

A Look at **Negative** Space

Malcolm Zander

Henry Moore,

Oval with Two Points, 1968–70

Photo: Reproduced by permission
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To me, negative space represents something mysterious and awakens one's curiosity.
—Binh Pho

Negative space is the open space within or around an object or image. It can bring lightness and delicacy to a sculpture or vessel, and it can also imply movement. Negative space can be used for telling stories. It is a means of adding interest and often generates drama by the use of light.

There are multiple ways of creating negative space—it can be carved,

sandblasted, drilled, constructed, inserted, cut, or it can simply pre-exist in nature. Multiple meanings can be given to it, and the way in which the space is designed and how it interacts with the associated mass is as important as the design of the mass itself.

A master in the use of negative space is English sculptor Henry Moore. *Oval with Two Points* is a massive object in a field of emptiness. The effect is

dramatic. The space within integrates the sculpture with the surroundings and gives it depth. The interplay and contrast between something and nothing—solidity and emptiness—brings a sense of mystery.

Exploiting wood orientation

In 1979, David Ellsworth introduced a secondary negative space into a

turned wood vessel by orienting a decayed log so the rotten core fell away on either side of the vessel. In 1986, Todd Hoyer used a similar technique for a bowl in his *Gourd Series*. The negative space in these two turnings was created by nature and brought out by skill in the orientation of the wood when turned. Incorporating negative space into a form can add information and interest; the eye is drawn into and through it. Look at the Ellsworth and Hoyer images and ask yourself if they would be as interesting if they were simply solid forms.

A variation on this technique starts with a burl—a wooden growth with an irregular shape. During solid-form turning, curved surfaces appear with crevices and hollows that have yet to be cut into. As more wood is removed, these areas disappear and eventually one is left with a smooth, round object. But if we stop before this point and then hollow the form to a thin wall, the crevices and hollows become voids in the wall. The trick is to stop at the right point, and to orient the wood so the voids are balanced. An example is Michael Peterson's *Two Canyon Mesa*. The void in the wall here fuses with the space inside the vessel and allows us to peer deep into the interior.

These methods of creating negative space by exploiting wood orientation during turning became popular in the 1980s, to the point where Giles Gilson spoofed the practice in his *Point of View* vase. The negative space in this piece is, of course, not a naturally occurring void, but was artificially constructed.

As with Henry Moore's *Oval with Two Points*, negative spaces can also be created by deliberately inserting holes or voids into an object. In 1984 and 1985, Frank ▶



David Ellsworth, *Vessel*, 1979, Desert ironwood, 6¾" × 6" (17cm × 15cm)



Todd Hoyer, Untitled from *Gourd series*, 1986, Mexican blue oak, 7¼" × 9½" × 8¼" (18cm × 24cm × 21cm)

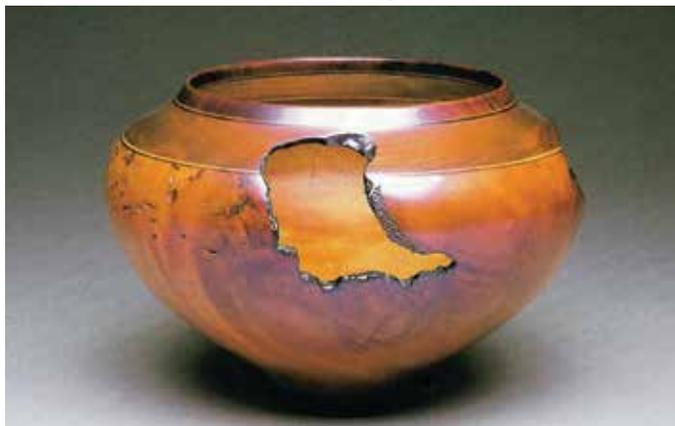
Voids created from a burl



Michael Peterson, *Two Canyon Mesa*, 1989, bleached and sandblasted boxelder burl, 5" × 14¼" (13cm × 36cm)

Photo: Robyn Horn

An un-natural natural edge



Giles Gilson, *Big Window/Little Bowl*, Walnut, maple, 3½" × 5" (9cm × 13cm)

Photo: Courtesy of Lipton Collection

Cummings III and Stephen Hughes designed negative space into their vessels after turning. This was a new approach. They used a jeweler's fretsaw to make the openings, which were then refined with rasps and carving techniques.

