

# BALANCE AND TENSION



ART | CRAFT | DESIGN  
BELLEVUE ARTS MUSEUM

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THE FURNITURE OF  
**SETH ROLLAND**

## FOREWORD

MICHAEL W. MONROE  
DIRECTOR EMERITUS

BELLEVUE ARTS MUSEUM

## Imagination

“The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.”

William Blake

So it is with Seth Rolland, a man of imagination. Nature has long been the dominant influence on the life and work of this furniture maker and sculptor. Seth's love and respect for nature's secrets—simple and complex—speak to balance, beauty and harmony. Inspired by the geographic environment of the United States Pacific Northwest, Rolland's intimate observation of a range of organic abstract forms... trees, stones, sea and landscapes... all refer to the natural and physical surroundings of his studio and home in Port Townsend, Washington. Against the impersonal qualities of manufactured society, Seth Rolland's practice is one of a handful of Pacific Northwest one-person studios or independent small shops that have survived great odds and yet remain a potent moral and artistic force providing new ideas and directions to the genre of handmade furniture. *Balance and Tension: The Furniture of Seth Rolland* allows for an evaluation of his works in this exhibition, the mid-point of his oeuvre.

Rolland's art, foremost and primarily, speaks to the timeless and universal rhythms which repeat in all forms of nature. Born in 1963 and largely self-taught as a designer and furniture maker, Rolland's early and formative years were spent in Rye, New York where his mother is an architect and his father, a landscape architect, both of whom in the 1950s and '60s were enthusiasts for modernist furniture designs and home furnishings—whether by leading international architects or Scandinavian furniture designers such as Hans Wegner or Alvar Aalto. As a result, much of Seth's furniture aesthetic has been inspired by Scandinavia's reverence for the beauty of solid hardwoods, a love of simple, flowing sculptural forms where the balance between art and utility is strictly maintained.

His philosophy and environmental studies at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, deepened Seth's convictions and devotion to the necessity of achieving equilibrium while preserving the beauty of the natural world.

The rich texture, grain and color of the various woods invites our touch. In his quest for honesty, rarely are surface treatments applied, but rather are singularly wedded to his objects... no frills, tricks or embellishments. Hence his work documents the perfect unity and subtle interaction and marriage of surface with structure... speak to the original form created by nature... the tree. Striving to integrate the physical properties of wood with the visual and functional aspects in his work, Rolland investigates—never imitates. Implied in the works is a universal harmony that the final form is determined by the physical laws in the process of growth. The surface patterns and treatments on the pieces confirm Seth's mastery of the material and his understanding of the relationships between idea, technique, material, and form. We appreciate the quality and beauty of Rolland's works... the play of light versus shadow or symmetry versus asymmetry and in doing so we recognize that wood's appeal springs from our universal yearning to connect with an organic material.

In conclusion, looking at and interacting with Seth's works, we're reminded that his values and choices echo Ralph Waldo Emerson's belief that nature is an “omnipotent agent,” representative of “the universal mind.” Art according to Emerson, must complement nature, in which beauty, necessity and usefulness are one.



ABOVE  
DREAMCATCHER HALL TABLE • 2007  
SUSTAINABLY HARVESTED ASH AND MAHOGANY  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

