

A black and white photograph of Emil Milan, a bearded man wearing a dark cap and a long-sleeved shirt, standing in a barn door. He is leaning on a wooden post with his right arm and holding a piece of paper or fabric in his left hand. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights his face and the texture of his clothing and the wood.

# Emil Milan

## Midcentury Master

**The illustrated biography of an influential American artist who was at the forefront of Midcentury Modern design, yet remained relatively unknown ... until now.**

Emil Milan standing in the barn door of his Thompson, PA studio, 1983. Photo: Leighton Johnson

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## Midcentury Master

An illustrated biography published by The Center for Art in Wood

Written by Craig Edelbrock with Norm Sartorius, Phil Jurus, and Barry Gordon

Foreword by Albert LeCoff



### ABOUT EMIL MILAN

Emil Milan (1922–85) was an American woodworker known for his carved bowls, trays, birds, and other accessories and art in wood. Trained as a sculptor at the Art Students League of New York, his life story straddles the 20th Century and is woven into major U.S. and world events.

Milan was at the forefront of midcentury modern design with the world's leading artists and designers of the times. His work distills the very essence of modern design as applied to functional wares in wood. He contributed to the rise of the studio craft movement in America following WWII. He also played a part in the emergence and growth of the American Craft Council, regional craft organizations including New Jersey Designer Craftsmen and Craftsmen of the Endless Mountains, and Peters Valley School of Craft.

Milan's items were sold in a variety of department stores during his lifetime. In the decade following WWII, Hammacher Schlemmer offered a "Table Talk" line of wooden tableware and accessories in their catalogs and at their famous store on 57th Street in Midtown Manhattan. The Table Talk "sculptures," as they called them, were designed by Emil Milan and made at his

production shop called Buckridge Contemporary Design located in Orange, NJ. True to Hammacher Schlemmer's core values, the items were leading edge modern designs, made of exotic imported hardwoods, hand finished, and available only from them. Milan also played a role in the early development of Pottery Barn and was featured in the company's first print catalog. He also lectured and did woodworking demonstrations at the first Pottery Barn store in West Chelsea, Manhattan.

Milan's works are in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Center for Art in Wood, the Museum of Arts and Design, and many private collections. Once prominent in midcentury modern design, Milan slipped into obscurity after his death. His legacy has been revived by the Emil Milan Research Team's extensive biographical research project that has led to renewed interest in his life, work, and influence.

### ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The forthcoming publication on the life and work of Emil Milan will contain the most comprehensive collection of chronology, stories, anecdotes, and work from the late American artist. There is an additional section devoted to Milan's "Circle of Influence" which showcases the artworks and stories of artists trained, influenced, and inspired by Emil Milan.

The book will be made available for pre-orders from October 17 through November 15, 2017 through a crowd-funding campaign on Kickstarter. To explore sample spreads from the book and to gain access to the lowest early bird price, sign up for the newsletter now at [emilmilan.org/the-publication](http://emilmilan.org/the-publication).

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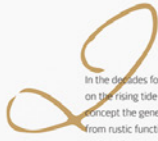
Emil Milan, *Bird on a Base*

Walnut. 5 x 12 x 3 in.

Collection of Kari Hexem Gordon and Adam Gordon

Photo: John Carlano

## The Rising Tide of Studio Craft



In the decades following World War II, Emil gained national visibility on the rising tide of the studio craft movement in America. The concept the general public held of craft shifted in just a few years from rustic functional ware made locally and sold inexpensively to a notion of more aesthetically sophisticated and refined one-of-a-kind works. The “rhetoric of craft”—literally the argument for why anyone should buy handmade objects—also shifted. This transformational change revolved around the meaning and importance of being handmade. The rhetoric of the arts and crafts movement had been primarily negative: buy crafts to protest machine production and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. That was replaced by midcentury with a positive message: handmade means unique, refined, and artistically attuned. The consumer market in America also matured rapidly as the expanding middle to upper class sought to differentiate their environments with objects that reflected good taste. Decorating with handmade objects was a key way to create and preserve individuality in an era of increasing social conformity and the homogenization of home and work environments.

Emil's designs and the quality of his workmanship had strong appeal with the buying public as tastes evolved rapidly toward a modern-sculptural look. There was also a return to wood as the material of choice. Flourishing in the United States from 1890 to 1925, the arts and crafts movement embraced wood as a natural material and emphasized the virtues of hand craftsmanship. Starting around 1925, American consumers became briefly infatuated with more futuristic, streamlined design and mass production using materials such as tubular steel, glass, and plastic.<sup>1</sup> By 1945, however, many people rejected such materials as “cold,” and tastes returned to wood and to objects that were handmade. This time, however, the American buying public preferred explicitly modern

**FIG. 30**  
Examples of Emil Milan functional sculptures including bowls, trays, and cutting boards.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR & RESEARCH TEAM

The Emil Milan Research Team has been working for nearly a decade to create the first biography and archive of Emil Milan. Since 2008 they have amassed hundreds of artifacts, photos, and documents, and conducted hundreds of interviews of Milan's friends, neighbors, relatives, students, colleagues, curators, and collectors. The Team helped curate and organize exhibitions, a symposium, and authored a Wikipedia page which acquired more than 2,500 unique visits in its first two years.

**Craig Edelbrock** is a professor and artist and acted as a researcher and the primary writer for the publication. Craig holds a bachelor's degree from Western Washington State College and a doctorate from Oregon State University. The author of more than 100 research articles and academic publications, he is a Professor and Dean at the University of Alabama. Craig is a woodturner and spoon carver under the mentorship of Norm Sartorius. Because of this lineage, he considers Emil Milan his “great grandfather in craft.”

