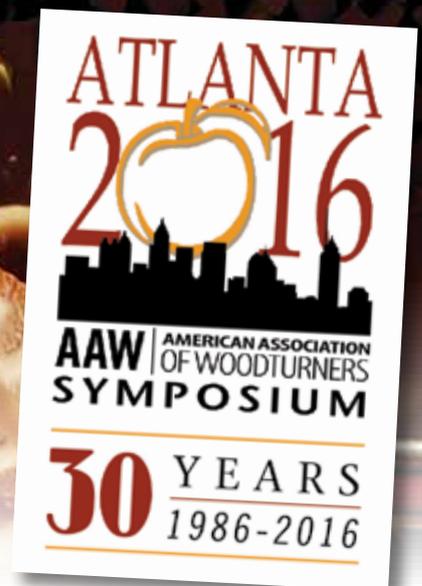


# AAW: transforming Woodturning in the US

The AAW looks back over the last 30 years



Woodturning is an endlessly fulfilling and rewarding craft because it is truly a personal expression of form and style; not only is every piece of wood unique, but every woodturner seems to invent his or her own distinctive approach to working with it. And though the basics

are not difficult to learn, mastery is an absorbing pursuit that can take a lifetime (Kelsey, back cover).

Like the craft that it supports, the American Association of Woodturners (AAW) is a truly unique organisation. The AAW's nearly 30-year journey, often

fraught with obstacles and opportunities, has led to a dramatic transformation of the craft. Fuelled by the commitment to build a community of shared ideas, techniques, and passion, the AAW has played a crucial role in the development of contemporary woodturning and wood art since 1986.

## Old traditions die hard

Prior to World War II, American turning could be defined as a process of rotational carving to rapidly produce elements out of an inexpensive and widely available material – wood. The primary use of the lathe as a mass-production tool placed a premium on minimising cost, so that where hand operations were still used, skill was equated with accuracy in speed and production. For the first 75 years of the 20th century, the long historical tradition of woodturning embodied several distinctive attributes (Kelsey, p. 123–124):

- Turning was taught in most secondary schools, along with introductions to general woodworking, metalworking and drafting. It was also taught by master to apprentice, by father to son, and by self-education.
- Turnings were commercial produced in volume, primarily for utility as housewares and structural/decorative elements in furniture and architecture, and in industrial patternmaking en route to cast-iron objects.
- Pattern books were often used as the style source, thus continuing aesthetic traditions

even where details were modified or when the worker reinterpreted the specified form.

- Turnings were generally monochromatic, whether of a single wood or as the result of paint.
- Turnings did not tend to result from personal artistic expression.

## The times they are a-changin’

Cultural upheaval in the 1960s and 70s created new interest in all traditional crafts. A new wave of woodturning artisans emerged, along with a new market in turning tools, lathes, and materials (Kelsey, p. 19). By the mid-1970s, woodturning had begun to appear in galleries and craft shows, and woodworking magazines covered the techniques and exciting new work of this old craft now recharged with a sense of quality and innovation. Woodturning was taking a uniquely contemporary shape, and the enthusiasm was pushing beyond the isolation of basement and garage workshops. [American] Woodturners wanted to share their work, their ideas, and their questions” (Mastelli, Mississippi, p. 5).

Numerous woodturning weekend symposiums had been organised, and there had been ground-breaking exhibitions of turned wood. Many late-night conversations had tossed around the idea of an organisation for woodturners, on that could continue to produce symposiums, exhibitions, and events, and become a clearing house for information and ideas (Kelsey, p. 55). Collectively, this extensive growth in such a short period provided the energy, content, and personnel that would help pull woodturning out of the confines of its industrial past and onto a stage in the decorative arts that was shared with the established fields of ceramics, glass, fibre and metal. Unlike these other media fields, woodturning did not have an academic of art(full) base. In effect, woodturning had never graduated beyond high-school woodshop class, while the other media fields had gone on to graduate school in university art departments (Kelsey, p. 61). The era was ripe for some form of service organisation that could address the collective needs of a growing field that included novice-to-advanced levels of turners, gallery owners, collectors and museum curators (Kelsey, p. 60).