Achieving movement

With the subsequent advent of flex-shaft, micromotor, and air-powered cutting and carving tools, many

woodturners have found it easy to cut negative spaces into their work after turning. Their goals are varied. Many are interested in movement associated with passive negative space. In Dewey Garrett's *Exploration* (whose turning was technically challenging—described by the artist as having periodic “rapid disassemblies”), the skeletal form is fascinating. For Garrett, the most interesting aspect was the moiré patterns it cast as one walked around it, with the

interplay of space and material. The moiré patterns generated by the spaces in Hans Weissflog's lathe-turned pieces are also particularly evident as one moves past them.

Frank Cummings III is interested in movement too. His childhood memories of a rotating carousel in a Los Angeles park became the inspiration for his *Carousel* series, which evolved from the earlier *Citrus-Citrine*. In *Splendid Lady*, the waves in the lace-like crown

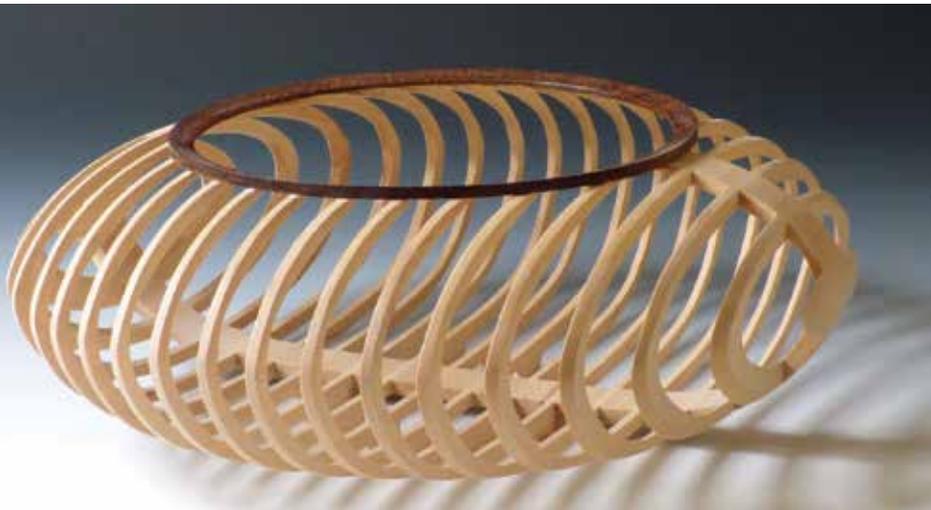
Negative space created by fretwork



(Left) **Frank Cummings III**, *Citrus-Citrine*, 1988, Orange wood, citrine, 18K gold, 8½" x 6½" (22cm x 17cm)

(Right) **Stephen Hughes**, *The Seed*, 1985, Huon pine, 14½" x 11" (37cm x 28cm)

Moiré Patterns



Dewey Garrett, *Exploration*, 1992, Maple, padauk, 4" x 14" (10cm x 36cm)



Hans Weissflog, *Saturn Star Bowl*, 2014, 2½" x 7" (6cm x 18cm)

evoke musical rhythms and undulate as one moves around the piece.

Arthur Jones explores the effect of movement in his *Black Hole* sculptures, which are interactive with the viewer: as one passes in front, the background light flickers on and off, giving a strobe effect; as one passes to the side, the thin lath attached to the equator becomes solid.

The open spaces in Virginia Dotson's cleverly constructed piece cast interesting light patterns, and the diagonal lines lend movement. ▶



Frank E. Cummings III, *Splendid Lady*, 1997, Bleached maple, Kingwood, pearls, garnets, 18k gold, 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (19cm x 13cm)

Photo: John Kiffe, © Long Beach Museum of Art

Voids in a segmented vessel



Virginia Dotson, *Shadow Play #10*, 1996, Maple, Pau marfim plywood, dye, 10" x 10" (25cm x 25cm)

The Center for Art in Wood Museum Collection, Donated by Neil and Susan Kaye

Flickering strobe



Arthur Jones, *Night Star VII*, 2003, Mahogany, 32" x 18" x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (81cm x 46cm x 17cm)

There is a strong sense of movement, too, in the *Helix* series by William Hunter, driven by the spiral forms for which he is known. The moving interplay of light and shadow between the forms and the spaces around and within them are integral to the dynamic effect.

