The Turned Bowl

The end of infancy for a craft reborn

by John Kelsey

For more than 3,000 years, sturdy bowls and plates of turned wood were among the most ordinary kitchen utensils. But during the past 100 years, the useful wooden bowl has been supplanted by mass-produced ware of ceramic, glass, metal and plastic.

Forty years ago, James Prestini added a dimension to traditional woodturning: the delicate, decorative wooden bowl. During the past ten years this new craft of the turned bowl has blossomed and matured.

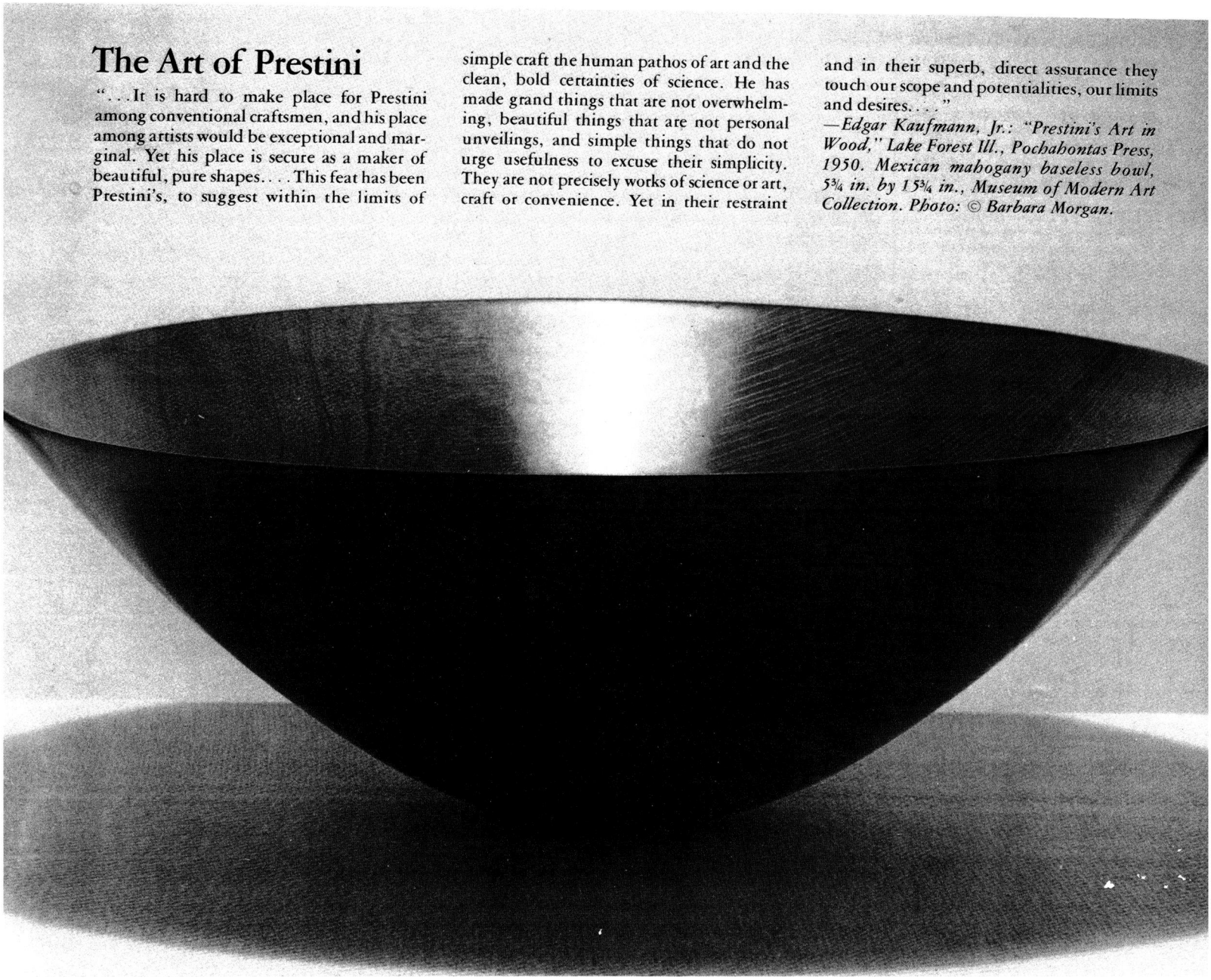
This contemporary flowering became publicly apparent last September in Philadelphia, when the Turned Objects Exhibition opened in conjunction with the Tenth Woodturning Symposium. The exhibition consists of 100 contemporary wooden turnings, selected by three jurors from about 1,500 entries. It will be traveling around the country during the next few years, provided sponsors can be found (box, p. 61). The symposium was a long weekend of technical demonstration and aesthetic argument among 30 expert turners, with 150 other turners, both amateur and professional, looking on and joining in. At the same time it was the summation of a five-year adventure, and the end of infancy for this craft reborn.

Along with a whole crowd of woodturners, I spent a day of that September symposium in a gallery filled by those 100 turned objects. Many of the 60 makers represented were there, as was juror David Ellsworth and symposium organizer Albert LeCoff.