## The birth of AAW



From left: Melvin Lindquist, Rude Osolnik, James Prestini, and Bob Stockdale participate in a panel discussion at the second AAW symposium in Philadelphia, PA in 1988



David Ellsworth offers an intimate critique in the 2012 Instant Gallery



Christian Burchard critiqued many of the works in an early Instant Gallery



Always a centrepiece of the AAW annual symposium, the 1998 Instant Gallery presented nearly 500 participant works



Featuring more than 1,000 pieces, today's Instant Gallery is the largest display of turned-wood objects under one roof



PHOTO: AMERICAN WOODTURNER

Turner Jerry Fant answers questions during an early symposium demonstration on hollow vessels

The concept of a service organisation did not gel until October 1985 during the Woodturning Vision and Concepts conference held at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in [Gatlinburg,] Tennessee. On the second day of the weekend event, 13 interested people gathered on the porch of the student dormitory, discussed the idea, and agreed to form the American Association of Woodturners (Kelsey, p. 55). It was clear that in order to become effective, this new

organisation would need to be not-for-profit be membership-based, and have a basic philosophy that focused on education (Kelsey, p. 60).

The first AAW Board of Directors was formed by write-in votes from approximately 100 of the 250 delegates who attended the 1985 Arrowmont conference. Individuals receiving the highest number of votes would be elected president vice president, secretary, and treasurer. The remaining

five would be known as board members at large (Kelsey, p. 58). No one on the original Board of Directors had the slightest idea of what they were getting into. They were not corporate types. They were unpaid. They had no previous experience or training (Kelsey, p. 58). What they did have was a love for woodturning and a desire to see woodturning not only continue but grow (Kelsey, p. 58). In any organisation, it is inevitable that board members will bring their own agenda, personal quirks, and biases to the meetings. But the overriding factors which influenced the AAW board's decisions were always: 1) what was best for the field of woodturning, 2) what was best for AAW members, and 3) how the board could improve growth, fellowship, and communications among AAW members.

David Ellsworth was elected the first AAW president and led the organisation through its formative years from 1986 to 1990. Reflecting on the experience Ellsworth revealed, "It was expected that the beginning of any organisation would be filled with a number of rocks and rolls and, as expected the first years were an event-full experience. As president, I received the first rock when [our administrator] informed me that the printer he was using in Texas had mixed up the pages imprinting our first newsletter"

◀ (Kelsey, p. 68). “Probably the most difficult period in these early years came in January 1989 when [our administrator] was let go and was replaced. [Then, the new administrator] struggled with personal problems and only lasted about six months on the job. That’s when our treasurer discovered...a professional group specialising in running nonprofit organisations. [They were] given a one-year contract, but it was not renewed. We discovered that they simply had no idea what a woodturner was” (Kelsey, p. 70). “Then we found [an administrator] who single-handedly rebuilt our computerised membership list and structurally saved the organisation with good administrative skills and an excellent memory. Equally if not more important, [this administrator] was a woodturner and spoke woodturning,” he explained.

Another early rock in the road focused on the articles that appeared in the *American Woodturner* journal. Ellsworth explained, “All these articles were written by members. The problem was that there were many people out there doing important work both technically and aesthetically, but you couldn’t get them to write about it, or if they had no writing skills, our ability to get valuable information out there was severely reduced. People rightfully complained that there would be one primary article in each issue

and that rest was fluff, which in many cases was true” (Kelsey, p. 70). “If an article wasn’t directed to the weekend hobbyist turner and filled with technical information and pictures of flying shavings, it qualified as fluff...As an educator, I felt it was a responsibility to help our members grow in ways that went beyond their present experience beyond the lathe, beyond technique, even beyond wood, so that there was no glass ceiling to their own efforts as their personal skills increased. This also relates to my greatest personal frustration and the most perplexing element of any grassroots craft media organisation: How do you create and balance the needs of hobbyist, semi-professional, and professional makers, knowing that if you’re doing your job, those needs will grow, will evolve, like cell division overtime?” (Kelsey, p. 71).