## BALANCE AND TENSION

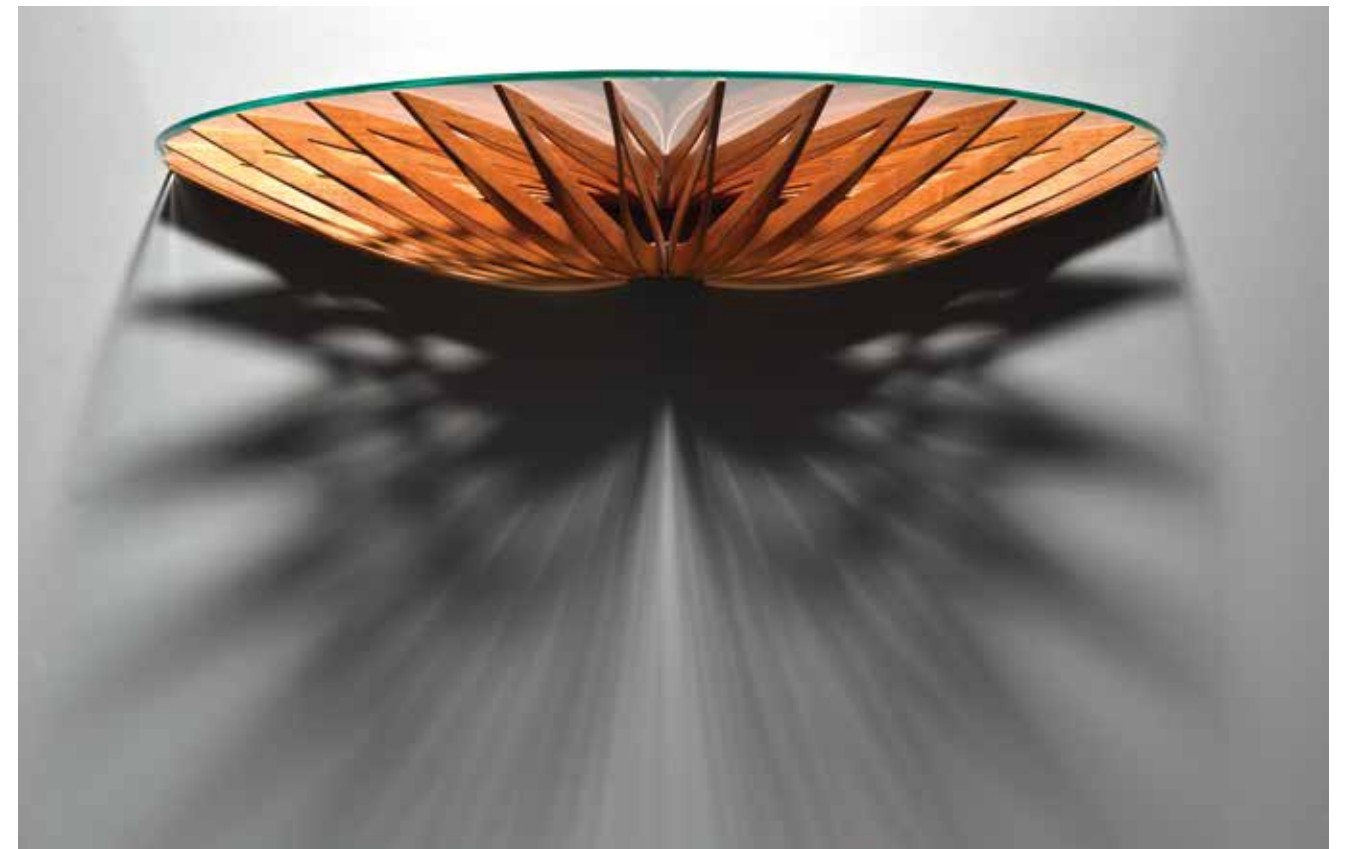
STEFANO CATALANI  
DIRECTOR OF ART,  
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BELLEVUE ARTS MUSEUM

Seth Rolland is a craftsman in the purest sense: a maker who thinks and communicates with his hands. For over 20 years, Rolland has been making furniture. Born in New York into a family of residential and landscape architects, Rolland's upbringing provided a strong foundation in problem solving and led him to find inspiration in the forms of the natural world.

Rolland's early interest in human interaction with the environment, both natural and built, was bolstered by his decision to pursue a bachelor's degree in Environmental Philosophy, which he earned from Williams College, Massachusetts in 1986. Rolland then went on to pursue boatbuilding apprenticeships in Maine and Connecticut. These experiences provided a formative hands-on education in the pliability of wood. The launch of his artistic career in New Mexico began in an unassuming way, fitting to his unpretentious character: invited by his future wife to show in her booth at a local craft fair, he built two folding slat chairs. Within a few months Rolland was selling several dozens of chairs per weekend. During that short season of craft fairs, Rolland found his vocation. The couple built and lived in a passive solar car tire and adobe home before relocating to Port Townsend, Washington, to live in proximity to the water of the Puget Sound and the majesty of the old growth forests of the Olympic Peninsula.

