

BOAT SHOW ISSUE 2012 | ISSUE 121

MAINE

BOATS, HOMES HARBORS

The Magazine of the Coast

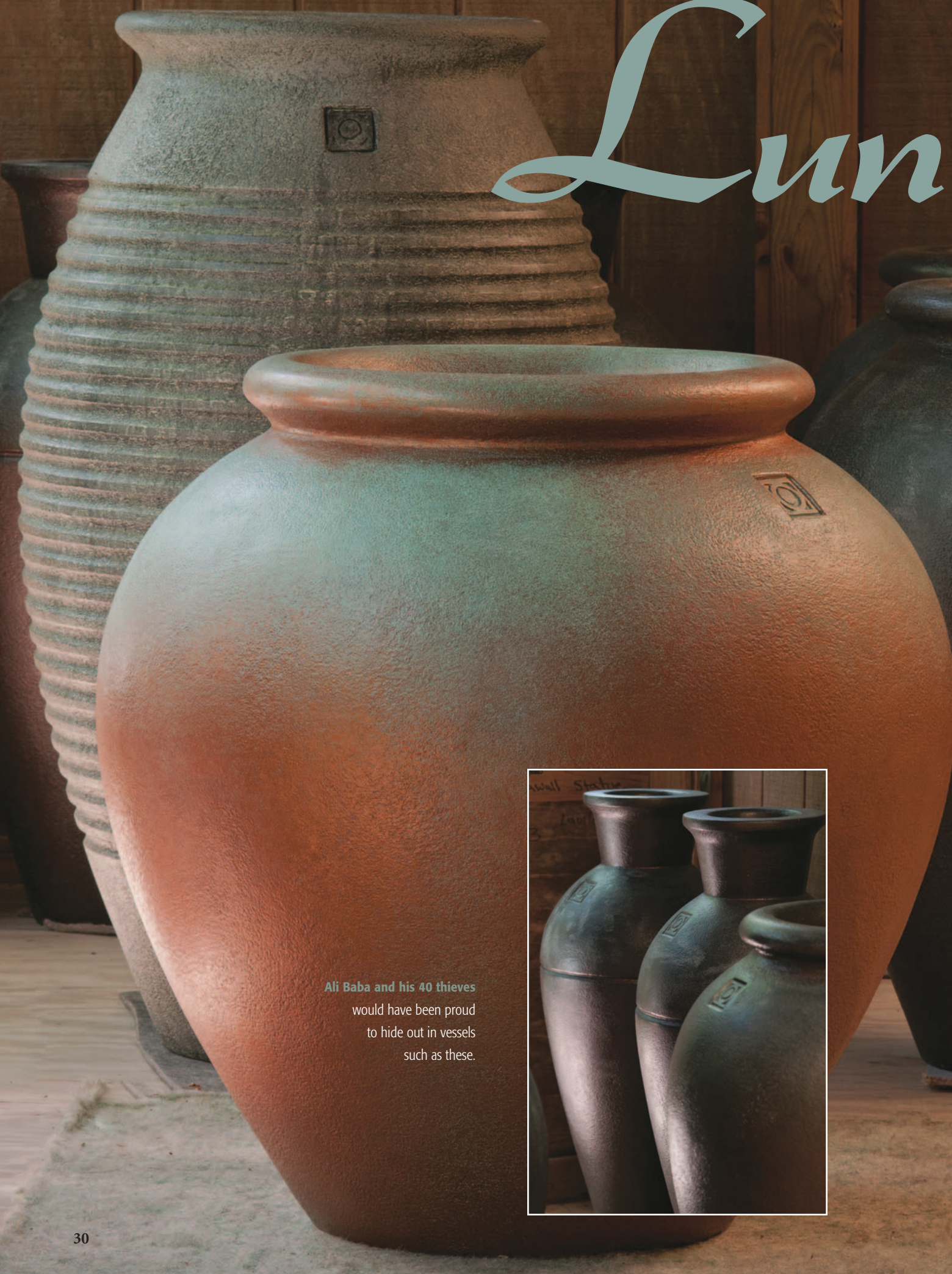
10TH
Annual

BOAT *and Home* SHOW

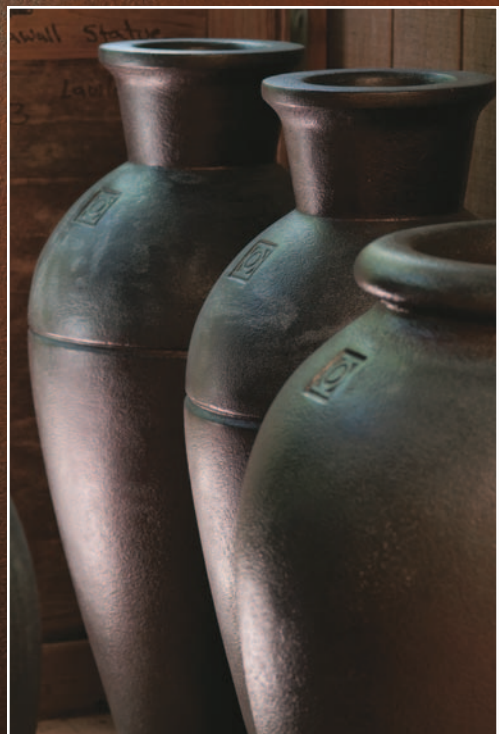
page 56

Why **YOU** Need a Porch
Stories from the Sea

Lun



Ali Baba and his 40 thieves
would have been proud
to hide out in vessels
such as these.



aform



AT ONE WITH THE **LANDSCAPE**



Phid Lawless and Dan Farrenkopf

The concrete gods are smiling in Sullivan. BY CARL LITTLE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN KARLIN

AN EARLY MEMORY: the tall oil jars in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” the film version released in the 1950s of a famous tale of the Middle East. There were similar jars in an illustration by Maxfield Parrish in a Scribner Illustrated Classics edition of the story in our family library. Who could forget the curved shapes of the jars; who was not impressed that thieves could hide in them? (You may recall, however, that nearly all the thieves perished when the clever Morgiana poured hot oil into each jar.)

Thirty-plus years after seeing the movie I visited the Thuya Garden above the Asticou Inn in Northeast Harbor. Set among the flowerbeds was a pot large enough to hold a thief—a short and relatively skinny thief, but a thief nonetheless.



Pottery factory or Zen retreat? The grounds at Lunaform.



Above

The goal was to create pots that would be both beautiful and able to hold up through Maine winters.

It took three years to develop the system.

A few years later, in 1993, I joined the staff at College of the Atlantic, where I encountered a similarly statuesque urn set in the Beatrix Farrand-designed gardens on the campus grounds. In my capacity as COA's public affairs director, I soon learned that an alumnus, Dan Farrenkopf, class of '93, had started a business crafting these remarkable landscape ornaments. The story of a creative downeast Maine legacy—by way of Scandinavia—began to emerge.

In the late 1800s, Eric Ellis Soderholtz, a Swedish photographer with an eye for architecture, came to America and settled in West Gouldsboro. In 1895, on assignment to photograph architecture and gardens in Spain and Italy, he became enamored with classic pottery.

Back home in Maine, Soderholtz began creating garden pots using layered concrete reinforced with embedded wire. He wrote about his technique in the June 1908 issue of *The Garden Magazine*: "Short pieces of old bale wire or telegraph line wire can be laid in and around the various layers, interlaced, etc., making the object when complete, a tough, almost unbreakable mass that will stand some pretty hard knocks." The combination of materials helped the pieces withstand the chill of northern New England.

Over time, Soderholtz's pots and garden ornaments caught on among landscape architects. One of the foremost, Beatrix Farrand, placed them in some of her best-known gardens, including the Fountain Terrace at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., one of her masterpieces.