We'd gathered to talk about this craft and its evolution, and to argue a little too. We tried to get beyond mutual admiration (hey, what a beautiful piece of wood) and on to what else might be said, not about turning tools and techniques but about design and aesthetics. Many of the turners in the room were having the first chance of their craft lives to

The Art of Prestini

"...It is hard to make place for Prestini among conventional craftsmen, and his place among artists would be exceptional and marginal. Yet his place is secure as a maker of beautiful, pure shapes.... This feat has been Prestini's, to suggest within the limits of simple craft the human pathos of art and the clean, bold certainties of science. He has made grand things that are not overwhelming, beautiful things that are not personal unveilings, and simple things that do not urge usefulness to excuse their simplicity. They are not precisely works of science or art, craft or convenience. Yet in their restraint and in their superb, direct assurance they touch our scope and potentialities, our limits and desires...."
—Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.: "Prestini's Art in Wood," Lake Forest Ill., Pochahontas Press, 1950. Mexican mahogany baseless bowl, 5¾ in. by 15¾ in., Museum of Modern Art Collection. Photo: © Barbara Morgan.



discuss their work with their peers, to hear artisans whose work they'd admired talk about ideas and values. I've been guided by that day of talk in choosing the turnings from the show to include in the second half of this article. But first, some highlights from 3,000 years of woodturning history.

The oldest turnings—The first archaeological fragments that seem to have been turned from wood are about 2,600 years old. They've been dug up in northern Italy and in Asia Minor. Archaeologists know a lot more about pottery than about turned wood, because potsherds don't decay the way woodchips do. The earliest turned wooden object to have survived intact is a bowl from a burial mound in Bavaria, about 600 B.C. As the sketch at right shows, the turner left toolmarks in a decorative ridged pattern and turned a ring free of the bowl's stem. Such sophistication indicates the lathe was already well known, although there's no direct evidence of early lathes until about 300 B.C. Writes the historian Robert S. Woodbury, "It seems quite clear that the lathe was in use as early as the eighth century B.C., probably as early as 1,000 B.C., and possibly even in 1,200 B.C. The place of its origin cannot be established, or even whether it had a single origin...possibly it was discovered independently by the Etruscans, the Celts and in Crimea." *(Studies in the History of Machine Tools,* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972.)

A few examples of treen survive from 17th-century America, along with thousands of objects from the 18th and early 19th centuries. The most durable woodenware to come down to us was turned from ash burl. Burl is more or less bowl-shaped as it comes off the tree, but man-powered lathes are not easy to work. I suspect it took about as much trouble to cut the burl and turn a bowl as it took to dig some clay, throw pots and fire them. Burl kitchenware is sturdier than pottery, until it gets on the wrong side of the moisture exchange. Then it's liable to crack wide open.

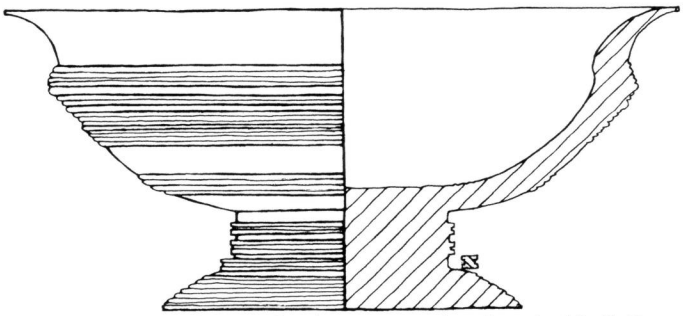
By 1850, industrial methods of forming clay, glass and metal had made turned wooden kitchenware all but obsolete. The craft of the turned utensil lingered in a few forms for which wood is particularly suitable (breadboards and rolling pins), as a hobby for grandpa, and in high-school shop class. Remember shop class? Lamp bases like sawed-off newel posts, nut bowls the shape of doggie dishes with green felt glued to their bottoms, honey-dippers drooling varnish?

The lathe (along with the bow drill) is man's oldest machine tool. It's probably the safest (and certainly the quickest) way to make raw wood into finished things. Turning ornamental intricacies on the Holtzapffel lathe is highly jigged and thus more akin to metalworking than to woodworking; but for that Victorian excess, traditional woodturning is staunchly utilitarian, not the place for startling beauty, nor for innovation. Then during the 1940s, James Prestini conceived the delicately thin, perfectly shaped, turned wooden bowl.

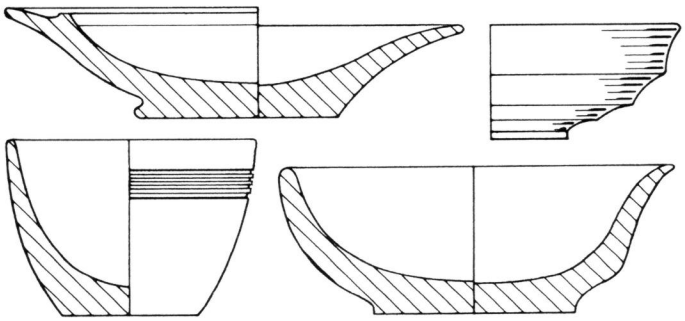
The pioneer—James Prestini, at 73, is a sculptor of iron and steel. Among many other things, he's been a professor of design, a research engineer, a mathematician and a metalworker. For 20 years, from 1933 until 1953, he was a woodturner. Although he turned and sold hundreds and hundreds of bowls and plates, it was always a hobby for him, not a full-time profession.