Thematic expression

Negative space can send an emotional message. In another deconstructed piece, Betty J. Scarpino has sent two very different messages simply in the way the two forms are arranged and the space between them is altered. The left image conveys a feeling of intimacy; the right image a sense of aloofness or independence.

A dramatic use of negative space is illustrated with *Only Time Will Tell* by Frank Cummings III. Three years in the making, all light and air with the delicately carved gears and interior works visible, it is very different in its impact and use of space from a classic, enclosed, tall-case grandfather clock.



Negative space can be symbolic. The flame-shaped voids in Neil Turner's *Fire Bowl* were inspired by the Australian bush fires; they elevate a simple solid-wall, natural-edge bowl into a signature work. In the space contained by Arthur Jones's early *Madonna and Child*, we envision a shoulder, a womb, and a fetal form all in one. ▶

Conveying emotion

Betty J. Scarpino, *Double Entendre*, 2007, Maple, 3½" thick x 15" diameter (9cm x 38cm)

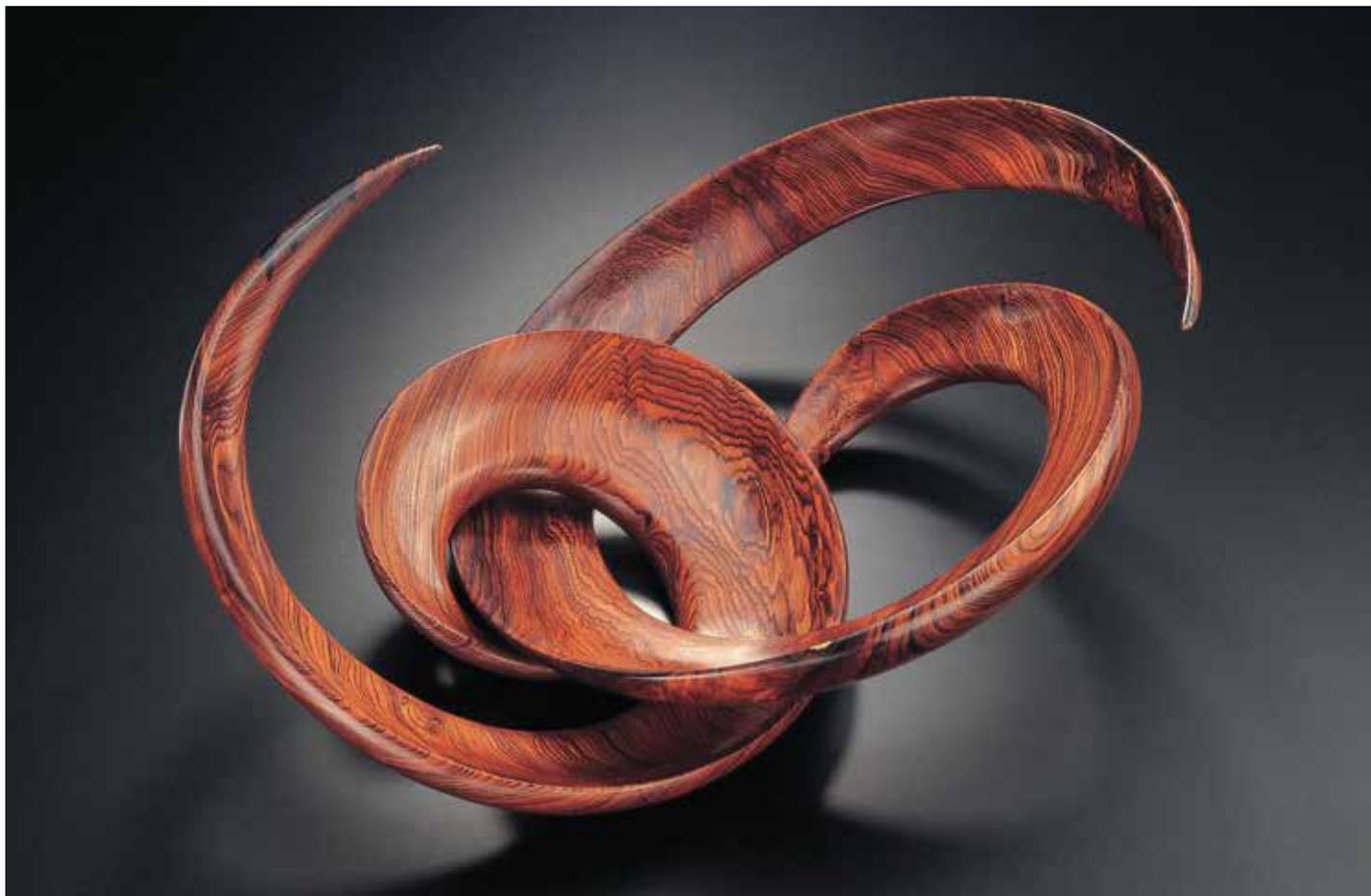
Photos: Shawn Spence



Frank Cummings III, *Only Time Will Tell*, 2013, Curly and spalted bubinga, walnut, rosewood, cherry, African blackwood, oak root, precious jewels, mirror, porcupine quills, 88½" x 25¼" x 15½" (225cm x 64cm x 39cm)

Photo: John Kiffe

Space and spirals spinning



William Hunter, *Converging Helix*, 1999, Cocobolo, 10" × 18" × 23" (25cm × 46cm × 58cm)

Space as symbolic form

Arthur Jones, *Madonna and Child*, 1998, Yellow poplar, 6" × 3" (15cm × 8cm)

Photo: Randall Smith



Neil Turner, *Fire Bowl*, 2003, Rock sheoak, 7" × 11½" (18cm × 29cm)

Photo: Victor France

Space embraced



Andi Wolfe, *Acer Embrace*, 2010, Sugar maple, 10" (25cm) tall



Arthur Jones, *The Offering*, 2000, Mahogany, celluloid ball, 22K gold leaf, 14" x 8" (36cm x 20cm)

Revealing the inner structure

Bill Luce, from *Bones of the Tree* series, Douglas fir



The two turned sculptures *at left* derive impact from their embrace of empty space. Andi Wolfe's *Acer Embrace* envelops a large void, yet the space occupies a volume. Visualize this piece if the leaves were simply carved onto a solid bowl form. It would lose the light, open feeling. *The Offering* comes from Arthur Jones's *Fossil/Skeletal* series. It is nearly all space and is elementally simple, yet the symbolism is unmistakable.

In a similar way, the space that surrounds and penetrates Alain Mailland's *L'Élégance de Pélagie* imbues it with a wonderful sense of lightness and grace.

