

What's in a Name

Terry Martin

For hundreds of years, woodturners across the world have been respected tradesmen in their communities. Most of them would have described themselves, in their own languages, as “woodturners.” These days, however, it seems that the one-time trade of woodturning has had so many ambitions tacked onto it that it can no longer be squeezed into its own name. Among the many self-descriptions, the word *artist* is increasingly used. This subject has been much discussed in our turning community over the last few decades and if you mention the “craft vs. art debate,” some roll their eyes as if their art has moved beyond such banal discourse, while others snort derisively at the mere mention of art in association with turning. Clearly, the “debate,” if there ever was a real one, is far from settled.

I am reminded of what Alain Mailland said at a symposium in Australia in 2000. He was asked, “Do you define yourself as a professional turner or as a carver?” He thought for a moment and then replied, “I turn my

work for ten percent of the time, then I carve it for twenty percent, and then I sand it for seventy percent. So I suppose I am a professional sander.” Of course, he was ironically rejecting being pigeonholed, but most people do need some kind of handle on an idea, even when it is almost too slippery to grasp.

Without some connection to reality, labels are meaningless, but the assessment of that reality can be problematic. In some countries, such as Germany, a master turner is assessed by qualified peers through time-honored criteria, but in countries where these standards no longer apply, it is not hard to find barely competent turners labeling themselves “master turners.” Theoretically at least, it should be possible to test such statements against measurable standards of accuracy, speed, and quality. But when a woodturner claims to be an artist, how do you assess that claim? Is it acceptable for makers of plain bowls to call themselves artists? What about a woodturner who airbrushes images onto his or her work? Coming from the other direction, should an artist



Dixie Biggs, *Lip Service*, 2010, Cherry, acrylic paint, 5½" × 7" × 5" (14cm × 18cm × 13cm)

Photo: Randy Batista

So apt for this subject, *Lip Service* by Dixie Biggs certainly qualifies as art.

who sometimes uses a lathe be called a woodturner? Where does the dividing line lie, or is there a dividing line? It is impossible to be entirely definitive, as we each have our personal criteria for deciding whether something is trade, craft, art, or something else. These criteria depend on experience, social background, education, existing prejudices, innate sensibility, and more. There are so many variables that there will never be definitive agreement, but that doesn't mean we can't have a meaningful discussion, or at least an interesting one—but any such discussion should be supported by an understanding of how the contemporary woodturning scene has evolved.

Where we came from

Woodturning was traditionally valued for the quick and inexpensive

production of functional objects. In our woodturning community today, this specific description is no longer universally applicable and, ironically, pieces are often valued for how long it takes to make them, how expensive they are, and how functionally useless. But we should not forget that there are many places where traditional criteria still prevail and turners work much the same as their ancestors did. For example, there are whole villages in Germany and Japan where the local economy depends on traditional turning and where they still simply call themselves *woodturners*.

In the mid-20th century, books about turning still adhered to time-proven formulas and appearance was not considered of primary importance. For example, in his *Woodturning Design and Practice* (1958), Gerald T. James wrote, “The object must fulfill its function well and it should be pleasant to look at.” However, quite soon the secure livelihood of woodturners came under threat from changing fashions and the increasing availability of mass-produced plastic wares. Once-thriving businesses started to close down, and within a few decades woodturning almost disappeared in many parts of the world.

Fortunately, in the permissive atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, a few visionary woodworkers saw that the lathe offered possibilities that had not been explored before. To appreciate this period of explosive creativity, I recommend books by Dona Z. Meilach, who understood what was happening before anyone else (*Creating Small Wood Objects as Functional Sculpture*, 1976, and *Woodworking the New Wave*, 1981). In fact, it was the first of these books that set me on my own path to creative woodwork in 1977. On art vs. craft, Dona, in her inimitable style, says, “Regardless of whether any of the pieces illustrated has an obvious use or exists as an intellectual stimulation (or



Takehito Nakajima, a traditional turner from Yamanaka, Japan, apprenticed to his father. At 51 years of age, he has spent his whole working life making traditional craft.

functional versus non-functional if you prefer), the artist’s creative processes are the same: visualization, execution, results, audience.”

I also recommend the early books by Dale Nish (*Artistic Woodturning*, 1980, and *Master Woodturners*, 1985). In the pre-Internet years, the articles published in *Fine Woodworking* by John Kelsey were like an inspiring how-to manual

for new-age woodturners. For example, John was responsible for the first article on hollow turning by David Ellsworth in 1979. Apart from such publications, the early symposia started by Albert LeCoff in 1976 allowed turners to share their knowledge and had a major influence on the development of contemporary turning. Creative turning was an ideal craft for the times. Some surviving traditionalists came together with the new kids on the block, respectfully found common ground, and numbers started to grow exponentially.