Rolland has been an assiduous presence at the Bellevue Arts Museum Arts Fair, which this year celebrates its 70th anniversary. As a craftsman, Rolland treasures and responds to the fair-goers' honest feedback to his designs as much today as at the start of his career. In 2014 Rolland won the John and Joyce Price Award of Excellence for his work in *BAM Biennial 2014: Knock on Wood. Balance and Tension: The Furniture of Seth Rolland* celebrates his craft.

A perceptive observer of shape and structure, Rolland draws inspiration for his design from the architecture of the natural world. The maker distills nature's complexity into its essential elements: symmetry and asymmetry, pattern and irregularity, lightness and mass, balance and tension, conferring an aura of deceptive simplicity and thoughtful restraint to his furniture. In some pieces, this influence is overt. In the majority of his work, however, Rolland employs a language of simplification and abstraction to subtly suggest nature's elemental forces. As a result, his furniture evokes such imagery as the slow erosion of geological formations, the rapturous essence of a Zen garden, the lacy intricacy of root systems, the stance of animals at rest, or their tensed muscles flexing to leap.



TOP  
RADIATA FLOATING SHELF • 2016  
SUSTAINABLY HARVESTED CHERRY  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

BOTTOM  
OXEYE HALL TABLE (DETAIL) • 2009  
SUSTAINABLY HARVESTED ASH  
AND WALNUT BURL  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

A more or less literal borrowing from nature is evident in the pieces from the *Stone | Balance* series. As the title suggests, this range of furniture combines wood with natural stone, letting the color and texture of one enhance that of the other. Rolland's design switches the usual qualities of the materials, often making the wood appear sharp and hard-edged, while the stones, with their weathered roundness, by comparison appear soft and inviting to the touch.

Heavy stones collected during walks on the beaches of the Puget Sound occupy a focal point in the structural as well as visual construction of many of the pieces included in this series. In the *North Beach Hall Table*, the cantilevered geometry of the top is literally balanced by the weight of a large cobble. In one of the most essential designs Rolland has ever conceived, the number of legs is reduced to two, while the contact of the diagonal plank with the floor provides the third necessary support. The table is reduced to three intersecting planes—horizontal, vertical, and diagonal—and the anchoring mass of the rock. Like a diagram representing a field of forces, the design of the *North Beach Hall Table* is dynamic, built with an essential economy of materials in mind, and with the stone to provide visual gravity by claiming for itself the space left agape by the diverging wooden elements.



ABOVE  
 NORTH BEACH HALL TABLE • 2005  
 EUROPEAN BEECH AND STONE  
 COLLECTION OF LEMOINE AND  
 FOSTER RADFORD



TOP  
 RAINFOREST BUFFET • 2012  
 WALNUT AND SLATE  
 COLLECTION OF NEIL AND  
 PEGGY HOLMAN

BOTTOM  
 GIBRALTAR BENCH COFFEE TABLE  
 RECLAIMED DOUGLAS FIR AND STONE  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



EDDY COFFEE TABLE • 2016  
MAHOGANY AND GRANITE  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Three legs also expressively define the design of the *Gibraltar Bench*, (shown on page 7) in which a large stone provides support along with two tapered legs of mid-century modern design inspiration. Bridging in one piece two of his sources of inspiration, Rolland is careful in visually balancing the curvy and asymmetrical design of the seat, tapering and slimming the seat on the 'heavy' side where the stone is set, as if to alleviate the visual weight of this end, and compensate for its mass. In an optical illusion, the rock appears to puncture the wood, emerging from below the flat wooden surface like a distant island floating on a vast expanse of water.