Alan Lacer was AAW’s second president, serving from 1991 to 1994, a time of rapid growth and organisational maturation. Lacer recounted his experience: “My first years on the board found me in the midst of a struggling organisation. The days of financial turmoil, survival loans, discussions of shutting down the AAW, relocating our office, multiple administrators, petitions, and the like, played an important role in the shaping of this organisation. As painful as those times were, they helped formulate a mission and vision for survival and growth.

In the struggle to exist, we probably had the closest working relationships within the board, with volunteers and with the editor and administrators that we have ever seen,” Lacer explained (Kelsey, p. 79).

The AAW also faced some procedural and organisational obstacles, and needed to improve membership records and create an efficient system for tracking membership dues. The first step to improving AAW’s financial situation was discovering that journals were being sent to 3,700 addresses, everyone in the database, when only 1,700 of them were current paid-up members. Looking back, there has been quite an evolution of the process for organising managing, and exchanging information (Kelsey, p. 174).



Left to right: William Moore, Kevin Wallace, and Frank E. Cummings take part in a 2012 symposium panel discussion



Artist Cindy Drozda shares secrets of successful finial turning at the 2015 AAW symposium

## Leafing through the AW journal

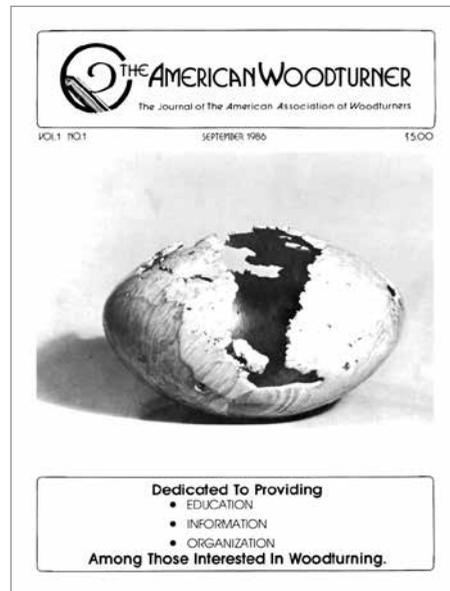
Even the AW journal, over the years has also undergone quite a transformation from its beginning in 1986 as a stapled newsletter. It then progressed to a colour cover and then evolved to become a full-colour, professionally produced, top-quality quarterly magazine that went bimonthly in 2010 (Kelsey, p. 174).

Pitfalls aside, the worldwide influence of the AAW has been significant. The heroes of the AAW are also international turning celebrities; the annual trek to the big symposium has become a rite of passage for many international turners, while others all over the world wait for the latest issue of *American Woodturner* so they can catch up on what is happening in the biggest turning club in the world. Turning groups across the globe have emulated the AAW and a delegate from the United States would feel right at home at symposiums as far afield as Germany, New Zealand, Ireland, and South Africa (Martin, p. 37).

## A new age for US woodturning

Since the formation of the American Association of Woodturners in 1986, a new tradition of woodturning has developed with a lengthy list of its own attributes (Kelsey, p. 124–125):

- It is process-oriented and, by definition, reveres the single media of wood.
- It is enamoured by faceplate work, rather than spindles and has set the thin-walled vessel as the standard reference for skill.
- It accepts speed-of-production as the common denominator of skill rather than quality, sophistication or repeatability.
- It has little concern for utility/function.
- Although many turners first saw a lathe in industrial arts class or were self-taught, today turning is most often taught in intimate small-group settings.
- It can claim only a few formal college or university programs in higher education and has steadfastly eschewed formal education in art or design.
- In the rush to be 'modern', turners have exhibited little knowledge of, or interest in, historical precedents.
- It was, until the early 1990s, composed almost entirely of middle-aged to elderly Caucasian American right-handed males.
- It has been seen by many practitioners as a hobby or entertainment, often centred upon the size and number of machines, tools and gadgets.
- It is involved with one-of-a-kind production, even when made for retail sale.
- It sees itself as apart from, and not a subset of, the field of furniture.
- It has an extraordinary sense of community



