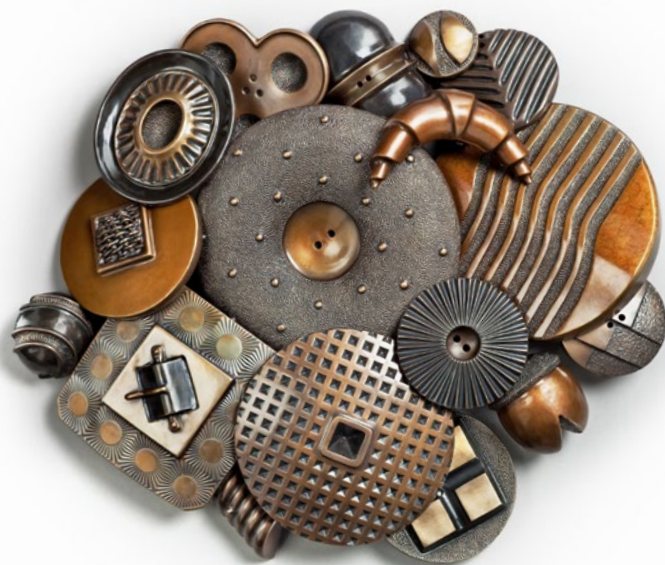


Lou Lynn

A Craft Maestro

By D Wood





*“More and more
I wonder to
what extent the
place where I
live influences
what I make.”*
—Lou Lynn



Top:
Lou Lynn's studio in
West Kootenay, British
Columbia, Canada

Photo courtesy of
Lou Lynn

Previous spread, left:
Buttons and Fasteners,
2014–2016
Bronze, steel
Various dimensions
Photo: Janet Dwyer

Previous spread, right:
Sharpener, 2018
Glass, bronze, steel
12 x 8 x 8 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer

Each year, the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) bestows a monetary prize and medallion upon a distinguished Canadian craftsperson. The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts—the Saidye Bronfman Award—is given to artists and artisans who have made a significant contribution to the field. It is the only award that honors fine craft in the country.¹

Candidates must be nominated by an arts professional, senior academic, private art dealer, art critic, or curator, and the jury is composed of a panel of prominent craftspeople. In other words, the laurel is recognition by one's peers. In 2021 Lou Lynn became the 45th winner of the Saidye Bronfman Award.

Six glass artists have received the honor in the past, and while Lynn has been recognized in glass journals, she is described by the CCA as a visual artist. Her notable work combining glass and bronze, uniting fragile with tough, as well as her teaching, publishing, and community service, make Lynn a worthy recipient of the award.

Overture

Lynn lives near the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, in a region called West Kootenay. As the crow flies, her home and studio are halfway between Vancouver and Calgary, Alberta, but a trip to either city requires a circuitous negotiation of two-lane highways. In the winter, Lynn rises early, shovels snow from the path to her studio, lights a fire in the wood stove, and returns to the house for breakfast. In summer, she may have to leave the property because of forest fires: in 2021, the nearby Trozzo Creek fire, covering 742 hectares, required Lynn to move 16 crates of sculpture to a safe location and stay with friends for a week.

Do these circumstances affect her work? Lynn says, “I used to resist this idea, but more and more I wonder to what extent the place where I live influences what I make. Initially I would suggest that I would be making the same work in downtown Toronto as I do living where I live.” She concedes that the property she shares with her partner, Joel Russ, requires chores like clearing brush and trimming foliage, which align with the process of handcraft. And her 2020 triptych, *Shovels*, bears witness to this connection. “I went to the sheds on our property and found sixteen different shovels. They all have slightly different purposes, or are broken, etc.,” Lynn says. I



Shovels (triptych), 2018
Glass, bronze, steel
42 x 62 x 19 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer

would contend that there are few sheds in Toronto that contain sixteen shovels and a broken one would go out in the weekly trash. Thus, the influence of place is worth exploring further. In the meantime, Lynn's description of where she took the notion of shovel gives an idea of her design inspiration, which she calls "the archaeology of daily life."

In the case of *Shovels*, Lynn says, "I began to see how this tool varies to dig a post-hole or something else. And it can alter over time. So I basically take a look at what's been done before and interpret, in my own way, what a shovel might be." *Shovel #1* looks orthodox, except for its glass shaft that is a ready-made 1 1/2-inch diameter glass rod. The bronze handle and socket are near normal in size, but the blade's missing corner leaves the viewer wondering. The brain reads it as shovel, yet it confounds because of its lack of utility: Would the fragile shaft withstand force? Would it break if tossed to the ground? Why the weird blade?

