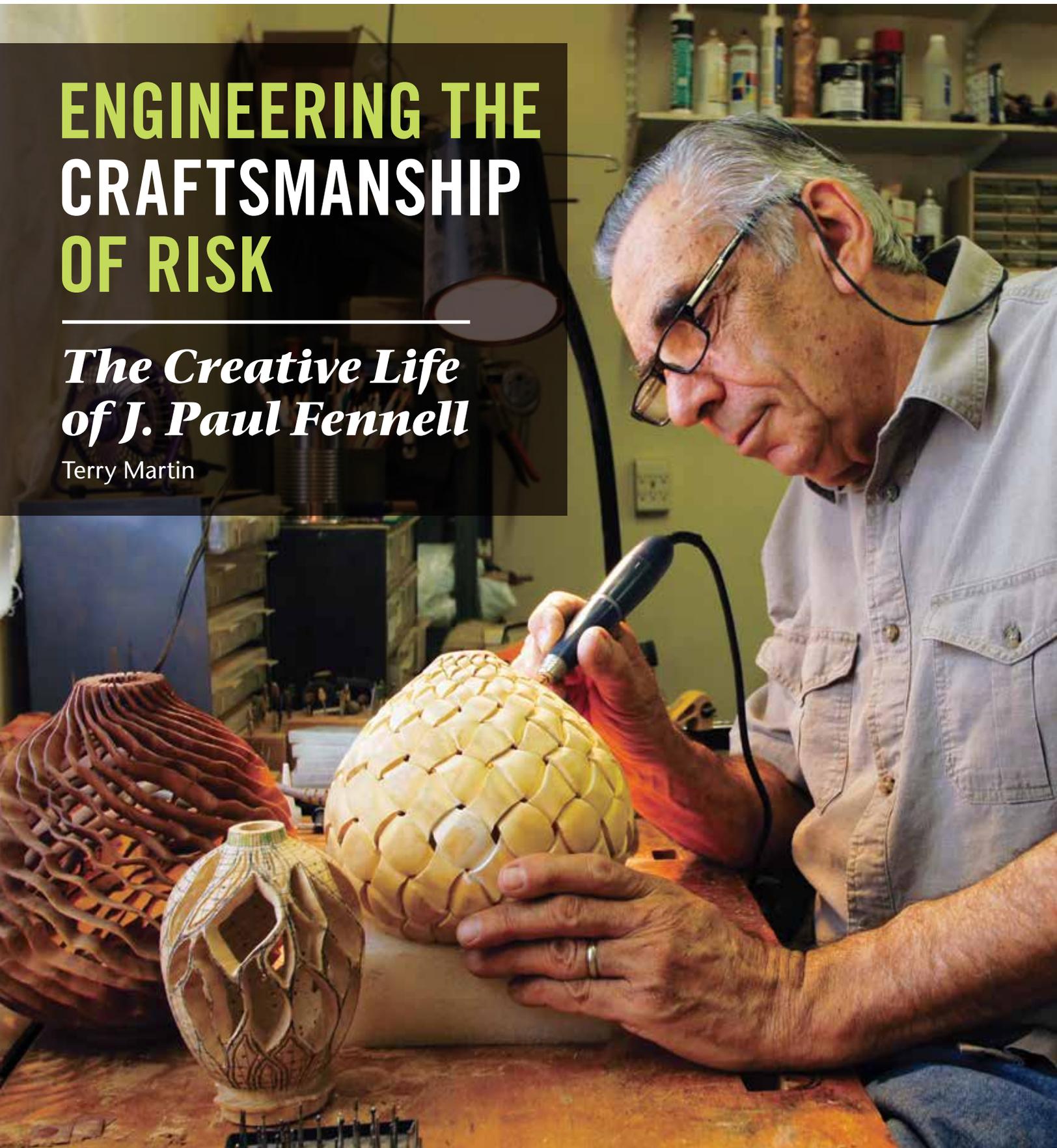


# ENGINEERING THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF RISK

*The Creative Life  
of J. Paul Fennell*

Terry Martin





J. Paul Fennell in his Arizona studio, 2014.

Photo: Terry Martin

I have learned not to be fooled by the modest demeanor of new turning acquaintances because they have often led very successful lives as surgeons, farmers, military officers, CEOs, and almost anything else you can think of. It speaks volumes for our field that it attracts so many who have already led such rich lives. Now I always ask new woodturning acquaintances what they did before becoming a woodturner. Of all the answers I have heard, J. Paul Fennell's was the biggest showstopper: "Oh, I was a rocket scientist."