Prestini taught himself the woodturning trade by doing it. He entered the 3,000-year tradition, but he was not of that

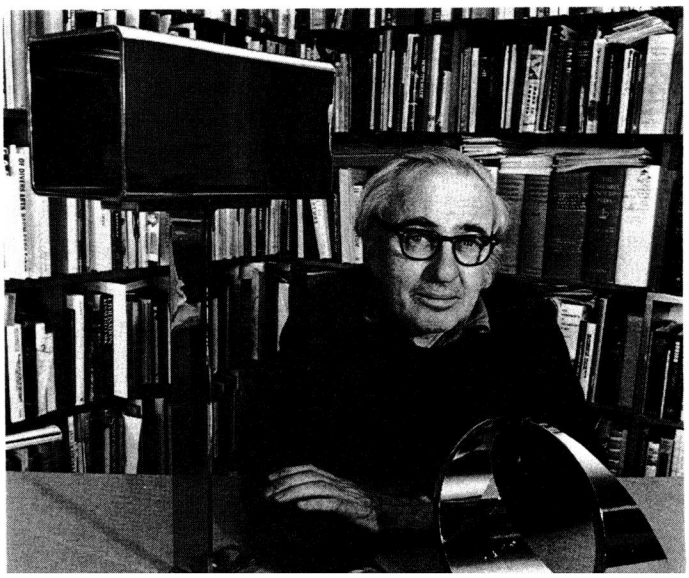
Merryll Saylan (center) explains her turned sculpture, Jelly Doughnut, *during the Tenth Woodturning Symposium. The doughnut was assembled from eight mitered segments, seven of them of poplar and the eighth of red acrylic plastic.*

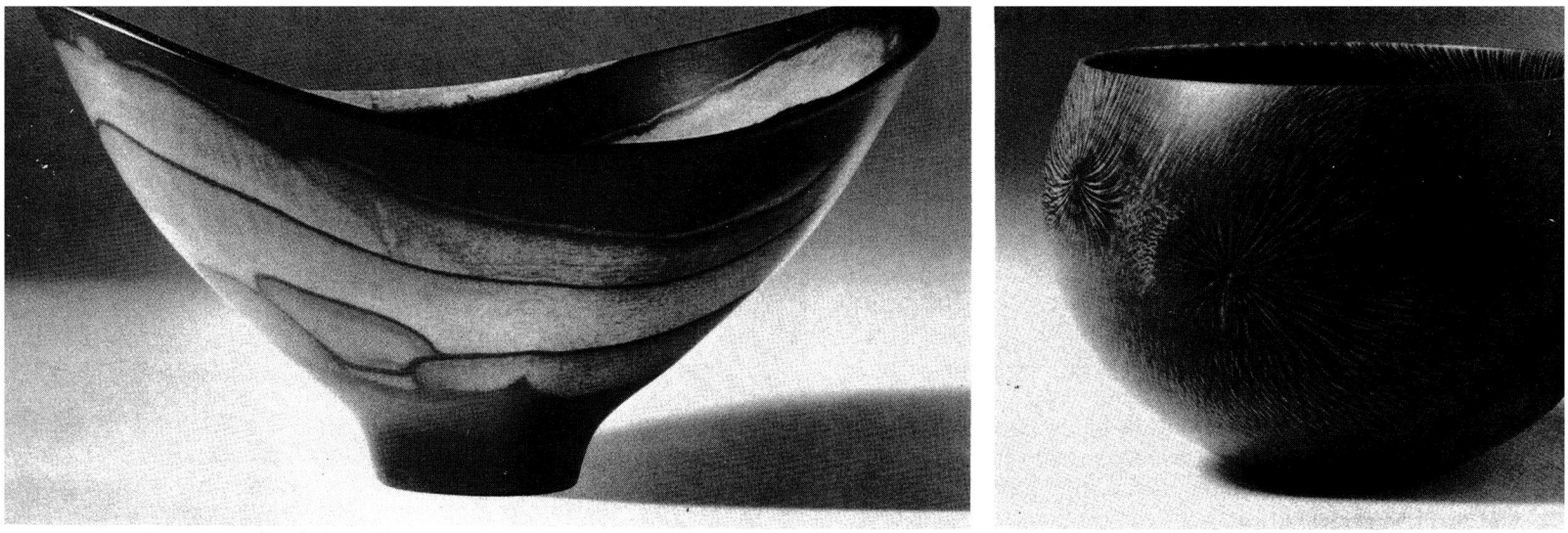


The oldest complete turning known to archaeology is this Celtic ceremonial bowl from the sixth century B.C., (above). Note the tooled decoration and the free-turned ring about its foot. Drawing adapted from Woodbury, Studies in the History of Machine Tools *(Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972). Below, some traditional forms for utilitarian turned bowls, from Seale,* Practical Designs for Wood Turning *(London: 1964, reissued New York: Sterling, 1979.)*



James Prestini in his library, with two of his sculptures in nickel-plated steel: Construction No. 161, 24 in. high (left), and Construction No. 286, 10½ in. dia. Photo: Jonathan Reichek/Catalyst.





Decorative bowls by Bob Stocksdale, from his one-man exhibition held last year at the Oakland Museum. Left, a rare piece of Ceylon ebony, 7¼ in. across; right, osage orange bowl, 6 in. dia. Photos: Joel Schopplein.

tradition: he was not encumbered by utilitarian ideas about kitchenware. The shape of his turnings was startlingly new, as was their fantastic thinness. People admired them. But it is only from a distance of 40 years that we can see how they were the first of a new craft form.