As with the *North Beach Hall Table*, the design of *Eddy Coffee Table* hinges on the carefully balanced gathering of visual and constructive elements. The heavily cantilevered mahogany top rests on a T-base, while an untreated granite rock wedged through it visually acts like a keystone holding the table together. Though the rock does not lock the pieces into position, it provides an anchoring weight essential to the stability of the table. The piece's expansive top, with its solitary peak emerging from the plane, rests on a carefully hand carved suggestion of ripples and eddies shaped by the wind on a grassy hillside. With its allusions to mountains and water, *Eddy Coffee Table* is a contemplative haven.



ROLLAND'S DESIGNS ARE DEFINITELY INDEBTED TO THE MODERNIST QUEST FOR FUNCTIONALITY IN SIMPLICITY. HOWEVER, STEERING AWAY FROM A STARK FUNCTIONALISM, ROLLAND BALANCES HIS PROCESS WITH THE SOFTNESS OF NATURE'S ESSENCE.



TOP  
 DRIFT COFFEE TABLE  
 WALNUT, STAINLESS STEEL AND GLASS  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



BOTTOM  
 OCTOPEL COFFEE TABLE • 2014  
 WALNUT  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Distilled to its salient features, nature—and that genuine and child-like sense of wonder that it often inspires—remains preponderant in the design of the tables, coffee tables, and chairs of the *Organic | Designing with Nature and Bamboo* series. These furniture pieces are inspired by the beauty and motion of streamlined natural forms. Some reflect the balance, stance, and motion of animals at rest or running, while others are influenced by the structure of plant forms, such as the rhizomatic division of root systems, or the recurring partition in three in the botanic and zoological realms. Inspired by the graceful stance of shore birds, the *Ibis Dining Table* is an expanding table that changes its look as the legs move apart to accommodate the extension leaves. The carved legs, carefully positioned to provide stability without being in the way of the diner's feet, appear slightly flexed as if ready to dramatically spring into flight. Equally evocative is the furniture inspired by the strong sculptural curves of Banyan tree roots. Rolland has created a whole series of tables, buffet, and desks using sustainably harvested bamboo. For each piece Rolland explores variations in the design of the legs as inspired by the vigorous root system. Indeed rather than legs, one should speak of base or pedestal as the elements are latticed in one web. The result is as compellingly dynamic as the brass dance steps inlaid on the pavement of a sidewalk. Swarming with legs, *Drift Coffee Table* and *Octoped Coffee Table* are another testimony of Rolland's ability to draw from nature's suggestive offerings: the *Drift Coffee Table* features 17 solid black walnut legs, loosely organized in two clusters and bonded with steel caps to an elliptical glass table top. Animated with aquatic references, the table's design is reduced to its sensually bent legs evocative of either the protruding tentacles of jellyfish and sea anemones or the anchoring of mangroves' roots in a mud bed. On the other hand, *Octoped Coffee*

*Table* seems to literally be running from under our mug as we rest it on top of the table.

Rolland's ability to instill movement through the subtle arching and tapering of the legs is evident in the *Finback Bar Stool* (shown on page 12). Designed to cradle a person in a comfortable position, the sculpted forms of the wood back and seat of the stool integrate gracefully with four sturdy tapering legs: while the rounded thickness of the 'thigh' of the leg suggests strength and support, the slender 'shin' under the foot rest evokes agility: with its slight tapering, each leg appears flexed and ready to release energy.

Distinctive of Rolland's work is the singular mastery of kerfing, as well as the technique known as steam bending. Used by luthiers to bend the lining of string instruments, and traditionally employed by the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest to create cedar bentwood boxes, kerfing is, in simple terms, the act of making a series of cuts in a piece of wood in close proximity, so that the wood can be curved. A cut too deep results in the wood cracking completely through, while a cut not deep enough causes the wood to snap instead of bending. Equally critical is spacing the cuts uniformly to evenly distribute the stress induced by bending.

Kerfing has become popular in recent years in conjunction with the accessibility to CNC (computer numerical control) milling, which allows machines to execute complex weaves of cuts with exact precision. Because of the incisions, the material gains textile-like properties and a significantly wider range of applications, such as flexible paneling for architecture and interiors, sound absorbing paneling, or chairs and boxes with 'living hinges.' In these applications, however, the cuts are seldom deeper than three quarters of an inch.



