows that a person’s positive first experience with woodworking can germinate years later to bloom into life-long creative endeavors.

*Atlas*, made in 2011, documents in three dimensions a map of Beth’s travels. The rolled map, viewed as a sculptural object, can be considered a talisman mapping the direction Beth would take in the next few years to explore her long-dormant interest in art. Before her career as an architectural turner, she studied art at State University College, Buffalo, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in art education. Thirty years later, she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Of her schooling, however, Beth notes, “My real education was thirty years in a woodshop, where I developed the technical skills and problem-solving abilities to easily accomplish whatever I envisioned in the realm of sculpture.” As *Atlas* suggests, Beth was on the road to somewhere, not necessarily away from craftsmanship, but headed toward a greater understanding of the role of art in craft and the importance of craft in artwork. For Beth, “There is not enough art in craft, nor enough craft in art.” This maker has already closed the gap for herself—she works in that in-between realm. The teacher in Beth will, perhaps, carry that message further afield.

### Artist residencies

Major excursions were part of Beth’s journey these last four years. She participated in three artist residencies: the Center for Art in Wood’s Windgate ITE International Residency in 2011; the SUNY Purchase Windgate

## JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

David Heim chronicled Beth Ireland’s Turning Around America project in the August 2012 issue of *American Woodturner* (vol 27, no 4, page 61). AAW members can access all past journal articles online at [woodturner.org](http://woodturner.org).



*Architectural Reliquary*, 2011,  
Cherry, holly, blown glass,  
8" x 13" x 3¼"  
(20cm x 33cm x 8cm)

The encapsulated objects represent Beth’s life work as an architectural woodturner.

Collection of the Center for Art in Wood, Philadelphia



*Atlas*, 2011, Wood, deconstructed leather jacket, 4" x 14" x 14"  
(10cm x 36cm x 36cm) unrolled

“*Atlas* represents my tool roll as a woodworker. It is built and turned the way I turn big columns, then split into pieces. Each section has the map from my first Turning Around America adventure. Each spine is imprinted with my favorite destination.” —Beth Ireland

Collection of Martha Plusquellec



(Left) *Totem 1*, 2011, Cherry, holly, 8" x 9" x 2¾"  
(20cm x 23cm x 7cm)

"*Totem 1* represents the community it takes to be able to travel and do the projects I do."

—Beth Ireland

Collection of Albert and Tina LeCoff



(Right) *Gear*, 2011, Basswood, rust paint, 12" x 12" x 2"  
(30cm x 30cm x 5cm)



Artist in Residency Program in 2013; and a residency at IUP in Indiana, Pennsylvania, in 2014. Beth had time during these full-time, semester-long residencies to rekindle her interest in artwork, resurrect her artistic skills, and undertake lots of thinking.

Beth's *Architectural Reliquary*, made during her 2011 ITE residency, pays homage to her life's work as an architectural woodturner. By encapsulating what these elements represent, she is saying it is time to stow baggage and head in an unknown direction, past the clearly visible. The sculpture looks almost boat-like—this crude vessel suggests Beth has launched herself into uncharted waters.

Beth knows that successful journeys require a boatload of help from others. *Totem 1*, 2011, is an enchanting combination of "people" and wood. The chunky, unfinished plinth could, perhaps, represent Beth; the totems topside help navigate. She also needs propulsion. The title of her 2011 piece, *Gear*, suggests something mechanical, yet it looks very much like a paddlewheel. Either way, *Gear* symbolizes movement.

Beth mentions in a 2014 video (<http://hosting.soundslides.com/lm4db/>) her desire to move away from the rigid constructs of architectural turning. Does her loose and quirky *Tribute*, made in 2011, foreshadow that direction? It has wheels. Is Beth paying tribute to ►

*Tribute*, 2011, Basswood, 62" x 32" x 13"  
(157cm x 81cm x 33cm)







**FOR ME, A PIECE BECOMES IMPORTANT WHEN IT LEADS ME TO A WHOLE NEW INVESTIGATION.**  
—BETH IRELAND

other artists or simply acknowledging her desire for greater self-expression?

Of these residencies, Beth writes, “The three residencies have been life altering because of the collaboration. At ITE, I learned so much watching others work. Kim Winkle introduced me to milk paint, which I now frequently use. Dan Hoffman taught me to pay as much attention to the debris as to the piece.”

### Drawing and music

During her SUNY Purchase artist residency, Beth realized she had stopped drawing while being busy building things. *Spark*, 2013, combines her long-dormant drawing skills with her vast woodworking knowledge. Ironically, it was Beth’s lack of satisfaction with drawing and printmaking that led her to join a construction crew, which eventually caused her to establish her own woodworking business. Drawing did not represent something worthwhile during those years, which is why Beth’s masterful *Pencil Box*, 2013, is so meaningful. Drawing has become bigger than life for Beth.