Prestini was 25 when he took up woodturning. He'd apprenticed as a metalworker for two years, then studied mechanical engineering at Yale, and was teaching mathematics in Lake Forest, Ill. As he explained it in a recent interview, "My idea was to use making as a design resource, a different way to learn design. The usual way is to study the history of design, go to the library, have seminars. I tried to reverse things, to make the object first, then to draw it and think about it, then to make it again. This way a craft can teach you what information you have to communicate." In the late 1930s, the Bauhaus remnants under Laszlo Moholy-Nagy set up school in Chicago, then Mies van der Rohe came there to invent the glass-and-steel skyscraper. Prestini was in touch with both of them and became deeply immersed in the Bauhaus ideas about art and design, craft and industry. He says that in our technological era, his own humanity required him to develop the skill to turn wood as well as a machine could do it. But the shape of his bowls, which so impressed the Museum of Modern Art (p. 54), he shrugs off as easily derived from metal-spinning. "The important thing," Prestini says, "is not the product but the process. I'm not interested in turning a good-looking bowl, I'm interested in what does it take to turn that bowl? What do I have to learn to do?" And the main thing he learned, he says, "is that work is your best friend, it never fights back. I have reverence not for wood, but for work."

In other words, the real product was Prestini himself. In 1953 he began to work in metal sculpture because "there's so many things you can do with metal that you can't do with wood." His craft now part of him, Prestini-the-artist hires craftsmen who use advanced metalworking technology to build his sculptural conceptions.

During the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, Prestini showed his bowls in museums and art galleries across the country, receiving considerable acclaim. Photographs of the bowls showed up in magazines, and the bowls themselves found places in many private and museum collections. People regarded their shape as an apt expression of streamlined modern times, and found it marvellous that they were turned from wood. They seemed as thin as china dishes, lighter than anybody had realized wood could be. Even so, serious woodturners who happen today upon an old bowl by Prestini see little that's remarkable. The woods are common birch, walnut, cherry and mahogany. A sharp eye finds sanding scratches. Many of them are variations of a single shape, a tautly convex curve from foot to rim, tilted more or less as the bowl widens. The thinness that seemed so magical when new is routine today, and nowhere near the limits of thin. The thing is, before Prestini perfected the techniques, nobody realized that such work could be done at all.

The professional—To the decorative bowl that Prestini discovered, Bob Stocksdale added the beauty of exotic woods from around the world *(FWW* #4, Fall'76). And from that perfect silhouette, Stocksdale built both a family of shapes plus the skill to interpret a bowl's curve in terms of the wood itself. Where Prestini's bowls were in a way incidental to the process of becoming a designer, Stocksdale's purpose is more prosaic. Since the late 1940s, Stocksdale has been a professional turner of bowls and plates, his work at the lathe supporting his family. For many years and until quite recently, Stocksdale was probably the only professional turner of decorative bowls in America. Because of this, and because of the technical perfection of his work, Stocksdale has been an inspiration to dozens of aspiring young turners. He's been elected a Fellow of the American Crafts Council, and at 68 he's the grand old man of his field.

Although they live about a mile from each other in Berkeley, Calif., Stocksdale and Prestini are just barely acquainted. Stocksdale recalls seeking out Prestini about 25 years ago because he had admired the older man's work. Today Stocksdale says, "He's got only one shape, they're all the same shape."

The bowls shown above represent two of the shapes Stocksdale makes, in two of the hundreds of wood species he's turned. These bowls have become a technical standard in the craft—at exhibitions, you can see young turners studying Stocksdale's work and measuring themselves against it. Their wall thickness is between ⅛ in. and 3/16 in. There are no abrupt changes in thickness or in silhouette, inside or outside. There's no pimple or dimple at the center of the bowl, no torn end-grain anywhere on its surface, no sanding scratches, and no screw holes in the bottom nor any other trace of how the wood was held on the lathe (the secret weapon is a three-jaw chuck). The professional Stocksdale, working about 30 hours a week, can deliver about 30 such bowls a month.

The Exhibition

The innovators—Working from the basis that Prestini and Stocksdale created, a number of turners have invented or rediscovered aspects of the contemporary craft's vocabulary. Through the nine previous woodturning symposia and through the pages of this magazine, these innovators have freely given their discoveries and their techniques to anybody who wanted to know. Their generosity of spirit characterizes woodturners; it is one of the reasons for the rebirth of their craft.

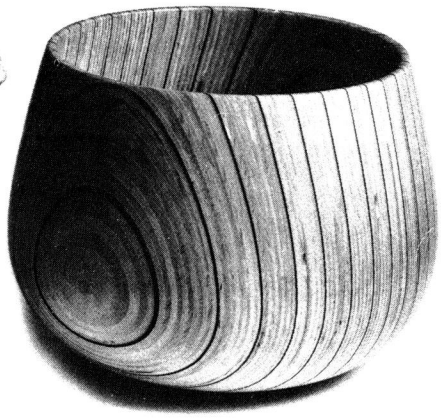
Melvin Lindquist of Schenectady, N.Y., working with his son Mark, showed that you don't need to import logs from Africa to find exotic beauty. It's right there on the ground, inside partially rotted logs of New England maple, elm and birch. The Lindquists' early work was turned away from craft fairs, but their persistence unleashed spalted wood upon the world *(FWW* #7, Summer'77, p. 50) and over the years they have perfected methods of turning this difficult material *(FWW* #11, Summer'78, p. 54).

Spalted wood can be turned only when the worker does not insist upon making functional kitchenware. It is a decorative material. But once you add spalted wood to the tradition of turning burl, and if you can accept mere existence as function enough, you can turn (and find beauty in) any bit of wood, no matter how worm-eaten, bug-infested, rotten or scabrous. These are either new ideas or newly popular ideas—I recently met an English master craftsman who was just shocked by the notion of turning rotten wood. After he'd spent a little time with a finishless, worm-eaten plate by Dale Nish (right), he came to agree that this new attitude could indeed uncover remarkable beauty.