In 1993, when Farrenkopf and his partner Phid Lawless were setting up shop in West Sullivan to create landscape ornaments, Patrick Chassé, a master garden designer from Mount Desert Island, told them about this Swedish gentleman who, nearly a century earlier, had made "seductive" concrete pots in his Boreas Lodge studio just down the road. Chassé encouraged them to replicate some of those designs.

A Connecticut native, Lawless graduated from the School of Design at North Carolina State University in 1971, having majored in architecture and product design. Following a summer at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, he became a full-time painter. He also had experience in retail as co-owner of Life Sports, a sporting goods business in Ellsworth and Bar Harbor.

Farrenkopf, originally from Rockport, Massachusetts, focused on environmental studies, painting, garden design, sculpture, and architecture while earning his BA in human ecology at COA; he continued his studies at the GITAG atelier, an architects' collective in St. Petersburg, Russia. He had been building a garden design and maintenance business on MDI when he met Lawless.

Joining talents, the two committed to creating garden ornaments that would be both beautiful and able to hold up through Maine winters. To do this required hard work and faith: it took them a good three years to develop the method for crafting the pots. "We wound up with a lot of concrete on our feet," Farrenkopf noted in a 2002 interview.

Lawless and Farrenkopf became experts in concrete. Through trial and error they discovered that

Bottom row: It's a painstaking production process: handling large, breakable creations (left, photo courtesy Lunaform), laying on the wire scrim and covering it with cement (center photos, by the author), scribing in the "chop" that serves as Lunaform's signature (right, courtesy Lunaform).





type III Portland cement was the best for their purposes. Lawless explained that it cures to 90 percent of its total potential strength in 7 days, rather than the 28 days required with types I and II. They went a step further than Soderholtz in an effort to insure the mixture's durability: they added polymer. "It's the most expensive ingredient we use," Lawless said, "but the more you replace water with polymer, the more impermeable the concrete will be, and the better it will handle freezing and thawing."

SET BACK among balsam fir, pine, and cedar woods a short distance from Route 1, Lawless and Farrenkopf's operation—Lunaform—looks like a Zen retreat. The simple and elegant series of con-

nected studio spaces designed by Lawless is accented with all manner of urns, planters, and fountains. The feeling is that of entering an exotic world, a blend of the Mediterranean and the Far East.

Their first design was the Luna, a lovely pot with a simple lip that measures two feet high by two feet in diameter. "At the time, we thought it was enormous," Lawless recalled. He did not know then that they would be making five-footers in the future.

With 100-plus designs now in production, Lunaform consistently bridges the worlds of craft and art. The artisans have a hand in every step of the process, from the initial shaping of the forms to the coloring and glazing at the end. No two pieces turn out exactly the same.

Above

Some Lunaform pots were inspired by ancient lines; others were designed in collaboration with their future owners. The result? All are beautifully crafted, yet no two are exactly alike.



In discussing their process, Lawless and Farrenkopf borrow from a range of art and craft disciplines. Many terms they employ are from ceramics, one of the foundations of their work both in design and technique. It is fitting that in some of its manifestations the concrete that is the principal element of their creations resembles clay. As garden writer Leslie Land noted in a 2003 *New York Times* column, “The products are more like fine ceramics than they are like conventional cast concrete.”

Lawless and Farrenkopf also borrow from physics. In speaking of a closed form like the Ebro urn, they explain how gravity works with, and against, the construction of the comely shape. Gravitational pull leads them to use as many as five layered concentric shells in the formation of each piece. This approach distinguishes Lunaform’s work from mass-produced assembly-line ornaments.

Elliptical pieces are generally the most difficult to produce. “We have developed a compound-axis potter’s wheel that allows us to spin an elliptical shape into existence,” Lawless explained. Because the radius on an ellipse is

changing at every degree of rotation, however, the steel screed—the rigid steelwork that shapes each piece as it is rotated—cannot be fixed in place as it is normally when working on the round cross-sectional pieces. Instead, the screed is mounted on a hinge, and the operator has to control its angle quite precisely as the object turns.