This answer may distract your attention from woodturning, but Paul also has had a remarkable career as a wood artist that began as far back as 1971. He has been an active and influential player in the development of the contemporary turning scene, and the story of how he became a respected elder in our field is one of the most fascinating I have recorded.

### Family life

Paul's family history is the classic American immigrant tale. His grandfather migrated from Italy to America around 1910 and bought a small farm in Massachusetts, where the family grew vegetables and corn and raised chickens. Paul's father grew up on this farm but, with a hint of the restless ambition and willingness to take risks that his son would inherit, he decided farming was not for him. He started his own sign-painting business in Salem, Massachusetts, and Paul was born in the nearby town of Beverly.

Every wood artist I have ever spoken to had a parent or grandparent who planted the seeds of woodworking in them at an early age. Paul's early influence came from his father: "He had a small workshop in the basement and could make just about anything that would be useful. The thing I remember most about the workshop is the aroma of white pine being cut. It was so sensuous."

The lure of wood was strong, but Paul's father had ambitions typical of immigrant families, and that included taking education very seriously. Paul was fortunate enough to go to a very progressive high school, which suited a boy of his potential. "The teachers were very demanding," he says. "For example, in my senior year we all had to do an enormous manuscript thesis. I wrote my heart out on it and when the teacher returned the papers my name wasn't called. I was wondering what had happened, when the teacher finally said, 'I want to talk about one particular thesis that I received. In my estimation, it is about as close to a master's thesis as you could get at this level of education.' I went home beaming and showed my parents, but all they said was, 'That's nice.'"

Throughout high school, Paul responded well to high expectations: "I took a lot of math and English. My parents always assumed I would go to college, so when I said I wanted to take up aeronautical engineering, they were pleased. I wanted to design airplanes and be involved in building them, so I chose The Ohio State University for its great engineering program."

### Life as a rocket scientist

Paul's professional ambitions were well-timed, as the demand for aeronautical engineers surged just as he graduated. "This was during the Cold War, so it was a particularly exciting field," he explains. "My first job was in San Diego on the Atlas program, and I worked on the missile that launched John Glenn into orbit. I soon changed companies to work on the second stage of the Saturn 5 rocket that was going to launch the Apollo missions into orbit and eventually to the moon. We moved to Whittier, California, and I worked at the factory that built the P51 Mustangs during World War II." Paul was a mission, rocket performance, ▶

(Left) *Curly Maple Hollow Form*, 1991, Maple, 8¾" × 5½" (22cm × 14cm)

(Right) *Discovery in Carob*, 2003, Carob, 9" × 10" (24cm × 26cm)

Photo: R. Barrkman



and orbital mechanics analyst in the Apollo space program. "Everything was fresh," he says, "and I also had the opportunity to continue my education free at the University of Southern California to get a master's degree. It was so exciting, taking what you learned in college and applying it—and making money!"

After twelve years, Paul was offered the chance to move to Houston to work on the Shuttle program, but he must have surprised everyone when he declined. "I didn't want to live there," he explains, "so I got out of the engineering business. I started working as a rocket scientist in 1961 and finished in 1973. It wasn't a very long career, but it was an intense and exciting part of my life."

### Early turning experiences

During this period, Paul also developed his interest in woodturning: "In 1971, I was making bookcases and toys for my two boys. There was a high school nearby that offered adult education classes, so I went there to make furniture. I noticed there were lathes that were never

used, so I asked the instructor whether they were available for us. They were. He didn't know much about them but offered to help as much as he could. The tools were all beat up, and the teacher explained, 'You're going to need lots of sandpaper.' I just put a piece of wood on the lathe and started, and I thought it was pretty neat."