The importance of skill

Why did these very different kinds of turners come together so easily? I think the old-school turners were relieved that people were still willing to show them respect and learn from their hard-won skills. Since the beginning of the woodturning revival, some trade-based turners, such as Richard Raffan and Glenn Lucas, have extended their careers by transferring their skills to the classroom, demonstration hall, and publications. For some traditional turners who had chafed against the restrictions of their trade, the new approach was like a ray of light. Jean-François Escoulen is a true master of traditional turning, but in 1996, after he spent two months in ▶



Jean-François Escoulen in the U.S. in 1996, escaping the restrictions of tradition.

the U.S. exploring creative turning, he told me, “Once I thought technique was everything, but now I think I was a prisoner of technique.”

On the other side, while the new heroes may have moved away from tradition, they still understood the need for slow and careful acquisition of skills. Many of them had replaced five-year apprenticeships with even longer periods of tenacious trial and error. No names stand higher in this than Mark Lindquist and David Ellsworth. In their two seminal publications (*Sculpting Wood*, Lindquist, 1986, and *Ellsworth on Woodturning*, 2008), they both stress the importance of informed and practiced technique as essential prerequisites to the creative process.

So these two groups, the traditionalists and the innovators, found common ground in technique and that has defined their relationship ever since. Increasingly, however, the Internet (and particularly YouTube) has allowed newcomers to bypass this relationship. In their rush toward “fame,” many hopeful turners are not aware of the time it takes to attain the level of skill their heroes attained. A web search using the word *woodturning* will reveal

such inexcusably bad technique by self-appointed “masters” that we need to make a strong statement: *Poor turning technique is not only inefficient, but also dangerous*. There is a beauty to the controlled use of tools that no amount of grandstanding can achieve and, not surprisingly, the products of wood bludgeoned into shape by pretenders are often as ugly as their technique.

What is a professional turner?

Not so long ago, it was accepted that professional woodturners earned their entire income from turning, but as times have changed this has become increasingly difficult. In countries like the U.S., turners who pay all of their bills through turning wood are rare. In the 1990s and early 2000s, as prices for work by famous creative turners soared, many of them were seen as the new “professionals” because it appeared they were doing very well. In truth, many of them were skating on thin ice. The failure of turned wood art to appeal to a wider market, a narrow and aging collector base, and the closure of the few galleries specializing in turned wood all made the ice even thinner. Then, in 2007-2008, the global financial crisis broke the ice and plunged them into cold water.

Nowadays, the word *professional* has lost much of its meaning and has become an aspirational term for those who want to be thought of as top-level turners. Many of the “real” professionals have been forced to depend on supplementary incomes, and that can mean engaging more with the hobby turners who want to be like them. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as we don’t confuse earning an income from selling turned work with being a purveyor of the woodturning dream. And for beginners, learning from an established “artist” can be confusing. Are they entitled to copy their teacher’s work and call themselves artists? Is a partly trained graduate of

a one-week class an “emerging artist”? And what are new turners to think when they see the online *poseurs* who demonstrate “how to turn a \$10,000 bowl from a piece of firewood”?

The role of the AAW

Many of the earliest woodturning clubs were formed in the United Kingdom and Australia, and they attracted people who knew a good hobby when they saw it. Often they were retired men who wanted something meaningful to do; woodturning was ideal because it resembled “work.” With no Internet and few publications to inspire them, they were typically grassroots groups that grew out of local interests, and this often meant they favored more traditional styles of turning. In contrast, when the AAW was formed in 1986, its agenda was heavily influenced by the new generation of turners. It is now the largest and most influential turning group in the world, so large that it has created its own microclimate, and within that insulated space it has largely redefined woodturning.

In September 1986, the cover of the first issue of *American Woodturner* featured a hollow vessel by David Ellsworth, and the thin-walled hollow vessel remains a benchmark for turning prowess today. But inside that issue, it was clear that the AAW was already developing a split personality. Topics included “Tips and Techniques,” “Project Page,” and “Safety in the Shop,” all subjects suitable for beginners, but also included were “The Zen Experience” and “Collector’s Corner,” obviously of more interest to creative members.

To become a credible national body, the AAW needed to attract enough members, and that meant building financial and organizational resources. The innovative superstars were a big drawcard, but to grow the membership, the organization needed to show new turners how to turn, hence the strong emphasis on technique. This



In 1986, the first cover of *American Woodturner* challenged everything that had gone before in woodturning. The challenge continues...

has always been evident in *American Woodturner*, where the editor has to balance members' diverse interests. Eventually, the need to guide beginners was the reason behind the separate AAW publication, *Woodturning FUNDamentals*. Ultimately, the AAW embraced all forms of turning, and this is one reason for the split personality that it has today.