Lynn has accumulated a range of common hand tools that are her inspiration. Extrapolating from utensils in the kitchen, workshop, laundry, sewing room, and shed, she develops exquisite non-utensils.



Lynn causes further perturbation with *Shovel* #2 and #3, with their unfamiliar blades. What purpose do they serve? Are they replicas of ancient implements? These tools challenge utility; their only function is to express creativity, celebrate form and material, and contribute harmony and beauty to the world.

Instrumentation

Lynn grew up in Edmonton, Alberta, where she was exposed to clay in primary school. During high school she studied commercial art and attended adult night courses in clay where she explored its sculptural possibilities. The commercial art training transferred readily into her initial interest in stained glass, with its two-dimensionality and application of color. Lynn established a glass studio in 1973 and showed her stained glass at craft fairs, received commissions for private homes, and participated in a few exhibitions. In these pre-internet years, she eventually became aware of Pilchuck Glass School in Washington state. Her first Pilchuck class was architectural stained glass, taught by Ed Carpenter, assisted by Peter Mollica and Tim O'Neil. She says, "I saw things happening with glass that I never could have imagined. That made me re-examine what I was doing and the direction I wanted to go. Being exposed to all the various realms of working with glass at Pilchuck, I began to see that glass is more than two dimensions." She took a general class in cold working and then kiln-forming at the University of Hawaii. In total, she attended seven workshops at Pilchuck and was either a teaching assistant or

faculty member there four times.

Lynn accrued techniques that allowed her to kiln-cast glass. She used wax to create forms and the lost-wax method of casting: a plaster and silica investment encases the wax form; the wax is burned out, and the cavity filled with molten glass; when cold, the investment is removed and the glass is cut and polished. She showed this work in western Canada where it caught the eye of Lloyd Herman, the founding director of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Art Museum. He had moved to Vancouver, and offered Lynn her first solo glass exhibition (1986) at the newly founded Cartwright Gallery. This exposure at a significant venue enabled Lynn and Tom Lynn (no relation) to apply for a CCA grant to explore the possibilities of combining metal and glass.

Tom had a foundry and cast in aluminum, and while Lynn made a number of pieces with glass and aluminum, she was

concerned about the toxicity of the lost Styrofoam method which, when burnt out, emits a fine cyanide gas. Despite its drawbacks, Lynn says, “Once I saw the potential of what those two materials could do together—the metal and the glass, the fragility, the permanence—I began to think there was the potential to do something, yet I didn’t know what.” Over the years she experimented with various metals, and while teaching at the Kootenay School of the Arts in Nelson, BC, the instructors in the foundry suggested that she cast bronze with them. As Lynn notes, the rest is history.

Symphony

The combination of cast glass and cast bronze dominated Lynn’s work until “casting became a frustrating process,” she says. “At the time, the forms I was interested in had glass components that were very symmetrical, i.e., the handles of tools. That’s a process that normally would have happened on a lathe.” Today, the symmetrical glass forms are made by expert glass blowers to whom Lynn supplies drawings. She brings the blown forms to her studio to cold-work and fit them to the bronze components. Carved wax molds, sometimes built around the blown glass to ensure an appropriate fit, are taken to a foundry. The very rough bronze returns to Lynn’s studio for polishing and patinas. Occasionally, wood is incorporated too.

While the bits and pieces are being crafted and assembled, Lynn hires a museum mount-maker to execute her vision of the object’s display. She says, “I often think of myself as the conductor, with many skilled musicians out there.” And



Standing Form, 2001
Cast glass
17 x 10 x 4 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer



Opposite:
Berry Scoop, 2012
Glass, bronze,
steel mount
29 x 8 x 10 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer

Wheel, 1990
Cast aluminum, glass
12 x 26 x 15 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer





this is where place arises again because those “musicians” are not resident in her village. The realization of Lynn’s objects requires journeys to Vancouver, Calgary, and Nelson and is reliant on the schedules and idiosyncrasies of other craftspeople. In addition, an ice storm, mud slide, or pandemic can bring her craft practice to a halt.