ABOVE  
 LEFT  
 FINBACK BAR STOOL • 2004  
 WALNUT  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



ABOVE  
 RIGHT  
 TRIMEROUS CHAIR • 2016  
 CURLY MAPLE, WALNUT,  
 SAPELE VENEER  
 FIRST DESIGNED IN 1998  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Early pieces include *Ash Explosion Coffee Table*, *Tanoto Coffee Table*, and *Ash Explosion Hall Table* in which a single solid piece of wood is longitudinally cut and fanned out into an expanding bundle of smaller boards as it passes through a vertical support. Such a visual device accounts for both the aesthetic narrative and the structural make-up of the pieces. Rolland modulates volume by varying the placement and angle of the round rods which hold each section apart. After the wood is cut, it becomes pliable through steaming. Rolland then bends all the pieces to the intended curves before the wood cools. Several months of drying are necessary for it to hold its final shape. Each one of these pieces is an early functional study on the balance between the full and the void, and an exploration of the tension between the pliability of the material and the 'solidity' of negative space. As Rolland learned to master the technique, his furniture ultimately expanded in both directions of simplicity and complexity as respectively exemplified by pieces such as *Branch Hall Tree* and *Torii Hall Table*. Executed from one piece of wood, *Branch Hall Tree* is a brilliant statement of restraint and minimalism in design. With its tapered 'trunk' offering an elegant visual counterpoint to the expanded 'canopy' *Branch Hall Tree* answers the question "how simple can design get while remaining fully functional?" The *Tree* exists as both sculpture and functional object, namely a coat rack.



RIGHT  
 ASH EXPLOSION COFFEE TABLE • 2016  
 SUSTAINABLY HARVESTED ASH,  
 CHERRY, BASSWOOD, SANDSTONE  
 FIRST DESIGNED IN 2001  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



*Torii Hall Table*, on the other hand, offers a complex twist to the art of kerfing: the legs of the table are each created from one continuous piece of wood that has been kerfed and expanded not longitudinally but radially, thus sculpturally referencing the bole from which the material was cut. In *Balance and Tension*, the artist engages with the ebb and flow between sculptural and functional, first welcoming, for example, the public to a copse of tall *Ghost Trees* among which the public ‘discovers’ pieces such as the already mentioned *Branch Hall Tree* (shown on page 10) whose functionality is determined *only* by its height.

Rolland’s furniture is informed by principles of simplicity and truth to materials—harking back to Shaker and Scandinavian design traditions—as well as contemporary concerns for environmental sustainability. Whether inspired by the myriad forms found in nature or the potential for complex architectures offered by kerfing, Rolland’s designs demonstrate his sophisticated process of simplification and abstraction, which enquires into untested possibilities of wood as a material for making furniture. Through the process of kerfing, Rolland expresses wood’s seemingly incongruent properties of rigidity and pliability, using them to determine the structural and aesthetic qualities of his pieces. Unconventional in his approach to design, Rolland focuses his attention on the base or legs of a furniture piece. The top of the work—its function consigned to accommodating plates, vases, and other domestic objects—is rendered invisible by the use of transparent glass or minimal simplicity of its surface. Driven by a quest for utility and essential forms, Rolland employs his mastery to create surprising design solutions in which engineering and aesthetics are intertwined.

A close analysis of the design of *Dreamcatcher Hall Table* (shown on page 2) or any of the tables from the *Parabola* group reveal how, though intricate at first glance, this furniture is in fact ingeniously simple and sparingly ornamental, riffing on the modernist creed



ABOVE  
TORII HALL TABLE • 2008  
SUSTAINABLY HARVESTED  
CHERRY AND ASH  
COLLECTION OF JOAN AND  
IRWIN GOVERMAN

of ‘less is more.’ These pieces are Rolland’s most ambitious effort towards a furniture of simplicity (of means, of process) and of visual balancing of tensions.