Peter Park, an emerging artist during Beth’s time at IUP, was working on an aspect of guitar-making different from Beth’s initial experiments years ago. Peter

shared his methods and techniques, which led to a combined research effort. Their friendship spawned in Beth a growing appreciation of music.

She says, “It was amazing to hear Peter play my instruments, something I had been unable to do. I took formal music lessons while there and learned some music theory. Now I can read music and play with direction, something not conceivable five years ago. The residencies have given me the space to step out of my day-to-day grind to do my unimaginable, like writing and music.”

### Inspirations and ideas

Archeological objects inspire Beth Ireland. I can see that—and playfulness, too—in her recent work. Archeological fetishes are objects integral to someone’s life, not things separate or apart. Beth’s *Fetishes Installation*, 2013, denotes her circle of friends. A compass in the middle, amulet inside, represents her. Beth will not lose her way, not when surrounded by close friends. All artists need a resilient support network. Beth has hers—one is *Shy*, another has *Four Eyes*. When needed, the circle closes to protect, yet the way this circle is constructed, it is ever expansive, open to the

outside world. *Fetishes Installation* seems to achieve the often-tricky balance of protection and openness.

Each fetish is mounted onto a tall, turned column—Beth’s work as an architectural turner has re-entered the picture. These columns, expressive fetishes perched on top, combine past and present, craft and art. They are old-world artifacts supported by a contemporary presentation. As monumental as these totems are, their quirkiness brings a smile. Each one is simple, yet powerful.

Beth makes her own contemporary tool fetishes, unlike anything an archeologist would have unearthed. Meaningful to Beth, the larger-than-life *Coping Saw* unquestionably helped her negotiate tight curves. *From the Factory (Artifactory)*, made in 2009, was a foreshadowing of current work. I can almost feel the relief of stress with these delightful, almost-useful, not-quite-understandable doohickeys. I want a drawer full of them, not to use, but to whip out when I need to attack a thorny problem: I would have just the right gadget!

Beth has given much thought to what she makes. She states, “I know the instant I complete a successful piece. I get really excited. I keep it around instead of selling it right away. I study it to try and understand why it is successful. Success to me may be different from others’ definitions. Just because I think a sculpture really works does not mean it has market value. For me, a piece ▶



*Spark*, 2013, Basswood, cardboard, steel, paint, pencil, 2½" x 16" x 22" (6cm x 41cm x 56cm)

The matches are turned.



*From The Factory (Artifactory)*, 2009, Maple, largest object is 4" x 16" x 4" (10cm x 41cm x 10cm)



*Coping Saw*, 2013, Basswood, 57" x 30" x 7" (145cm x 76cm x 18cm)

Beth made these "artifacts" as a spoof about producing artifacts on machines.



*Fetishes Installation*, 2013

*Fetishes* is a seven-piece set that goes together in a circle, set around a compass piece. They represent Beth's closest friends.

(Left) *Shy*, 2013, Holly, Sapelle, 57" x 7" x 7" (145cm x 18cm x 18cm)

(Right) *Four Eyes*, 2013, Holly, sapelle, 57" x 7" x 7" (145cm x 18cm x 18cm)



becomes important when it leads me to a whole new investigation. It is usually raw compared to the work that comes after it, but I guess that is what I like.”

Beth’s ideas come from many sources. Sometimes ideas surface while driving or after being told a joke. Personal interests play a role. Beth realizes that coming up with new ideas can be challenging for emerging artists. After acquiring a skill, then what? From Beth’s six years of art training and all her life experiences, she offers this advice: “Whatever you make, put yourself into it. Each person is a unique accumulation of experiences. Draw upon that for your work. If you are not truly interested and passionate about what you are making, no one else will be either.”

### Craft and art

Beth understands that most of us compartmentalize our lives. She explains how this relates to artwork: “This is turning, and over there is my interest in archeology, and over there is my interest in trailers. Individually, each interest is fun, but when combined, they become an incredible combination unique to my work. I often ask students what they would do if they had an extra hour. Would it be gardening, nature, architecture, cooking, or reading? Whatever it is, add it to the thinking about your work. If it is important enough to spend precious time on, it can be a well to draw from for your turning work.”