Once the classes were over, Paul wanted to turn more: "My work as an engineer was essentially a desk job, no use of the hands, no manual exertion, so I found woodturning very therapeutic." He soon bought an old Rockwell Delta lathe with cast iron legs and a bunch of tools for \$150. Paul continued making things in his garage and learned from any books he could find on woodturning. With his typical sharp focus, Paul immediately found ways to make turning even more interesting: "After I learned the basic skills, I found I really liked solving woodturning problems. That's all engineering is—solving very technical problems. To be a good engineer, you have to have a sense of curiosity. What happens if I do this?

Will changing something make it better? That's how I look at work."

### A woodturning career emerges

Once Paul decided to leave the space program, he made a clean break: "In 1973, I decided to go back to Massachusetts. My father wanted to retire, so I took over his successful sign business and we stayed there till 1993." Paul continued to develop his interest in turning: "I bought Dale Nish's books, *Creative Woodturning* and *Master Woodturners*. He had a section on miniatures and I really got into that for a while."

In 1980, Paul became involved in the burgeoning woodturning movement after he saw an ad for a symposium in Philadelphia, where Bob Stocksdale was to demonstrate. "It was the first Albert LeCoff symposium I went to," he recalls. "The other demonstrators were Dale Nish, Dell Stubbs, Rudy Osolnik, Palmer Sharpless, and a couple of others. It just blew my mind."

Paul also attended the final LeCoff symposium in 1981. The demonstrators included David Ellsworth,

Richard Raffan, Ray Key, and Ed Moulthrop. Paul recalls the significant woodturning exhibit that accompanied the symposium: “It was the first exhibit of notables like Ellsworth, Raffan, Key, Moulthrop, Gilson, Hunter, Hosaluk, Stubbs, Brolly, Saylan, Hogbin, Holzapfel, and Stirt. It was really exciting, particularly at the end, when David [Ellsworth] did a critique of the work.”

Inspired by all this exposure to the rising stars of turning, Paul continued to experiment in his garage. “I made many things in different woods,” he says, “and gave most of them away. My very first exhibit was for a month in a tall bookcase at the entrance of the local public library. The pieces weren’t for sale, but I got written up in the newspaper and became known in my area.”

Paul joined the AAW as charter member #297, just after AAW’s inaugural meeting at Arrowmont in 1985. When he attended the first AAW symposium in 1986, he started to make friends with people who were to be major players in the field and who shared his interests: “Bonnie Klein and I hit it off because we were both doing miniatures. At the instant gallery, I showed my miniature goblets and a tall vase with a glass insert that you could put cut flowers into.” Paul remains a strong supporter of the AAW, explaining that he has missed only one AAW annual symposium since 1987. He was also a charter member of the Central New England Woodturners, one of the earliest AAW chapters, and has the enviable record of being an invited demonstrator at no less than ten AAW symposia. Paul is also the current chair of AAW’s POP program.

## Inspiration

Even as late as 1986, Paul did not have a real focus for his work, but at his first AAW event, when he was introduced to hollow forms, everything changed. “I just had to know how to do those things,” he recalls. “I was on a quest to learn, but of course I had no teachers and no suitable tools. Even Ellsworth’s tools were all homemade, so I decided I’d make my own. Everything fit together into my engineering psyche—I was trying something new, developing new skills, and making new tools. The aesthetics came later, but once I got into hollow forms, there was no going back.”

Hints of Paul’s future success as a professional turner soon appeared: “First, I was juried into the Society of Arts and Crafts gallery in a very high-end section of Boston, where I sold a few pieces, and then I sold some pieces at the AAW symposiums.” Paul believes that his success as a turner really started in early 1988, when he began turning thin-walled hollow forms. “I just kept getting better and



Developing new processes is what makes it fascinating for me.

—J. Paul Fennell

better,” he says. “The pieces were mostly unembellished, but I did turn thin grooves in some and I sandblasted others. I felt the sandblasting process was a breakthrough—the effect of eroding the soft grain while leaving the harder grain intact was impressive and people just had to get their hands around them.”

Paul started making his hollow forms really thin in the early 1990s, borrowing Richard Raffan’s idea of using light as a wall-thickness gauge. “He was using it on the outside,” Paul explains, “but I bought a fiber-optics unit with a thin light cable you could put in a hollow form and when it was thin enough it would become translucent. I still do this during demonstrations and it amazes everyone.”