In *Dreamcatcher Hall Table* the light-colored ash structure started as one small board. Like an accordion it has been unfolded and expanded in length and in depth at once, into an architecture spatially over 6 times the original size. This wood origami was then framed by the Mahogany top and stretchers, creating an extremely strong and light-weight console. Rolland enhances the impression of weightlessness by gently arching the stretchers, thus trusting upward the Moorish-inspired latticework.

With the *Parabola* tables the mind goes to the tensile architecture of man-made landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the cantilever Forth Bridge, over the Firth of Forth in the east of Scotland, or the organic ‘impossible’ structures by contemporary Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. In the *Parabola* tables each of the two legs

RIGHT/INSET  
PARABOLA CONSOLE • 2011  
CLARO WALNUT AND CHERRY  
FIRST DESIGNED IN 2006  
COLLECTION OF ALISA AND  
MASATOSHI INOUE

originates from one single piece of wood, deeply kerfed. The effect is textural as the slender elements weave in space while twisting around a vertical axis. Rolland finally anchors the extremities of each fan into the bowed strips at the base and at the top, ‘pulling’ the two arcs in opposite direction, and capturing the dramatic tension of a structure bent and about to release. Visually complex, technically challenging, the *Parabola* tables embody Rolland’s design philosophy of complexity in sparseness, and accumulation of visual tension in the balancing act which defines the construction of each piece. Rolland’s designs are definitely indebted to the modernist quest for functionality in simplicity. However, steering away

from a stark functionalism, Rolland balances his process with the softness of nature’s essence.

In exploring and resolving physical as well as visual tensions, Seth Rolland achieves balance between the craftsman’s preoccupation with skill and the designer’s pursuit of form and function. Through processes of reduction and abstraction his furniture becomes suggestive of nature’s patterns as shaped by the tension and balance of the forces at work. In this ebb and flow between inspiration from the organic and the architectural, Rolland produces furniture of genuine simplicity, contemplative beauty, and honest design.



# SETH ROLLAND

Born in Rye, New York; lives and works in Port Townsend, WA



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## EDUCATION

- 1987 - 1988   Apprentice to Janis Colella Custom Furniture, Banksville,  
New York
- 1986           Bachelor of Arts, Williams College, Massachusetts

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2016           Balance and Tension, Bellevue Arts Museum,  
Bellevue, Washington
- 2015           Wood In-vase-ives, The Wharton Esherick Museum,  
Paoli, Pennsylvania
- 2014           BAM Biennial 2014: Knock on Wood, Bellevue Arts Museum,  
Bellevue, Washington
- 2014           Reaching Beyond: Northwest Designer Craftsmen at 60,  
Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, Washington
- 2014           The Art of Fine Furniture, Winona County Historical Museum,  
Winona, Minnesota
- 2012           Solo Show, Bainbridge Arts & Crafts Gallery,  
Bainbridge Island, Washington
- 2011           Our Community Collects, Chrysler Art Museum,  
Norfolk, Virginia
- 2010           A Cure for the Common Desk, The Wharton Esherick  
Museum, Paoli, Pennsylvania
- 2010           Rising Stars, Northwest Woodworkers Gallery,  
Seattle, Washington
- 2008           The Unexpected Table, Bainbridge Arts & Crafts Gallery,  
Bainbridge Island, Washington
- 2007           Cascadia Furniture Exhibition, The Maltwood Art Museum  
and Gallery, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
- 2007           Lines into Shapes, Art Center of Estes Park, Colorado
- 2007           7th North American Sculptural Wood Invitational, American  
Art Company, Tacoma, Washington
- 2006           Art of Craft, B.J. Spoke Gallery, Huntington, New York
- 2006           Square One, The Art Mine, Port Hadlock, Washington
- 2003           Emerging Artists Show, Bellevue Art Museum,  
Bellevue, Washington
- 2001           Above and Beyond, Phoenix Sky Harbor International  
Airport, Arizona
- 2000           Taos Invites Taos, Taos, New Mexico
- 1999           Taos Invites Taos, Taos, New Mexico
- 1998           Taos Invites Taos, Taos, New Mexico
- 1996           Treasured Troves, The Wharton Esherick Museum,  
Paoli, Pennsylvania