Along with Rude Osolnik of Berea, Ky., Mel Lindquist was among the first to realize that a turned object doesn't require a pristine rim. Instead, its edge can reveal the original outside of the tree from which it came—a shape the turner does not create, he only selects and preserves. Then about the same time as David Ellsworth of Bucks County, Pa., Mel Lindquist rediscovered the 19th-century techniques of turning hollow, narrow-necked bottles through their neck openings *(FWW* #16, May'79, p. 62).

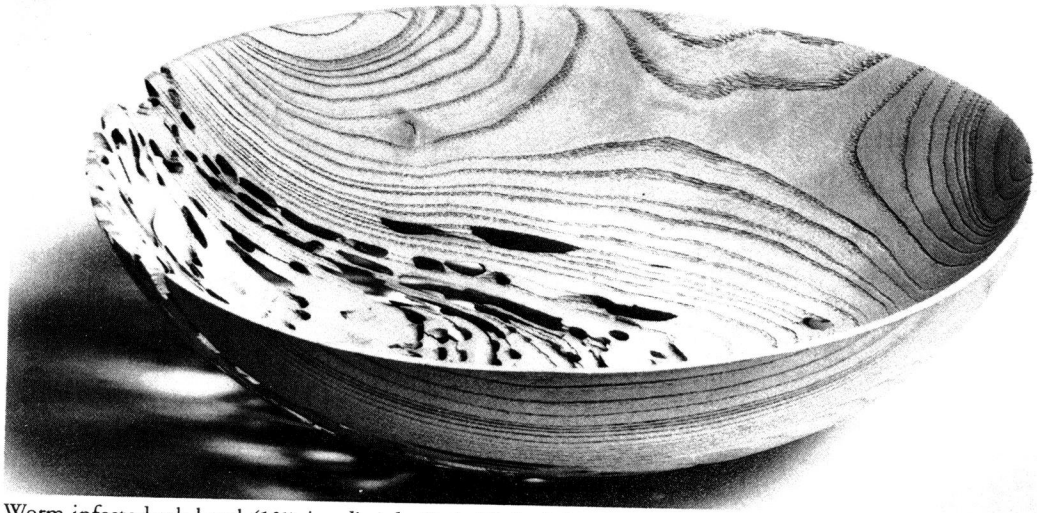
Finally, Stephen Hogbin of Owen Sound, Ont., has shown how to escape from the lathe's circular nature, by cutting and reassembling turned elements into new forms *(FWW* #21, March'80, p. 56). Hogbin's work points always toward what else might be done, if the turner keeps eyes and mind open.

English walnut bowl *(10 in. dia.) by Melvin Lindquist combines the natural edge with the hollow bottle form. The turner cannot impose a preconceived shape on wood like this, but must see an appropriate shape within the log.*

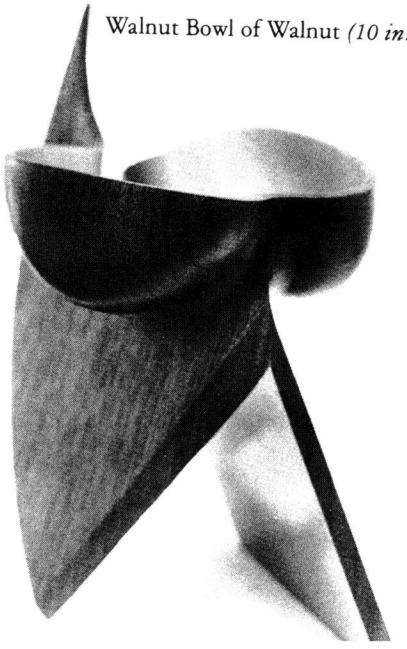


Laminated mahogany and birch plywood bowl *(6 in. high) by Rude Osolnik. Osolnik, who with David Ellsworth chose the pieces shown in the Turned Objects Exhibition, is an exceptionally versatile craftsman. He is as comfortable with burls and gnarly roots as he is with the controlled materials and forms displayed here. But the various methods of laminating blanks for turning* (FWW *#29, July '81, p. 52) do not find much favor among the younger craftsmen, who would rather find and saw a suitable lump of tree.*

Photos, except where noted: Bobby Hanson

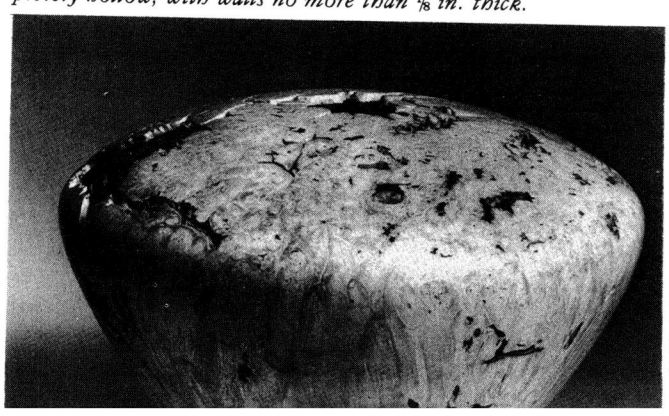


Worm infested ash bowl *(13½ in. dia.) by Dale Nish. A bowl from such awful wood can't be functional. This one was turned, and exists, for its own sake—for what it shows about wood, about worms, and about Nish.*