Eventually, those who had inspired Paul began to recognize his work. At one symposium, where he was displaying a hollow form made from masur birch, Del Stubbs expressed his approval. “He came up to me and picked up the piece. He told me he couldn’t get over how thin it was,” says Paul. Stubbs was not the only famed woodworker who was to be impressed. “I met Sam Maloof at an exhibit in Boston and he asked which piece was mine. I pointed to my tiny piece that was \$125, and he said, ‘I’m going to buy this!’ Being recognized by people who inspired you is a good feeling. Once David Ellsworth told me he really liked a piece of mine. Now when I show it to people, I say, ‘David Ellsworth stuck his finger in this piece.’ He was at the top of the pile and that meant something to me.” An increasing number of collectors also began purchasing Paul’s work during this period, which was, as Paul says, “a good time to be a woodturner.” By 2014, his work was held in thirty-three permanent collections.

## Moving south again

Paul and his wife Judy missed the California weather, so in 1993, when their children had grown, they moved to the warmer climate of Arizona, where Paul bought another sign ►

company. “Working in a small garage where it could reach 106 degrees in the summer wasn’t pleasant, and I had to adjust to the lack of good wood,” explains Paul. “I joined the local AAW chapter, the Arizona Woodturners Association, and that helped a lot. It’s a nice club and I’m still a member. During that time, I became increasingly fascinated with adding tactile qualities that you can’t get on the lathe.”

### Finding a signature style

Paul and Judy’s final move to their home in Arizona allowed Paul to have his dream workshop, where he was able to settle down to creating a body of signature work. His thoughts on this subject are the result of many years of analysis. Paul did not intentionally try to develop a signature style, but one day when someone told him he could always tell Paul’s work in an exhibit, he realized it had happened. “The heavy carving, piercing, and texturing began around 1997, when I did things like basket-weave designs,” Paul explains. “The design for the lattice patterns came from a small snippet of two-dimensional patterns from Buddhist temples in China. I was curious about how it could be applied to a three-dimensional surface.” This was a real milestone for the development of Paul’s distinctive style: “You have to figure out how many times a pattern will be repeated and then fit it so there’s no discontinuity as you work your way around the piece. Sometimes the number of divisions is not one that is commonly used. For example, if the pattern repeats itself after seven spaces, when you fit the design to a vessel, you may end up with a multiple of seven, say fifty-six. So how do you divide a vessel into fifty-six divisions? I needed an

indexing system, and I had to make it myself. Developing new processes is what makes it fascinating for me.”

Paul has had a lifelong interest in improvisational jazz, which he believes is similar to what he does with the patterns he creates: “You’re improvising,” he says. “Even though you’re working with patterns that could be found in other people’s work, no one has ever done it like that before. Just like jazz, you can recognize the person by his style.”

Paul insists that the development of creativity is a never-ending process: “You have to really look at the idea and practice it like a musical instrument. ‘If I change this a little bit, would it be better or different? How would it look?’ It becomes a dialog, a series of expressive designs that come together into a body of work that nobody else has done. I believe you also need an element of risk in your work, the challenge of doing something that takes a lot of effort and concentration.”

### An evolving body of work

A review of Paul’s work since he first had success with hollow forms illustrates this process of incremental development very well. There is no doubt that as early as 1991, when he made *Curly Maple Hollow Form*, he had already mastered the shape of such pieces, and this becomes especially apparent when you hold the vessel yourself. It is so light, you

can almost imagine it will float out of your hand. Careful sounding by tapping with a fingernail proves it is eggshell-thin, all the way to the bottom. This is the work of a hollowing master.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Paul soon began to explore the third dimension of the vessel surface. This transition is graphically shown in *Discovery in Carob* from 2003. After leaving a lightly grooved part of the turned surface to emphasize that it came from the lathe, he then juxtaposed this treatment with a deeply carved basket-weave pattern. This piece clearly states: “I won’t be restrained by the lathe!”

Paul continued to create both solid and pierced pieces and the effect of these different approaches is clearly illustrated by comparing *La Passion de Mon Père* and *Les Marguerites*, from 2003 and 2004. They are superficially similar, but the former is built on solid deep relief, while the latter, with its fragile, pierced background, allows the light to wash around the flowers. I believe this effect takes this work to an entirely different level.

*Red Cord* from 2005 is a good example of how Paul imbues his pieces with personal content. He explains, “*Red Cord* was inspired by my eldest son’s marriage in 2004. It is based on the Chinese legend of a red silk cord connected at birth to couples who are destined for each other. As they grow up, the cord ►

(Top row, left to right)  
*La Passion de Mon Père*, 2003,  
Carob, 9" × 6¼" (24cm × 16cm)

*Les Marguerites*, 2004, Carob,  
10" × 6¼" (26cm × 16cm)

*Red Cord*, 2005, Mesquite, acrylic  
ink, 8¼" × 6" (21cm × 15cm)

(Middle row, left to right)  
*Leaf Form*, 2005, African sumac,  
8¾" × 7" (22cm × 18cm)

*View from the Garden*, 2006, African  
sumac, 7½" × 6¼" (19cm × 16cm)

*Sumac Ribbons*, 2008, African  
sumac, 6" × 6" (15cm × 15cm)

(Bottom row, left to right)  
*Perturbations II*, 2008, African  
sumac, 6" × 5½" (15cm × 14cm)

*Swirls*, 2008, African sumac,  
7" × 7" (18cm × 18cm)

*Wave Patterns*, 2013, African  
sumac, 8" × 6" (20cm × 15cm)



Photo: R. Barrkman

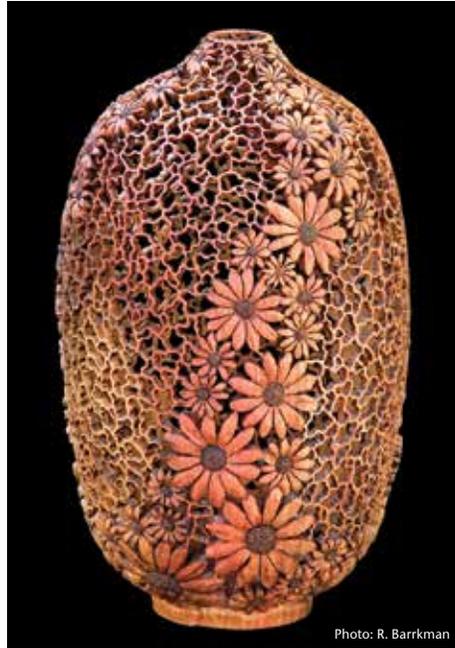
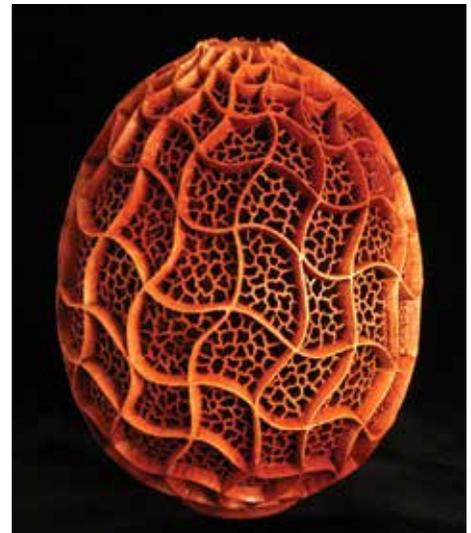
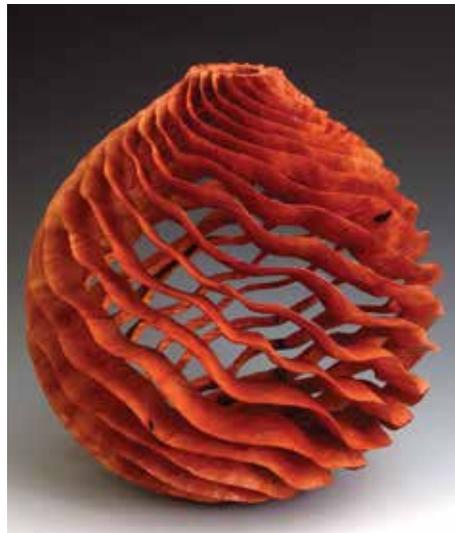
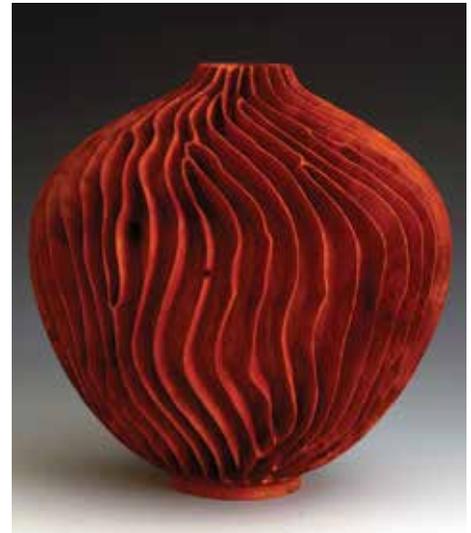