Craft and art are often compartmentalized and separate. Not, however, for

Beth. In *To-Go*, another larger-than-life sculpture where a wheel makes an appearance, craft pairs with art. This cup, saucer, and wheelbarrow suggest a combination of work and leisure. Wood for the wheelbarrow is unfinished and the formal white teacup is poised to receive a yet-to-be-known beverage. What would you pour into that vessel? Your heart’s desire? A strong amber liquid? This cup is full of potential carrying, wheeling something precious from one place to another. Perhaps for Beth it symbolizes being receptive to combining craft with art.

Currently, Beth continues with her musical-instrument-making, often using objects found along her journey’s pathways. Her *Instruments* can be viewed as an example of how an artist explores a



*To-Go*, 2014, Basswood, milk paint, cup is 24" x 48" x 23" (61cm x 122cm x 58cm)

Beth made this sculpture for a show called “Modern Kylix” (Greek drinking vessel). All parts are turned.



concept—why make one when ten or more are effortlessly accomplished? There's nothing like doing iterations in quick succession and Beth is supremely capable. Make no mistake, though. Sing praises for the years of hard work Beth devoted to learning skills, advancing her craftsmanship, and incubating ideas. Only in this way can artists effortlessly make music.

Beth, the teacher, understands that not everyone will have the opportunity to participate in a residency or devote the years she did to developing skills. She recommends taking a one- or two-week class. Many are offered for woodturning at schools such as the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship (CFC) in Maine, Arrowmont School of Arts and

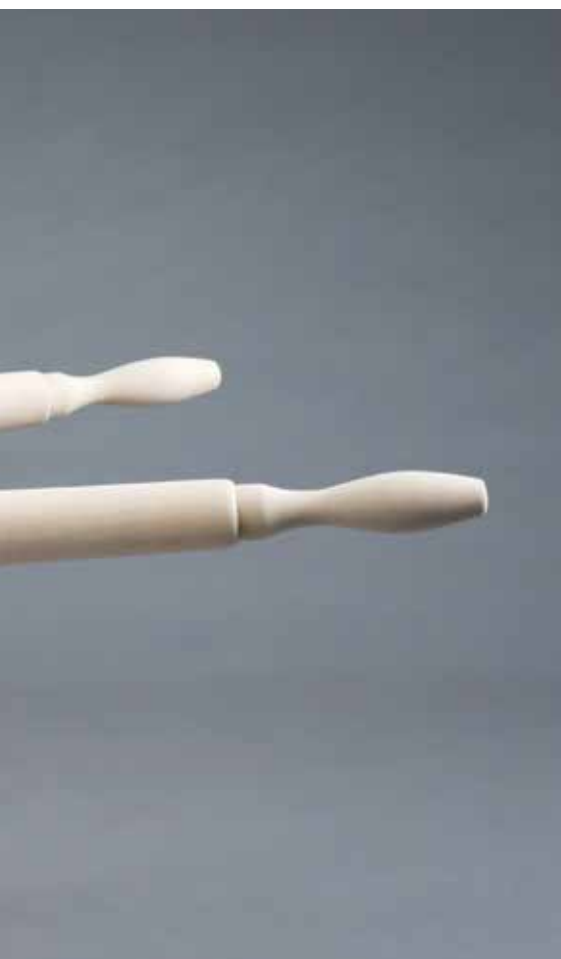
Crafts in Tennessee, and Anderson Ranch in Colorado. The students Beth has for her twelve-week intensives, taught at CFC every winter, all agreed they could hardly believe how much they learned. Beth notes, "A one-night-a-week class can teach specific skills, but immersing yourself in your craft for a week or more cannot be beat." She also encourages pushing yourself with these sage words, "If you do not take a risk and do something beyond your abilities, you will never improve your skills."

The natural progression of Beth's life led her to this body of expressive new artwork. Perhaps thirty-some years may seem an extreme detour, but it is what it is, and for Beth the timing is right. For most of us, there are no

shortcuts, only interesting diversions where we might acquire necessary keys that will unlock the next entryway. Beth abounds with keys.

In between the often strict and limiting definitions of craft and art there is extensive fertile ground of inclusiveness and creativity. Beth Ireland lives and works in this realm, planting seeds for herself and others. Her six years of art training are the wellspring from which Beth releases a creative flow of ideas. Beth's highly advanced skill level allows her to create whatever she envisions. Skills matter. So does focused, concentrated work. ■

*Betty Scarpino lives and works in Indianapolis, Indiana. Her sculpture can be seen on her website, [bettyscarpino.com](http://bettyscarpino.com).*



*Instruments, 2015, life-size*

One instrument is a recycled Seagull guitar; the rest are made from scratch with found objects. The necks are turned; many of the bodies are turned and have turned tuners.