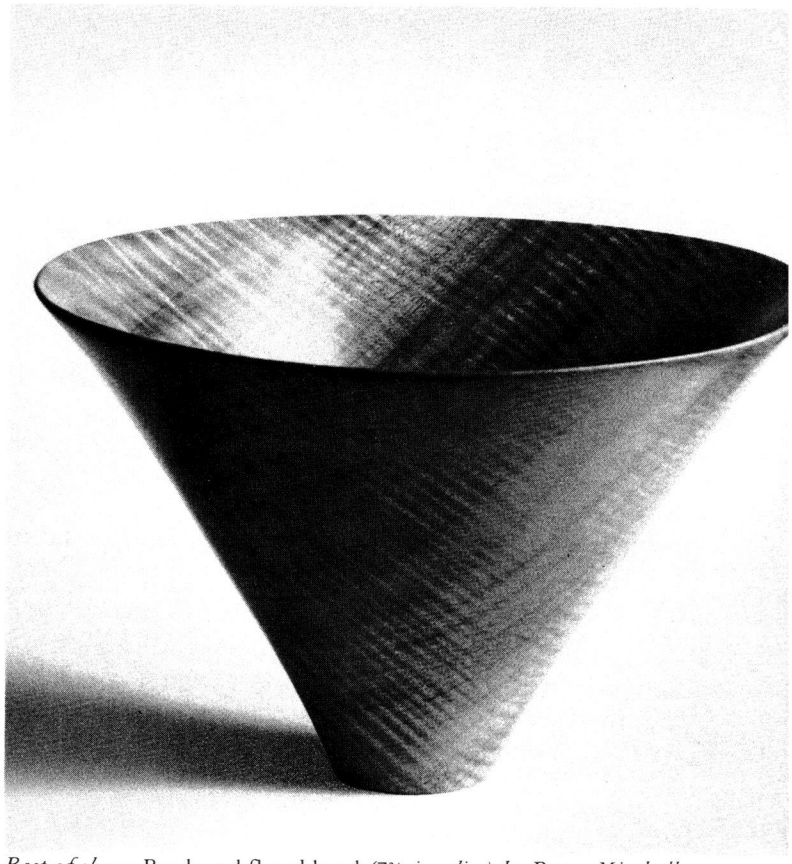
Walnut Bowl of Walnut *(10 in. high) by Stephen Hogbin. Photo: Staff.*

Box elder cluster burl *bowl (10 in. dia., 7½ in. high) hollow-turned by David Ellsworth. Like the blown shells of ostrich eggs, Ellsworth's hollow turnings can startle and amaze. It's difficult to imagine their lightness, or to believe that a piece of wood can be hollowed out through such a small opening. Nonetheless, this turning is completely hollow, with walls no more than ⅛ in. thick.*



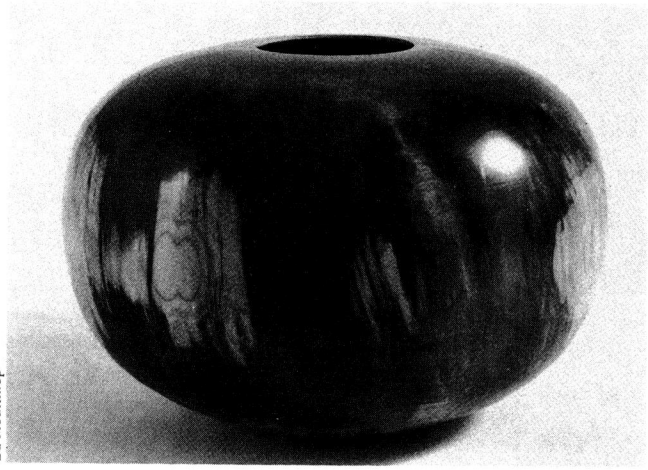
The ideal bowl—Professional turner Bruce Mitchell of Inverness, Calif., won the "Best of Show" ribbon for his bay laurel flared bowl (7¾ in. dia., 5¼ in. high). Mitchell contrived to saw the blank, orient the axis of rotation and choose a shape that allowed the wood's fiddleback figure to squarely criss-cross its annual rings at every point on the bowl's surface, inside and out. The turning is correctly thin and skillfully flawless: no screw holes, no torn grain, no sanding swirls.

Juror Ellsworth said all of this still made it only another pretty bowl among many. But these qualities together with the precision of its taut silhouette made Mitchell's piece an archetypal symbol of the fond hopes of all the woodturners, and a perfect summary of the craft's recent evolution. Thus it won the prize, and most of the turners seemed to agree. But during the symposium debate several artisans declared Mitchell's silhouette a cliche, tritely modern, as dated as Prestini's shapes, nothing new and nothing inspiring here. Thus the bowl earned its prize again, by serving as the touchstone for a long and thoughtful discussion of the bowl-turning craft among the symposium participants: What good is a bowl such as this? Could you ever serve candy or pickles in it? Where would you keep it, besides on a pedestal? Is it purpose enough for a bowl to be a beautiful expression of nature's wonder, revealed by human skill? Does this make it art, or does art require newer and more profound insights? For myself, the bowl's beauty is its function, and I would give it a pedestal. But it is not the same as art. It is proud craft, admirably good craft, and that's enough for a bowl to be.