“Applying the concrete to a vertical or overhung surface,” said Farrenkopf, “requires a bit of acrobatics.” Closed-form urns, such as the Milano or Borghese, which are approximately 1,000 pounds, require more steps. “Applying the concrete, especially for the final coat, can be demanding,” he explained. When speed and consistency are in sync, he said, “The concrete gods are smiling.”

Another distinguishing feature is the scale: some pieces are more than five feet tall. “Because we work from the inside out,” explained Farrenkopf, “we can achieve a taller piece.”

On any given day, a number of different pieces are in production; during a week as many as a dozen might receive attention. One member of Lunaform’s six-person crew might be applying the

bonding agent that serves to create the near-seamless layers of the ornament’s shell; another might be winding a spiral of steel wire around the curving girth of a piece; still another applying a glaze.

The various designs enter the Lunaform catalog by a myriad of routes. Some are commissioned; some spring from the design intelligence of Lawless and Farrenkopf. There is a rich dynamic in the creation of each piece that encompasses the form, function, and aesthetics of a shapely ornament that will take its place in the landscape.

The designers often work closely with clients to come up with the final design. Those clients are frequently landscape architects working on projects across the country—an arts academy in Florida, Rockefeller Center in New York City, a residence on Mount Desert Island. Lawless can draw up a piece in Adobe Illustrator from a simple pencil sketch, developing exact dimensions for all parts of a design. The process then becomes a give-and-take of refinements.

When it comes to naming a piece they might turn to a map of Italy spread out

on a table. Sometimes the choice is random, at others quite conscious: the Borghese urn owes something to the vessels found in the famous garden in Rome, while the Boreas planter is a tribute to Soderholtz. Other names derive from the patrons who inspired the design.

About an hour after a piece is rendered, the designers cut a small rectangle out of the surface and add the Lunaform logo using a metal die that is carefully tapped into the concrete. Designed by Lawless in the mid-1990s and fabricated by Chong Lim, a local Korean-born artisan, the chop completes each work—the signature, as it were, of the artists.

Lawless and Farrenkopf each have their favorite piece in the Lunaform line. The former is especially fond of the Banded Perugia. While unable to pinpoint what exactly pleases him about the design, Lawless points to the combination of scale, proportions, and the banding pattern encircling its handsome girth. Farrenkopf leans to the 66-inch-tall Milano. “The form of this vessel seems quite ancient,” he said.

Heading into year 20, business is brisk, with a mix of commercial and res-

idential work. In May of this year pieces were sent to Washington, D.C.; Larchmont, New York; Roswell, Georgia; Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts; Owls Head, Maine; and Florida.

Fountain projects are in the works for healing gardens at Maine Coast Memorial Hospital in Bangor and a hospital in Pennsylvania. Lunaform also created a pair of Ira’s Bowls for the Rockefeller family on Mount Desert Island. The original design for this cup-shaped planter was commissioned in 2007 by a client, Ira Friedman, who wanted to replicate some of his favorite examples of American Indian spiral pottery.

Waxing philosophical in a 2009 interview, Farrenkopf noted how con-

tainers and dispensers have “enormous practical, metaphorical, and ceremonial significance in art’s investigation of the human condition.”

Through their work, the Lunaform crew also reminds us that pottery is an art form that is capable of completing the landscape. ★

Carl Little’s most recent book is Island: Paintings by Tom Curry. He lives and writes on Mount Desert Island.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Lunaform, 66 Cedar Lane, Sullivan, ME 04664.
207-422-0923; www.lunaform.com

Hours: Monday-Friday, 9:30-11:30 a.m. and 1:00- 4:30 p.m., Saturdays by appointment.



Lunaform on View

Lunaform pieces are sited in public and private sites across the U.S. and in Canada. Regionally, you can find their work at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, Thuya and Asticou gardens in Northeast Harbor, and at Bowdoin and Colby colleges.