

TOOLING ALONG

*Avampato hammers together
 local and international examples of turning tools into art*

By Rusty Marks
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WHEN John Hechinger moved his hardware store empire into new headquarters in 1978, he found the walls drab and bare. The amateur art collector decided to hang some artwork celebrating tools to brighten things up a little.

Hechinger has since retired and sold off his empire, but he still controls what has become the largest collection of tool-based artwork in the world.

"Tools as Art," a traveling show of 65 pieces of art from the Hechinger collection, comes to the Avampato Discovery Museum at the Clay Center on Saturday. The exhibit runs through March 21 at the downtown Charleston museum.

"This is not your average art show," said museum art curator and deputy director Ric Ambrose.

About half the artists included in the exhibit are well known, including Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, Red Grooms and Richard Estes. But many are just beginning to achieve recognition. While a good number of Americans are represented, some of the artists are European and Asian.

"It's a good cross-section of the art that's being created today," Ambrose said.

Pieces in the exhibit run the gamut from more traditional paintings to off-the-wall sculptures. Visitors can expect to see a giant carpenter's plane carved from wood and a life-sized stepladder made entirely of paper.

Ambrose said some of the pieces in the collection are by known artists, but are atypical of their other works. "The sense of creativity really comes to the forefront," he said.

One of Ambrose's favorite pieces in the collection is "Blue, Red, Brown," a sweeping rainbow of real paintbrushes flowing across a canvas they seem to be in the process of painting. Robert Arman created the piece in 1988.

Hechinger's collection includes two pieces by Alderson artist Mark Blumenstein, whose whimsical sculptures made of tools and old junk have received national recognition. But don't look for the pieces in the traveling exhibit — they're among Hechinger's favorites and are not included in the tour.

"Those two pieces are in his home," Ambrose said.

Blumenstein will still be represented in the show. In conjunction with the "Tools as Art" exhibit, Ambrose asked West Virginia artists to produce pieces to include with the collection.

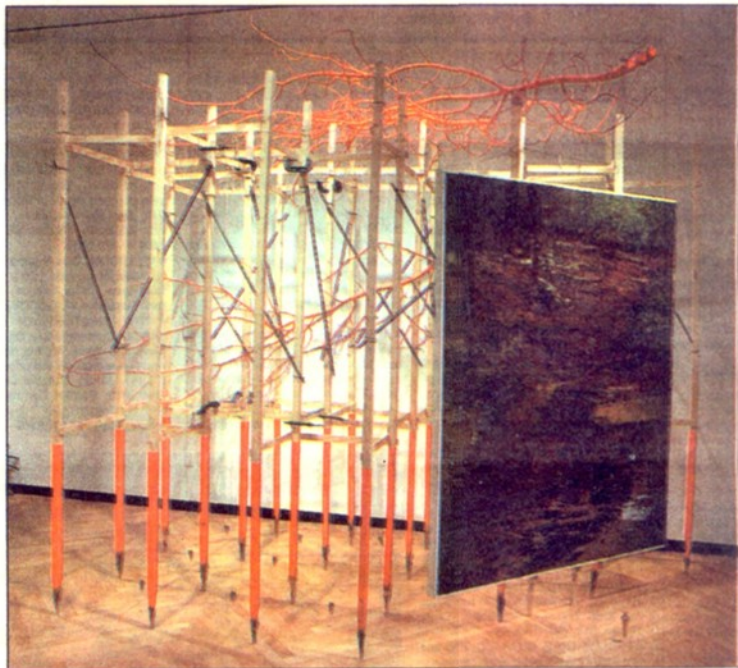
The result was 24 pieces of artwork as diverse as those in the Hechinger collection. If anything, Ambrose said, the Mountain State artists took more risks than those included in the touring exhibit.

"It really expands the concept of what a tool is," Ambrose said.

Filmmaker and artist Bob Gates of Charleston created a cubic assemblage titled "Memories" that incorporates old film reels, a television picture tube and jumbles of computer parts. Chris Dutch and Robin Hammer play off of their own tools for their sculpture "Not To Scale," which features a highly stylized T-square, artist's angle and a Dali-esque pencil meandering across a tile surface.

"There really isn't a weak piece in the exhibit," Ambrose said.

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Gazette photos by LAWRENCE PERCI

"The Divining Rod," by Fairmont artist Lynn Boggess, in part explores what happens when man meets nature and sets about conquering it for his own aims. The sculpture is one of 24 pieces created by West Virginia artists to display with the nationally touring art exhibit "Tools As Art: The Hechinger Collection" on display through March 21 at the Avampato Discovery Museum in the Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences.

If you go

Museum gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission to the gallery is \$5.50 for adults, \$5 for children, students, teachers and seniors. Film, planetarium and laser shows are extra. Call 561-3570.



Sculptor Christopher Plowman created "Cut" in 1986. It is among 65 pieces of artwork touring the country as part of the "Tools as Art" collection.

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Ric Ambrose, museum art curator