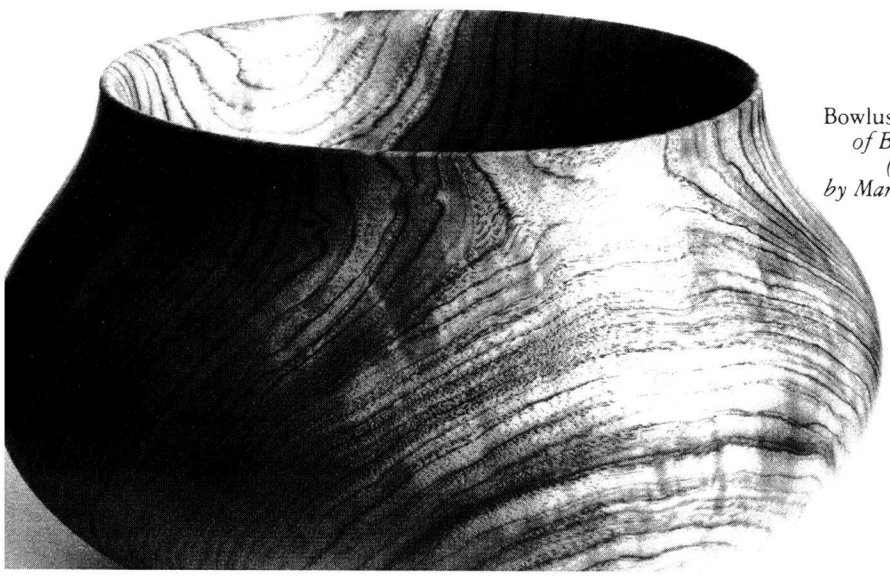


Best of show: Bay laurel flared bowl *(7¾ in. dia.) by Bruce Mitchell.*

Tulip poplar sphere bowl *(36 in. dia.) by Ed Moulthrop.*



Ed Moulthrop



Bowlus Fecundus *of Burma teak (9 in. dia.) by Marilyn Scott.*

Besides thinness—Turning a little bowl with coin-thin walls is a technical skill that separates the novice from the master. Thinness is now the aesthetic main line against which other types of bowl turning are judged. But there is more to this craft than thinness.

Ed Moulthrop of Atlanta, Ga., goes to the extreme of size. His tulip poplar spheroids range from 12 in. in diameter to 36 in., tree wide, always turned with the pith on the axis of rotation. They're usually the same squashed-sphere shape, fully hollow inside but with relatively thick walls. After rough-turning the green wood, Moulthrop stabilizes it with a long soak in polyethylene glycol, then completes the turning and sanding and applies an epoxy finish. Moulthroup is an architect turned professional turner who makes lots of these things. Whenever he puts together a gallery showing, it sells out. If you put your ear to the turning's opening, you can hear the sound the tools made when cutting into the whirling wood.

Marilyn Scott of Toronto, in this Burma teak turning she calls Bowlus Fecundus, confronts the notion that it has to be thin to be good. Although Bowlus is very thin at its rim, the walls get thicker as Bowlus gets deeper. Looking into it is like looking into a bell. You think you can lift Bowlus by grabbing its lip between thumb and

forefinger, but you can't. You have to cradle it in two hands. Scott reminds us that mass and bulk are inherent characteristics of wood, whereas thinness is characteristic of porcelain or sheet metal. By embracing wood's mass, Scott has made a friendly fat thing to contain something special.

Carving goes well with turning, thereby generating another fresh universe of possibilities. Lottie Kwai Lin Wolff of Madison, Wis., carved the rim and interior of her thumbprint bowl, while Bill Hunter of El Portal, Calif., disc-sanded spiral flutes into his rosewood spheroid.

Del Stubbs of Chico, Calif., breaks away from the bowl by putting a tight-fitting lid on it. He's been making his living for four years by turning delicate little boxes; this one, in California walnut, is 3½ in. high. The lids of most turned boxes are smoothly sanded into the shape of the box itself, the join all but invisible. Stubbs avoids this easy way out, and accepts the difficult challenge of turning two related forms that fit harmoniously together. Part of the reason for his success is pure skill—Stubbs cuts surfaces and tiny beads that need only the finest sanding.

Bert Lustig of Berkeley Springs, W. Va., breaks the bowl upward, with a daringly deep vase form of black walnut, made special by its free edge. Lustig won a merit award.

William Patrick of Arlington, Vt., is among several professional turners who aren't stuck on the one-whole-piece-of-wood idea. Patrick sees the surface of a turned plate as a canvas for expressive drawing. He is exploring the color palette available in world hardwoods, and the shape-vocabulary made possible by the bandsaw; Patrick glues the picture together, then turns the plate. This example is zebrawood, mahogany, walnut, ebony and amaranth, 11 in. diameter.

Thumbprint bowl *of mahogany (7 in. dia.) by Lottie Kwai Lin Wolff.*

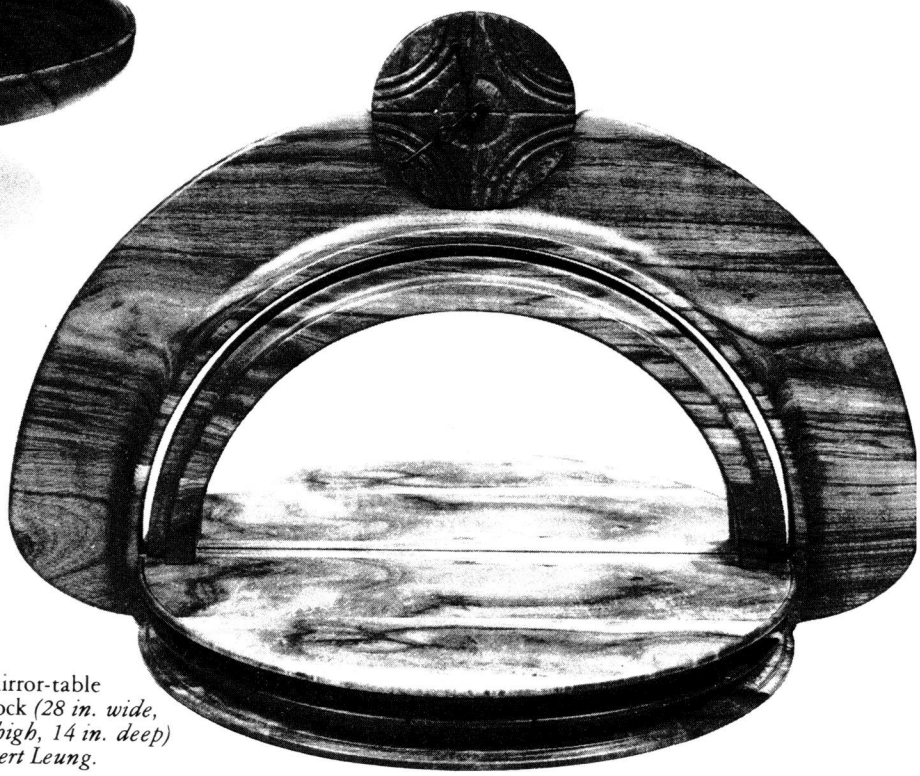
Spiral *(5 in. dia., 2 in high) by Bill Hunter.*