Negative space is a feature of open segmented work, where it is a form of decoration and also adds lightness. William Smith's *Wings* is a lovely example.

Bill Luce has a unique method of creating negative space, by sandblasting. In his skeletal *Bones of the Tree* series, he reveals the history of a tree in the patterns cast, with the spaces created by removal of the softer growth rings contrasting with the harder rings left behind.

Mystery

A simple salad bowl encloses space. Many of us are drawn to hollow forms, which also enclose space. Viewed from the side, a hollow form is indistinguishable from a solid form. Yet as we lean over it, our eyes and hands are drawn to explore the interior, and when we lift it, we experience a pleasant surprise from the unexpected lightness. It is an optical illusion. Binh Pho associates negative space with mystery, so perhaps it is a sense of the unknown that we enjoy here.

Pho is a storyteller. In his two books, *River of Destiny* and *Shadow of the Turning*, co-authored by Kevin Wallace, every piece has a story, and



William Smith,
Wings, 2006, Ebony,
holly, pear, chakte
viga, padauk, 2¾" x
4½" (7cm x 11cm)

**Alain
Mailland,**
*L'Élégance de
Pélagie*, 2005,
Pistachio, 11" x 8"
(28cm x 20cm)

Negative space as metaphor



Binh Pho, *Balance*, Boxelder,
14" x 9" (36cm x 23cm)

Pho uses negative space in every one of these stories. He associates negative space with events that occur in dreams or have actually occurred. He calls it “the presence of absence.” An example in *River of Destiny* is the legend of Ying Toi and Leung Shan Pak, two lovers who were separated by death. Pho represents them by two butterflies surrounded by an open pierced lattice, so

that they exist in the negative space of the spirit realm.

Binh Pho trained as an architect, and form and space are the vocabulary of architecture. His sculpture *Balance* combines form and space beautifully. Beneath the image of *Balance* on his website, Pho quotes philosopher I Ching. As a summary of negative space, it is a good last word:

We join the spokes together in a wheel, but it is the center hole that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a home, but it is the inner space that makes it livable.

We work with being, but non-being is what we use.

Photos courtesy of the artists, unless otherwise noted.

Malcolm Zander is a New Zealand-born wood artist living in Ottawa, Canada. His website is malcolmezander.com.