Nevertheless, Lou Lynn’s portfolio is extensive. She’s a collector and has accumulated a range of common hand tools that are her inspiration. Extrapolating from utensils in the kitchen, workshop, laundry, sewing room, and shed, she develops exquisite non-utensils. Lynn reflects, “I wouldn’t say there was a deeper meaning that I’m exploring. There’s no message about what I’m doing. It’s a search for form and expression and interpreting my ideas which come bit by bit.” Yet a narrative *could* be imposed on the work.

Often in a small local history museum there will be a sign beside a displayed artifact that asks if the viewer can identify it. These objects once performed a vital function—apple peeling, meat grinding, trenching, candle making—that is now obsolete or done by machine. Lynn’s tools are not replicas of these antiques, but she riffs on them, creating a “thing” that looks like its predecessor yet isn’t. Not only does *Berry Scoop* have an impractical glass handle, it has a serrated edge that would pierce berries, making a juicy mess. Similarly, *Iron*, which recalls flat irons that were heated on a stove or had a chamber for heated coals, can’t fulfill its function because the chamber is remote from the triangular base. These objects seem to subtly comment on lost technologies and, like the unidentified museum artifact, were necessary at the time but are absurd from our perspective.

The works in *Tools as Artifacts*, a series from 2008–2010, have handles, knobs, and heads that are familiar, but their business ends have unrecognizable uses. *Button Box* is reminiscent of a tin of odd buttons in a sewing basket. The bronze, wood, and glass forms replicate the originals while the sizes would suit a giant’s clothes! The glass needle poking out of the central button is also from a fantasy tale.

One could speculate that Lynn’s location in a wild, mysterious, and inaccessible terrain, and one that was inhabited by colonial pioneers as well as back-to-the-landers, was and is a place where making do with what is at hand means survival. Her enigmatic and ersatz DIY tools suit that idiosyncratic, challenging environment.

Tools As Artifacts
(installation) (detail),
2008–2010
Glass, bronze
408 x 36 x 6 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer

Iron, 2017
Glass, bronze, steel
18 x 16 x 5 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer



Wool Comb, 2016
Glass, bronze,
steel
14 x 10.5 x 16 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer



Fasteners (installation), 2014–2016
Bronze, steel
42 x 432 x 6 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer

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1 Saidye Bronfman was the wife of Samuel Bronfman, the founder of the Seagram Company, a distiller of Canadian whiskey. Saidye was a philanthropist, active in Jewish communities, and a supporter of the arts and charities. / 2 Formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, the area was officially renamed Haida Gwaii (Islands of the People) in 2010 to honor the Haida Nation who lived there for 14,000 years.

Drum Roll

Lynn's deep participation in her community contributed to her being chosen for the Saidye Bronfman Award. She taught design and professional practice at the Kootenay School of the Arts for thirteen years, which led to workshops on marketing art. She was invited by an economic development consultant to give sessions to Indigenous artists in Haida Gwaii² and prepared them for attending and showing work at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. Her experience prompted her to write three books: *Make it to Market: Marketing Opportunities for Craft* (1999), *Marketing Pacific Northwest Coast Native Arts & Crafts* (2001) and *Marketing Guide for Fine Contemporary Craft in the U.S.* (2002). She has also been a board member and President of the BC Craft Council, served on the board of the Glass Art Association of Canada, acted as a provincial representative for the Canadian Craft Federation, and served as curator, coordinator, and consultant for exhibitions, juries, and programs.

Of winning the award, Lou Lynn says: "It's incredibly gratifying. The list of recipients is long with wonderful makers. It means that the work I've done over the course of my career, somebody noticed along the way. Because living where I live, I'm not always sure. I ask myself, does this matter to anybody else? I've been very fortunate to receive a number of grants and exhibitions so I know that people have noticed. This is definitely an accomplishment for me personally. Satisfaction." Yet when Lynn goes to Ottawa where the Governor-General will present the coveted medallion, she won't forget the metaphorical musicians: Janet Dwyer (photographer), Denis Kleine (metal caster), Julia Reimer (glass artist), Tyler Rock (glass artist), Joel Russ, Carl Schlichting (mountmaker), and a roster of other supporters. When she received news of the accolade, she told her husband, "We've just won the Bronfman." Acknowledging that "we" is another reason for her tribute.

Button Box is reminiscent of a tin of odd buttons in a sewing basket. The bronze, wood, and glass forms replicate the originals while the sizes would suit a giant's clothes! The glass needle poking out of the central button is also from a fantasy tale.

*Button Box, 2014
Glass, wood, metal
18 x 42 x 42 in.
Photo: Janet Dwyer*

