The recipient of the International Sculpture Center’s 2013 Outstanding Educator Award, Wayne Potratz will have taught at the University of Minnesota for 45 years when he retires in 2014. A metal caster, he was the first artist on the U of M faculty to be named Professor and Scholar of the College. Over the decades, he has taught Basic Sculpture, Metal Casting of Sculpture, Modeling and Mold-making of Sculpture, Sculpture Seminar, Freshman Seminar, Professional Practices, as well as numerous graduate tutorials, while serving as a role model and mentor to hundreds of burgeoning artists.

A St. Paul native, Potratz graduated from Central High School and went on to receive a BS in art and education from Macalester College in 1964 and an MA in sculpture from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1966. Returning to the Twin Cities, he first taught art at Mounds View High School and Lakewood Community College before beginning at U of M in 1969.

In addition to metal, Potratz works with wood and stone, and his more elaborate pieces often incorporate all three. To these dense, gravity-bound works, he might add a feather, a piece of string or rope, or a branch chewed by a beaver. His rich iconography includes turtles, canoes and paddles, low-slung carts, and a range of vessels rooted in an Asian aesthetic. Employing an additive process in which one form is enlivened or completed by another, Potratz’s works coalesce into opaque but associative narratives, leaving viewers to complete the meaning.

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**Mason Riddle:** You cast your first piece—a lead casting of a head—in 1959. You have said that with metal casting “there is no end to the ideas you can investigate” and “no exhaustion of the potential of the materials.” Could you elaborate on the continued allure of the casting process for you in terms of the material, fire, and collaboration?

**Wayne Potratz:** Plato quoted Socrates as saying, “The more you know, the more there is to know,” and that has been my experience with metal casting. As a transformative process that makes use of the element of fire, its methodology is deeply involved with chance and risk, as Paul Valéry so aptly points out in his essay “On the Pre-eminent Dignity of the Arts of Fire.” So, the existential angst one feels just before pouring liquid metal into a mold is part of what makes the process exciting and interesting. Both the material and the maker are transformed and refined by the fire, so the work is physical, mental, and spiritual—a kind of alchemy that brings one back to an enchanted world. There is a magical sense to working with fire and transforming the space within the mold into an image. Part of my practice has also been to research and then use various historical and ethnic metal casting techniques and traditions with an eye as to how these various methods have influenced the aesthetics of the images that I make in iron, bronze, or other metals.

**M R:** Your father was a cabinetmaker and your grandfather was a roofer—professions that require working with tools and the hand. What did you learn from these men about the importance of the hand in art?

**WP:** I grew up playing around in my father’s shop. I had free access to tools and materials and no restrictions on the things I could make. As a child, I liked to draw, and I also listened to the radio before the advent of TV. Radio required you to fill in the images out of your own imagination as you listened to “The Lone Ranger” or “Straight Arrow.” Early in my practice, I saw the link between the hand and making, between the mind and image. I have come to think that there is as much mind in one’s hand as in one’s brain and that the mind extends throughout the body. Frank Wilson’s The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture simply confirmed what I had experienced through making sculpture.

**M R:** You work with a distinct iconography of forms. Why do these objects and images have enduring importance for you?

**WP:** I have used the Lakota sign for “turtle” as my artistic signature since graduate school, when I started marking my molds with it. I began to see this pictographic image as my totem and discovered that the turtle appears in the creation myths of many cultures. It is seen as a sign for longevity, fecundity, and creativity. I began making the image as a kind of mantra and a place to begin. Canoes, paddles, and vessels come from my travels in the wilderness and in other cultures. It’s a kind of narrative—you are what you make, and you make what you are. I recently came across a statement from Carl Jung that I think pertains to my imagery and practice: “I can only make direct statements, only ‘tell stories.’ Whether or not the stories are ‘true’ is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is my fable, my truth.”

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MR: You’ve said, “Art is an extension of play—an open-ended situation where all relationships are possible.”

WP: In pure play, all relationships are possible. We are naturally creative as children and are then “educated” out of creative play into “knowledge” in which only certain relationships are “correct.” I have come to the conclusion that relationships create meaning, and that many relationships are reciprocal—a kind of inverse conundrum, reminiscent of the Yang and the Yin, the ink and the paper, space and time, or the mold and the casting. Each is not the other, but their relationship creates meaning.

MR: A skilled fisherman, you have spent decades camping and fishing in the Boundary Waters Canoe area in Northern Minnesota and Canada. You’ve explained that sport fishing is a metaphor for art-making
in that one enters into it "with no expectation of success." How have those five decades of wilderness trips influenced your aesthetic and art-making process?

WP: Like all art seekers, I am on a journey both literally and metaphorically, immersing my mind and body in the unfamiliar. I go to experience the Other in order to know and understand the Familiar. My many trips into Boundary Waters have made me very aware of a 360-degree spatial experience, of the power of wind, water, and rock. The myriad forms of consciousness abounding there do not care whether you live or die; you are simply part of the process, not at center stage. I began to see these trips as performances, acts in time and space, with a sculptor’s sensibility of order, form, process, skill, and composition. As a sport fisher, I go with light tackle and artificial lures and fish in unknown waters, just in the hope of catching the “Big One.” I think of art as a kind of fishing in an unknown pool for more than an infinite number of possibilities.

MR: Your longstanding interest in Native American culture began when you were a child in St. Paul. What particular aspects of Native culture have been important to you?

WP: I began learning about Native American dancing, crafts, and culture at the age of 10. When I became a practicing artist, those early experiences and later contemplations entered the work. The Lakota phrase *Mitakuye Owasin* ("All My Relations") says it best; it reflects the Native American worldview of inter-connectedness, an awareness of the harmony in and the interrelatedness of the natural world, and seeing the spirit in all things. This has led me to the idea of becoming very close to my materials and my process. My recent activity in making steel directly from Minnesota magnetite iron ore and then using it in my work is an example of this philosophy. My travels in Asia and conversations with Asian artists revealed a similar respect for and intimacy with the material — there is a correspondence there with Native American philosophy.

MR: Could you expand on the importance of travel to the development of your work? Over the decades, you have traveled extensively, exploring other cultures and metal-casting traditions. You first visited Western Europe in the early 1970s and then went on to travel in India, Turkey, China, Japan, Korea, Ireland, Canada, and Mexico.

WP: At first, traveling was a way to see and experience the architecture and art that I had studied in school. Later, the trips became research projects to meet artists, study, and practice — always learning by doing. Relationships create meaning in the larger sense that I described before, but I also make it a point to stay connected on a personal level with the artists whom I’ve met. These meaningful relationships have opened up other possibilities and introductions, leading to other avenues of inquiry, an ever-expanding field. My international relationships have been very valuable to our department and students and have resulted in numerous symposia, conferences, and exchanges.

MR: You have spent your entire adult life in academia, mostly teaching art at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. How has academic life supported your artistic growth and aesthetic investigations into the metal-casting traditions of other cultures?

WP: I have been very fortunate to teach and do creative research at a research-oriented institution. The art department and the College of Liberal Arts have supported my research travel and provided
funding for tools, equipment, and materials. Of course, the perfect grant for the artist is “give me money, so I can play in my studio.” Academic institutions are reluctant to make grants like that, so my strategy has been to tie my creative and aesthetic play to something that traditional academics can understand: historical, cultural, and methodological enquiry.

MR: How have your students enriched your professional life?
WP: My philosophy has always been that if I was going to teach, I also had to continue to learn. I’ve done my work at the University of Minnesota Sculpture Foundry, so students are engaged not just with lectures, discussions, and demonstrations, but also with the idea of continued, active making. Metal casting is a natural “draw” because of its inherent danger and physicality. Once students become involved, they also see the collaborative nature of the process. So, we all learn from one another in an updated version of the artist’s workshop. I have always liked the old Chinese aphorism “Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself.” As my students have gone out into the art world, I have tried to stay in touch, and those relationships have created another expanded field.

MR: You have often stated your deep interest in the “history of things,” and you place great importance on skill, craft, and authenticity. As you have noted, these are not necessarily popular values or ideas in the 21st-century art world. Why are they important to you?
WP: As the world becomes more and more digitized, I fear for the role of the hand in the making process. For example, cursive writing is being abandoned in elementary schools, so I wonder how brain development will change with the “tablet generation.” Many of today’s students cannot make it through a class period without being digitally connected, and they come with very limited hand skills or experience with hand tools. Computers, cell phones, ear buds, and digital tools are all wonderfully useful, and I am a firm believer in the “there’s room for all approaches” school of art, but digital devices also mediate experience and separate us from a more direct experience. Lately I’ve been reading articles that cite the “de-skilling” of art as an aspect of contemporary art, something I have witnessed in recent MFA thesis exhibitions. I think the term “contemporary art” now implies stylistic tendencies, in the same way that “modern” has come to mean a particular style. I have always believed that I was headed away from the “trends,” but I must admit that recently I figured out how to put a video in an iron casting.

Mason Riddle is a writer living in St. Paul.