Bowl form *of black walnut (4½ in. dia., 8 in. high) by Bert Lustig.*

Covered jar of California walnut (5½ in. dia.) by Del Stubbs.

Plate *(11 in. dia.) by William Patrick.*

Vermilion bowl *(11 in. dia.) by Tom Eckert.*

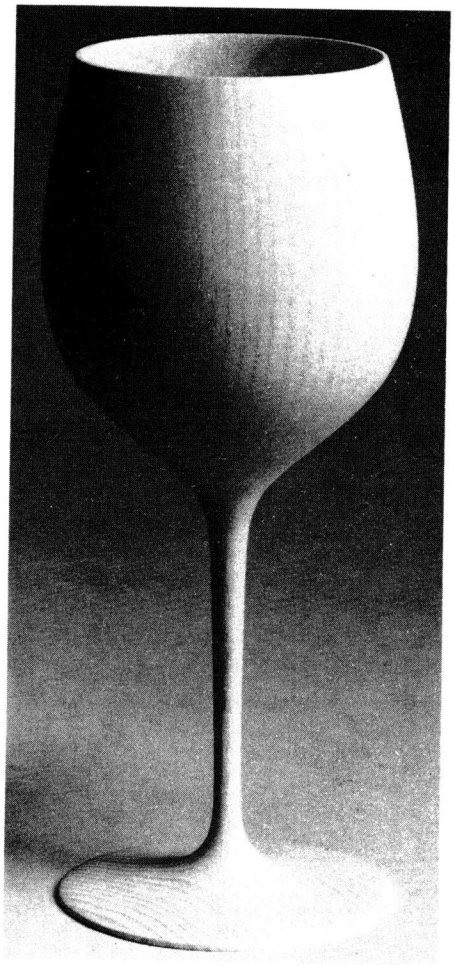


Wall-mirror-table with clock *(28 in. wide, 20 in. high, 14 in. deep) by Robert Leung.*

Beyond bowls—As Scott's Bowlus enriches everyday life, Tom Eckert's vermilion bowl with bronze detailing and a skirt of orange feathers suggests a ceremony. The texture and color of the feathers against dark, purple-brown wood tempt you to touch, they make the bowl important, magic and mysterious: what relic lives here? May I peek?

Eckert, who teaches design and woodworking at the University of Arizona in Tempe, is no pilgrim at the shrine of the tree. He uses the lathe to explore forms and functions in other materials besides wood, in his own search for meaning. Turning technique and the wood's figure are secondary to Eckert's larger aims, so he doesn't mind a vertical glueline through the lid's knob. To me the glueline is a distraction that diminishes the mystery of the piece, making it seem ordinary again.

Robert Leung, a student in San Bernardino, Calif., assembled his wall-mirror-table from several koa-wood turnings. There's a clock at top center and two trapezoidal drawers under the shelf. Leung's turning suffers technically from end-grain tear-out, and his joinery is ratty, but the jurors still gave him an honorable mention. He deserves the encouragement, for Leung is not working in the well-known territory of bowl turning. He's plunging off into exploration of the lathe as a tool for making parts, a class of turning (and of furniture design) toward which Hogbin pointed but which remains unexplored. In this piece Leung has broken the sacred circle that came off the lathe, while restoring the circle by reflection in the mirror. The mirror glass peeping through the ring space in its frame makes ambiguous the boundary between glass and wood, between solid object and mirage. Leung is at the beginning of a journey,and it will be fascinating to see where he goes.



Translucent Goblet in Wood, *by Robert Street.*

The ghostly goblet—Bob Street of Aberdeen, Wash., an architect and amateur turner, turned this translucent goblet of Western ash, 7 in. high, 3 in. dia., 1/32 in. thick. It's a soft white ghost of a thing, weighing a mere 1.2 ounces. It has no finish, so it could never hold wine. All it can hold (along with your attention) is a yellow-orange glow when it's put next to the light.

Street's goblet came to be my favorite piece among the 100 Turned Objects in the exhibition. The wood he chose is the straightest imaginable, no hint of flashy grain. The form he chose is that of the common wine glass. The result transcends extravagantly figured wood and novel form by demonstrating that wood, the most rigid of materials, can achieve the delicate shapes of that most liquid material, blown glass. Thus it celebrates, in the humblest of materials, the limits of human dexterity. It was daunting to learn that Bob Street turned not just one goblet, but three of them, and then it was heartening to find out that the second and third took him much longer than the first. I'm glad I never saw more than one goblet at a time. □