**Barry Gordon** is an artist and devotee of Emil Milan and acted as a researcher and contributor for the publication. Observing Milan's woodworking path has strengthened Barry's belief in the importance of well-executed small functional objects and in the value of sharing methods for their creation.

**Norm Sartorius** is an artist and student of Phil Jurus and acted as a researcher and contributor for the publication. Emil Milan instructed Norm's first woodworking teacher, Phil Jurus. In February of 2008 Norm initiated the Emil Milan Research Project. He wanted to learn more about the roots of his own work by investigating the life and work of his earliest influence, Emil Milan, whom he never met.

**Phil Jurus** is an artist and mentee of Emil Milan and acted as a researcher and contributor for the publication. The research done by the team has enlarged the scope of why Milan had such a unique appeal as a person and an artist. Phil believes Milan was a historic figure among midcentury woodworkers and deserves that recognition.

More information about the team can be found at [emilmilan.org/team](http://emilmilan.org/team).

Emil objected to the term “free form” applied to his work. It implied for him that his designs were arbitrary or even random, which was far from true.



FIG. 76  
Two-Compartment  
Bowl  
Walnut  
11 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.  
(Cat. 25)



FIG. 75  
Two-Compartment  
Fish-Shaped Bowl  
Walnut  
21 x 19 1/2 x 3 in.  
(Cat. 34)

### ABOUT THE DESIGNERS

**Dan Saal** and **Erika Brask** of Thoughtfull Corporation are multi-disciplinary designers with a passion for storytelling. For more than 20 years, they have each collaborated with clients and artists all over the world, bringing their unique stories to life. With each project, the pair thoughtfully pushes the boundaries of viewer experience and relevancy. Their passion for helping clients tell stories has expanded to include both design and self-publishing management. Their expertise helps elevate the work of artists who may not have the resources of a major publisher, institution, or endowment. They are now both avid collectors of Emil Milan artworks.

### ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

**The Center for Art in Wood** is a non-profit organization that nurtures and promotes the innovation of art in wood through collaborative residencies, exhibitions, education and documentation. The Center also maintains an inspirational collection and a research library to enhance the understanding and appreciation of the art.

For at least four decades, **Albert LeCoff**, Co-Founder and Executive Director of The Center for Art in Wood, has been involved in wood art as a turner and organizing creator of opportunities for artists who express themselves in turnings and sculptures. Albert and his associates at the Center have generated scores of exhibitions and their documentations that explore the evolving field of art in wood, and occasionally other materials. For the Emil Milan Research Project, Albert encouraged and helped shape the production of the comprehensive exposition and appreciation of Emil Milan's life, work, and inspiration. Through his energy and creativity, Albert has built the Center into a singular gallery and museum in Old City, Philadelphia that celebrates and elucidates artists' endeavors.

More information about the designers and publisher can be found at [emilmilan.org/team](http://emilmilan.org/team).



Fig. 70  
Pair of Sabel Servers  
Walnut  
13 in.  
(Cat. 43)

Thanks to Kittredge's contacts and marketing skills, Buckridge items were sold in department stores in and around New York City including Hammacher Schlemmer, Bonniers, McCutcheon's, and Saks Fifth Avenue. Bonniers in particular featured crafts and had a separate section of the store dedicated to handmade items. Competition among upscale department stores reached its peak during the prosperous postwar decades. Offering handmade and especially one-of-a-kind items was a marketing strategy designed to differentiate the store and attract more affluent customers. This same strategy was pursued on the West Coast by Gump's in San Francisco, which, for example, offered bowls turned by Bob Stockdale. Hammacher Schlemmer marketed Buckridge items as their Table Talk line of functional art in wood, proudly claiming that each piece was "expertly hand crafted by Emilian" (figs. 71, 72).

Fig. 71  
Two-compartment  
bowl featured in  
the Hammacher  
Schlemmer ad.  
Table Talk line  
Hardwood  
1 1/4 x 7 1/4 x 14 1/4 in.  
(Cat. 33)

**table talk sculpture**

Magnificently hand crafted serving pieces sculptured of Russian mahogany by Emil Milan... Having contours dictated by the delicate grainings so that no two pieces are identical. As practical as they are beautiful. In a warm lustrous natural finish.

Diced Bowl and Other Dish, 12" long x 8" wide \$8.00

Sabel Bowl, 14" long x 11" wide with servers \$8.00

Chosen from the many exquisite pieces sculptured from unusual timbers.

exclusively at contemporary shop

Post Paid Apparels U.S.A.  
Write for New Gift Book 14 4

**Hammacher Schlemmer**  
143 East 57 Street, New York 22, N.Y.  
Eldorado 5-4700

## THE PRODUCTION SPECS

*Emil Milan: Midcentury Master* will be 272 pages, 9 x 11 inches, printed in full color throughout, over 35,000 words of text with endnotes and index, nearly 300 artworks and historical photos, Smyth sewn, case bound with full-color endpapers.

There will be a limited edition version of the publication available *only* through Kickstarter. This will be a hand-numbered edition signed with an impression of Milan's signature from the bottom of one of his sculptures (the closest you'll get to his actual signature). Other exciting upgrades to the limited edition will be made known in the weeks preceding the Kickstarter campaign. Sign up for the newsletter at [emilmilan.org/the-publication](http://emilmilan.org/the-publication) in order to be the first to know about this one of a kind edition.

**iocolor** in Seattle, Washington will do the color management and oversee the printing of the book. iocolor produces museum quality books of the highest caliber for its sister company LuciaMarquand and many other museums, university presses, and publishers all over the country.



Emil Milan, *Small Bird*  
Walnut. 4 1/2 x 6 x 2 in.  
Collection of Tina and Albert LeCoff  
Photo: John Carlano