## AWARDS

- 2015           First Prize, Vases, The Wharton Esherick Museum show,  
Paoli, Pennsylvania
- 2014           John and Joyce Price Award of Excellence, BAM Biennial  
2014: Knock on Wood, Bellevue Arts Museum,  
Bellevue, Washington
- 2011           Carol Duke Award of Excellence, BAM ARTSfair, Bellevue  
Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington
- 2010           First Prize, Desk Accessories, The Wharton Esherick Museum,  
Paoli, Pennsylvania
- 2010           NICHE Award for Torii Hall table, Home Furnishings
- 2006           Carol Duke Award of Excellence, BAM ARTSfair, Bellevue  
Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington

- 2006           Design Portfolio Award, Home Furniture, Custom  
Woodworking Business Magazine
- 2003           Emerging Artist Award and exhibition, Bellevue Art  
Museum, Bellevue, Washington
- 2000           Recipient of the Sam Maloof Scholarship for study at  
Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, Colorado
- 1999           Recipient of the Sam Maloof Scholarship for study at  
Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, Colorado
- 1998           Recipient of the Sam Maloof Scholarship for study at  
Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, Colorado
- 1997           Primary Award Winner, Silverhawk National Fine Craft  
Competition

## PUBLICATIONS

- 2014           Lee, Linda, "Whatever Floats Your Boat," New York Times,  
February 19
- 2014           Nancy Worssam, "Witty, poignant, versatile: 'Designer  
Craftsmen at 60,'" Seattle Times, NW Weekend section, July 24
- 2012           Rogel, Christine, "Details" Western Art and Architecture  
Magazine, June, pg. 79
- 2010           Binzen, Jonathan, "A Slice of Genius," Fine Woodworking  
Magazine, August, vol. 213, back cover
- 2010           Johnson, Tim, "Gallery," Woodwork magazine, Winter, pg. 62
- 2009           Rohrlich, Marianne, "Sculptural Bookends that Blossom from  
Single Piece of Wood," New York Times, February 4
- 2009           Hemachandra, Ray, and Glasgow, Andrew, 500 Tables: Inspiring  
Interpretations of Function and Style, Lark Crafts,  
pg. 88, 126, 134, 322
- 2009           Gibson, Scott, Fine Woodworking Design Book Eight: Original  
Furniture from the World's Finest Craftsmen, Newtown,  
Connecticut: The Taunton Press, pg. Cover and 6-7
- 2008           Hemachandra, Ray, 500 Chairs: Celebrating Traditional &  
Innovative Designs, Lark Crafts, pg. 90, 92
- 2008           Donna Schoolfield, "Functional Art," Pacific Northwest Homes  
Magazine, February, pg. 47
- 2008           Goldman, Ron "Profile: Seth Rolland," Woodworker West  
Magazine, Feature Article, January, pg. Cover and 54-55
- 2008           Kapsales, Anissa, "Gallery," Fine Woodworking, January, pg 87
- 2005           Minton, Elise, "House Pick," Luxe Magazine, October, pg. 75
- 2004           Gunter, Veronika Alice, Lydgate, Tony, 400 Wood Boxes:  
The Fine Art of Containment & Concealment, Lark Books,  
pg. 50-51
- 2001           "Show # 612." Modern Masters. HGTV: December 30
- 2001           Kazan, Katie, Object Lessons: Beauty and Meaning in Art,  
Madison, Wisconsin: Guild Publishing, pg. 142

## TEACHING

- 2016           Port Townsend School of Woodworking, Port Townsend,  
Washington
- 2015           Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, Colorado
- 2014           Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, Rockport, Maine
- 2013           Minnesota Woodworkers Guild Fall Seminar,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 2013           Marc Adams School of Woodworking, Franklin, Indiana
- 2010           Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee
- 2010           Lecture for Vancouver Island Woodworkers Guild,  
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada