

NEIL SCOBIE A TURNER FOR US ALL

Terry Martin

Neil Scobie, *left*, in a teaching moment with student Kevin Ingersol. *A quiet word, a soft suggestion, some reassurance.*

Photo: Terry Martin

In mid-1988, I was traveling the rural New South Wales countryside in eastern Australia and I happened upon a small craft gallery in a tiny village. There I found a small natural-edged bowl turned in rosewood, a delightful piece that was so well-crafted, I immediately bought it for my newly started collection. The name on the bowl meant nothing to me at the time, but Neil Scobie would become one of my most valued friends and someone who has earned my deepest respect. Now, twenty-eight years on, I want to introduce Neil to all those who do not yet know him. As I describe how Neil has become such a respected and well-liked man, I hope his story will have meaning for others and echo the friendships and shared experiences that are at the heart of the woodturning revival.

I started to hear more about Neil after I bought the bowl, but we did not meet until 1995, when I drove to his home. His reputation intrigued me, and I was filled with interest to meet another turner like me—a reinvented professional who wanted to make a living turning wood. Those were the “good old days” for turners, although most did not know it at the time. Sales were good, ideas were exploding, and it seemed there was a viable future for us all. Today, turning is less about making a living and more commonly a way for people to find new meaning in life and to engage with a sharing community. Neil has negotiated this change more successfully than most, so in a sense his story also echoes the new direction of the whole turning movement.

Today, turning is less about making a living and more commonly a way for people to find new meaning in life and to engage with a sharing community. Neil’s story echoes this new direction.

On that first trip, after a six-hour drive from my home in Brisbane, I arrived at the house Neil had built near the beachside resort town of Coffs Harbour. It is among the

most beautiful places in Australia, rimmed by perfect beaches and backed by forested mountains. I have made the same trek many times since then, and the sense of welcome, peace, and contentment I always feel when I am there goes a long way toward explaining why so many people have traveled to Neil's home to renew their energy and find new meaning in their lives. Neil has, quite simply, lived the woodturner's dream life, and he has dedicated much of his life to helping others find their own share of this dream. How he arrived there is a simple story of hard work, dedication, and knowing what is really important in life.

Background

Neil was born to farm life near the wonderfully named Australian town of Wagga Wagga. It seems farm life is the perfect training for a creative woodturner, as it fosters the ability to turn a hand to any task, to work hard over long hours, to maintain machinery, and to find simple and practical solutions to everyday problems. All of this was reinforced at the school Neil attended, as he explains: "We were mostly farm boys, so we did a subject called Farm Mechanics. We learned to work in wood and metal, to forge, fix motors—things like that." This practical background is invaluable, but to make a really creative turner you need that little extra, the curiosity to try new ways, the cleverness to see new solutions. This curiosity led Neil away from the farm life to train as a woodworking teacher.

In his first year of study, Neil met the most important person in his life, his wife and life partner in every way, Liz. If you get to know enough successful woodturners, you almost always discover they have a strong partner who supports the unpredictable life

of making a living in this financially precarious occupation. Liz makes her own living as a textile artist and designer and has always worked on equal terms with Neil. So, by introducing Liz Scobie, I hope I am also acknowledging those partners who may not be so well known to the woodturning community, but who deserve at least as much respect and acknowledgement.

Early turning days

Neil studied industrial arts and one of his teachers started his interest in turning, although he also credits three others for inspiring him: "During the 1980s, several influential turners visited Australia," he says, "but Del Stubbs and Mike Hosaluk impressed me the most. Among Australian turners, it was Richard Raffan who I was most influenced by." After they graduated, Neil and Liz spent twenty years teaching in high schools in rural Australia, and in his spare time Neil applied his metalworking skills to build his own lathe, which meant he could start selling his turnings as a sideline. That was when he made the bowl I had bought. It was a comfortable and meaningful life, and many might have been content to devote their whole working lives to it, but times were good for independent makers and eventually they decided to make the break and start their own business. Both Neil and Liz are perfect examples of the old adage that the best way to learn something is to teach it, so it is not surprising that after twenty years of teaching, when they decided to start their own business in 1990, they were masters of their crafts.

A new life

Neil and Liz built their home themselves, using old bridge timbers to create enormous open spaces filled



Neil and Liz Scobie

Photo: Anna Scobie

with light from twenty-foot-high windows. From every direction of their eight-acre homestead, the smell of trees and flowers fills the air, and every day starts and ends with bird-song. While Liz works in her studio in the house, not far away is Neil's 2,400-square-foot workshop. Liz explains that they never really had a master plan: "It just evolved really. Neil was making too much noise for our neighbors and his workshop was too small. We moved out of town so he could build a bigger one." I am not alone when I say that this is my dream workspace—the wide roller doors open to let the breeze gently blow through, and the mild climate means they are always open. Every tool you could ever want is laid out, ready at hand, the rack of quality local timbers seems to reach up forever, and there is space to make anything you could think of. In the workshop, Neil is in his element, negotiating designs with the students, making sure they have what they need, sharing a quiet word, and always leaving them with the impression that they themselves thought of the answer to a particular problem.

The fortunate residents of the region and those who travel far to learn from Neil are the beneficiaries of Neil's good nature and knowledge. Many times I have joined Neil and his students under the veranda outside ►



Neil Scobie (center) in his element: in the workshop with students.

Photo: Terry Martin

the workshop for a morning coffee or an end-of-day beer, and it always feels like home. Liz put it wonderfully when I mentioned to her that a lot of their students had become life-long friends: “Oh, some of them have become family,” she laughed.

Neil describes how his classes grew: “I know the classes started around twenty years ago because one student is in his twentieth year here. We began with one night class, and that eventually became four, two night and two morning classes. I also run week-long classes, and one year I ran eight of them. This year we started doing three-day weekends, which seems to be a good option because people can get a day off work and spend the weekend. I have to say that financially it’s a good idea, but it does take away time from my own work.” One indication of the quality of Neil’s classes is that he has never had to advertise—word-of-mouth brings more than enough students.

It is obvious that one of the secrets to Neil’s success is his relentless energy, as Liz explains: “People often say ‘Oh, he’s really lucky,’ but he actually works hard at being lucky. He’s always in the workshop by

eight-thirty and he works until six, then if he’s got furniture orders or classes at night, he’s back there again after dinner.” Neil is also a dedicated sportsman, as he explains: “I play in a local volleyball competition, surf regularly, and ride my mountain bike as often as I can. I love to walk on the beach and go bush-walking. It’s good to be fit, but it is as much about the friendship as the sport. I have one friend who I have been playing sport with for thirty-three years!” It’s an understatement when Liz says, “It’s often very busy, so when we have a quiet moment and sit outside with a drink, Neil will say, ‘This is such a great place, we should visit it more often.’”

An international reputation

It is hard to imagine how Neil finds the time, but he has also developed a solid reputation abroad. “I first demonstrated in the U.S. in 2004 in Orlando, Florida. That was enjoyable, but I was quite nervous—the boy from the bush in the big city. But once I looked at some other demonstrators, I realized they didn’t really know any more than me,”

he says. “I’ve also demonstrated in Los Angeles and San Jose, and Liz and I both went to the Utah symposium in 2005. In 2006, I did the ITE [International Turning Exchange] with what was then the Wood Turning Center, and I demonstrated at the Louisville, Kentucky, [AAW] Symposium. Since then I have been to the Phoenix Symposium and last year I went to the Ohio Valley Woodturners. I’ve also demonstrated in Hawaii twice and that’s really enjoyable.”

Neil also taught in France at Jean-François Escoulen’s school, and he says those classes were a real highlight for him: “I liked the students very much and when Jean-François said his students were very happy, I was pleased.” Add four trips to demonstrate in New Zealand and it is not hard to see why Neil has such a good international reputation.

Normally, I like to explain the way people I am writing about work, but Neil recently wrote an article, “Concept Development: Going from Idea to Finished Form,” for the February 2016 issue of *American Woodturner*, so I don’t need to explain his thoughtful approach to creation. The story is a gem of concise guidance and reveals all the elements that make him not only a master craftsman, but also a master teacher.

JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

Neil Scobie’s “Concept Development” article can be found in the AAW’s online journal archives (vol 31, no 1), along with all past journal articles. Visit woodturner.org for more.



Meaningful collaboration

Among all the achievements, there is one aspect of Neil's work that stands out: his collaborations with Liz. They have sold so many pieces they made together that I suspect they are the most successful turning-based collaborators in the world. In their house you are surrounded by their work—wooden screens filled with Liz's voluptuous textiles, bowls painted in swirling patterns, functional wooden objects with that extra touch of Liz about them. Liz explains best how they work together: "Making a living in the woodworking industry is not an easy thing to do if you don't diversify. It's the same for me and I think that's the main reason the collaboration started. We've been doing this since our children were young. We had to educate them and we still needed to make a good living. Also, Neil likes the variety."



Textile Lidded Box, 2014, Sheoak, textile, 6¾" × 4¾" (16cm × 12cm)

Neil has left this box simple for Liz to play with. Her textile work peppers this lid with texture and flashing light.

“
IT SOUNDS EASY TO SAY
THAT NEIL MAKES THE
BOWLS AND I PAINT
THEM, BUT IT TAKES
UNDERSTANDING AND
COOPERATION TO GET
A BALANCED RESULT.
— LIZ SCOBIE

The distinctive bowls they have made together glow with beautifully chosen tones that enhance the wood colors. Neil takes into account that Liz will work on the bowl, so he leaves a clear palette for her

work. She, in turn, is able to transform a simple bowl into a work of art. Once more, she explains it best: "I call myself a patternist, not a painter. I think it shows in the designs I use on Neil's bowls. It sounds easy to say that Neil makes the bowls and I paint them, but it takes understanding and cooperation to get a balanced result."

This process of working meaningfully with someone else is also part of their teaching life. "We sometimes do collaborative classes," says Liz. "If we are doing lamps, one partner will do the timber work and the other will do the textile work. By partner, I don't always mean husband and wife. Sometimes we've had mothers and sons and we've had all sorts of combinations. We've even had a wife say, 'You'll have to go down and do the sewing because I'm doing the woodwork!'" ▶



Texture Platter, 2012, Blackwood, 2" × 11⅞" (5cm × 30cm)

Nautilus, 2013, Red cedar, 2¾" × 6¾" (6cm × 17cm)

A collaboration with Liz Scobie, whose work can transform a simple surface into a wonderland of texture and light.





Varied output

As if all this was not enough, Neil has played a significant role in the Australian furniture scene for many years, not only as a teacher, but also as an accomplished maker. Neil's work is so respected that he was commissioned to make furniture for the residence of the Australian Prime Minister. He also writes prolifically about furniture making and even sells full-scale plans of his projects. So how has he balanced this life as a furniture maker with his turning career? "When I stopped teaching, it was all about woodturning," Neil explains. "You could just about sell anything you made. I was turning about three or four days a week and maybe only making furniture for one day. I was selling about \$1,000 a week worth of turning in one outlet alone. That's reversed now because you can't sell as much woodturning. But my passion is designing new turnings, so on weekends I usually do something creative and that's my greatest pleasure. I like to write about it because I feel you should pass on what you know for future generations."

Ever-efficient, Neil always finds a way to squeeze everything he can out of each job. "A lot of the creative pieces I make now are material for writing and for future demonstrations. Things have changed to the point that while I am making a piece, I am thinking, 'How will this look in a magazine?' rather than thinking of selling it. I think it's a bit sad that I get paid more to write about a piece than I actually earn selling it."

Reflections

Just a few months ago, I sat with Neil on a warm summer evening outside his home while frogs chirped around the house and kookaburras called to each other across the valley. With glasses of wine in our hands, we were both feeling contemplative, so putting all thoughts of woodwork aside, I asked Neil what he thought his biggest achievement was. He didn't hesitate: "It's how you treat people and how people treat you. Money's not going to make you happy, but having a good family and a good set of friends, that's the most important thing."

When I asked Neil what advice he would give those who seek success and balance, his reply supported what Liz

(Above) *Collector's Drawers*, 2013, Blackwood, red cedar, 53" x 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (1.35m x 55cm x 45cm)

Neil is celebrated as both a furniture maker and woodturner.

Photo: Ian Spagnolo

(Right) *Family Values*, 2012, White beech, Largest is 15" x 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (38cm x 11cm x 6cm)

One of Neil's interactive pieces; the relationships change as you rearrange the pieces.



Suspended Form, 2004, Rosewood, aluminum, 9" x 4" x 4" (23cm x 10cm x 10cm)

Neil's metal skills surface in unexpected ways.

had said: “They’ve got to be prepared to put the hours in. Some things just have to be *done*, even if it is just oiling pieces. One woman wanted a little side table and qualified her request by saying, ‘But never mind if you’re too busy.’ I said, ‘Well, I am busy, but I’ll set time aside to do it for you.’ It’s about commitment. I really enjoy what I do and I have no regrets. We don’t earn a lot of money, but we live comfortably. I like food, I like cooking, a good wine—we enjoy people’s company and love to have people over for dinner. I just enjoy life and the friends I have.”

Among all the good things I could say about Neil and Liz Scobie, I think the most important is that they have a remarkable gift for making people feel good about themselves. A few years ago, I noticed that Neil did not have any of his own very early work, so I polished up the bowl I had bought in 1988 and presented it to him as a surprise. It was a good feeling to give back to a man who has given so much to so many. ■

For more, visit neilandlizscobie.com.

Terry Martin is a wood artist, writer, and curator who lives and works in Brisbane, Australia. He can be contacted at eltel@optusnet.com.au.



Holly Nautilus, 2006, Holly, 2¾" × 9" (6cm × 23cm)

Doughnuts, 2012, Blackwood, 6" × 6" × 6" (15cm × 15cm × 15cm)



Evolution, 2014, Red cedar, silver ash, 8" × 6" × 6" (20cm × 15cm × 15cm)



Lidded Shell Box, 2016, Huon pine, 3" × 11" × 3" (8cm × 28cm × 8cm)



Ebb Tide, 2012, White beech, 2" × 27½" × 12" (5cm × 70cm × 30cm)

The turning is not obvious, but each panel was formed on the lathe before being carved.

Photo: Terry Martin