Photo: R. Barrkman





*Cycles*, 2014, African sumac, 6" x 6½" (15cm x 16.5cm)

becomes shorter and shorter, until they find each other and are united forever. The undulating basket-weave pattern shows that when two lives are inextricably woven together in marriage, it is not always smooth and predictable."

Even though *Leaf Form*, also made in 2005, was the result of painstaking incremental development, it has all the hallmarks of a leap forward in both fragility and style. The design is amazing enough, but the execution of such fine work requires remarkable patience and dexterity. Such pieces were milestones not only for Paul, but for the entire field.

The challenge of wrapping a design around a hollow vessel is particularly well illustrated in *View from the Garden* (2006). The flat patterns Paul obtained from Chinese temples have to taper toward the top and bottom of the vessel, requiring a

clever combination of creative vision and technical virtuosity.

Paul's improvisational evolution is exemplified by three pieces he made in 2008. In *Sumac Ribbons*, Paul cut deep vertical fissures, but they do not pierce the wall of the vessel so there is little sense of the inner volume. In *Perturbations II*, he has pierced through to leave thin vertical pieces like blades of grass to both enclose and reveal the space within. In *Swirls*, he has taken the craftsmanship of risk a large step further by cutting in swirling lines right across the grain, risking all, but succeeding in creating a piece that defies predictability—and the fear of breakage. You can almost hear him asking himself the questions: "What if...? Would it be better...? How would it look...?" In retrospect, the evolution of his work seems obvious, inevitable, but in reality it took a lot of

experimentation, backtracking, and broken wood to arrive at this level of craftsmanship.

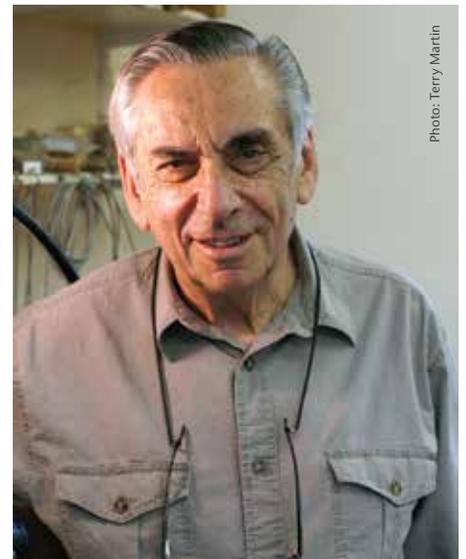
*Wave Patterns*, made in 2013, beautifully echoes *Leaf Form* from 2005. Now fully in control of his medium, Paul continued to push the limits of this design and in 2014 produced *Cycles*, arguably his best piece to date.

Paul has unselfishly supported other artists and is deeply committed to the wood world we share. Like the evolved state of his turned work, his successes in life resulted from a willingness to face risk, a precedent set by his immigrant grandfather and entrepreneurial father. That Paul has embraced this attitude is evidenced by his rich and varied life and by the ambitious nature of his art.

For more on J. Paul Fennell, visit [jpaulfennell.com](http://jpaulfennell.com). ■

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Photo: Terry Martin