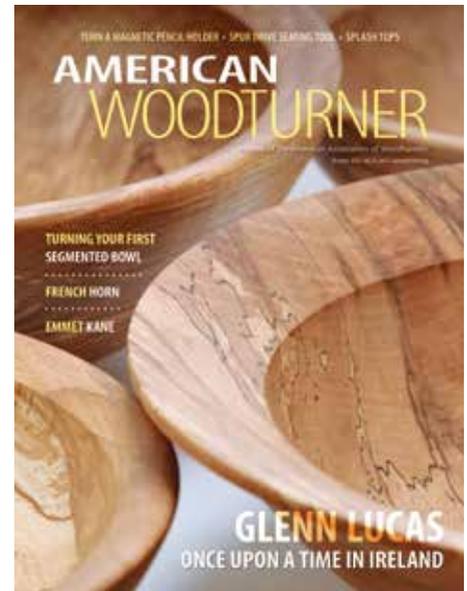
September 1986: The first issue of the 'American Woodturner' journal. It had 28 black-and-white pages and sported five photos

and unique level of sharing and has led the other crafts in its exploration of artistic collaboration.

## The AAW today

The AAW attributes its success to the combined enthusiasm, commitment and diligence of the woodturning community including hobbyists, professionals, galleries, collectors and others. Every year since 1992, the AAW has recognised outstanding contributors and has awarded the distinction of Honorary Lifetime Member to a select individual or organisation that has made a significant impact on the field of woodturning. AAW Honorary Lifetime Members include: David Ellsworth, Ed 'Bud' Jacobson, Dale L. Nish, Rude Osolnik, Melvin Lindquist, Ed Moulthrop, Bob Stocksdale, Palmer Sharpless, Alan Stirt, S. Gary Roberts, Alan Lacer, Robyn Horn, Ray Key, Nick Cook, Bonnie Klein, Dick Gerard, Arthur and Jane Mason, Mary Lacer, Jerry Glaser, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Albert LeCoff, Giles Gilson, Mark Lindquist, John Hill, John Jordan, David Wahl, Allen Hockenbery, and Ruth and David Waterbury. While some of these special people are no longer with us, their passion and extraordinary contributions to the field and AAW endure.

Today, the AAW has more than 15,000 members and more than 350 local chapters worldwide. The association is well known among turning communities globally with more than 1,450 of its members residing in 51 countries outside the US. AAW maintains an office along with its Gallery of Wood Art in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The AAW has evolved into the world's leading resource for



2015: Today, the 'American Woodturner' journal contains more than 70 full-colour pages of instructional material, feature stories, process articles, artist retrospectives, and profiles of innovative turners, and received a 2015 Niche Award for Best Niche Consumer Association Magazine

woodturning information, inspiration, and instruction. In addition to AAW's annual international symposium and the *American Woodturner* journal, members have access to publications including *Woodturning Fundamentals*, *Safety for Woodturners*, and mentoring publications, as well as a variety of complimentary services, website tools grant opportunities, and specialty programming. Learn more about the AAW at [www.woodturner.org](http://www.woodturner.org).

The AAW's 30th annual international symposium will be held at the Atlanta Convention Center at AmericasMart, Atlanta, Georgia, 9 to 12 June, 2016. Regardless of your skill level or interests, the AAW symposium will offer something for you. You'll be able to select from a broad range of demonstrations and panel discussions to focus on session that will enhance your woodturning experience the most. You'll take away knowledge, tips, and techniques sure to enhance your woodturning experience. Learn more about AAW's 2016 symposium at <http://tiny.cc/AAW2016Atlanta>

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