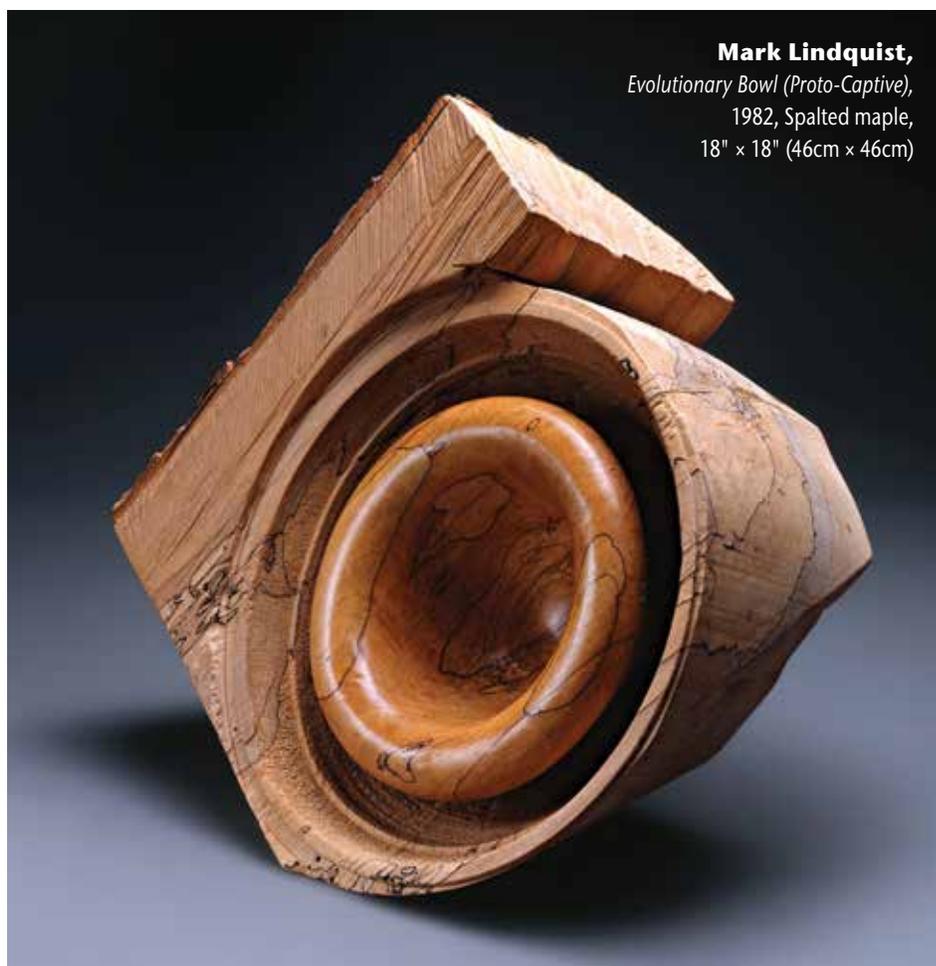
A stroll through the Instant Gallery at an AAW Symposium will reveal very little “traditional” turning, but lots of glitz and glamor. For the uninformed aspirant, this is a powerful message—dazzling showiness gets you on the podium. This is supported by the many demonstrations where accomplished turners show how easily they can do astonishing things in an hour. As they are marketing the dream, the years and years it takes to achieve their level of skill are rarely mentioned.

In their own words

One of the most influential early publications on creative turning was *The Art of Turned-Wood Bowls* by Edward Jacobson, 1985. Jacobson had started collecting in 1978 and by the time he published his book, he was confident he was collecting art. Jacobson wrote some very pertinent questions on this subject, and then answered them with refreshing honesty:

- *What is the difference between art and craft? I do not know.*
- *What objective evidence can be marshalled to support any answer to that question? Very little.*
- *Have answers previously given stood the test of time? No.*

To track the subsequent dialogue on this subject, I trawled the biggest history of the contemporary woodturning movement, a history not written in one voice but in the voices of many hundreds over a period of thirty-four years. It is called *American Woodturner* and it is available online in its entirety to members of the AAW. I searched



Mark Lindquist,
Evolutionary Bowl (Proto-Captive),
1982, Spalted maple,
18" × 18" (46cm × 46cm)

Mark Lindquist was the first to link material, process, and product all in one piece—something that had never been done before in woodturning.

every issue from 1986 and learned many things I never knew, and relearned many I had forgotten. Here is a small selection of opinions on this subject:

- 1988, Letter to the Editor: *I am not going to rejoin your organization as I feel you are much too sophisticated for me. You are worrying about whether woodturning is an art or a craft. I just worry about how to make something I enjoy making.*
- Betty Scarpino, 1996: *I'm not sure, though, whose place it is to publicly criticize—I just know that criticism is needed because there are some exceptionally bad wooden vessels sailing around out there in the name of art and woodturning.*
- David Ellsworth, 2000: *Sooner or later you will encounter the conundrum of the balance between the terms “art” and “craft”... I use the term “balance,” because the two are inseparably linked. I also realize that for some, this may be a tired old song.*
- Ron Vavra, 2000: *[You] cannot have art without craft, but you can have craft without art. Therefore it seems sensible to think that when the word “craft” is used, it implies that the step toward art has not yet been taken. In other words, craft is not art.*
- John Jordan, 2006: *When we, or others, declare our work “art objects,” we jump from a small pond into a very large ocean... [There] are many in our field trying—and not succeeding—to ►*

become sculptors because their work comes off as pretentious and clever.

- Jean-François Escoulen, 2009: *Don't try to be the best and stay humble. You are a woodturner.*
- Hayley Smith, 2011: *I couldn't understand how I could be an artist if I made a bowl out of clay, but not be an artist if I turned a bowl out of wood.*
- John Kelsey, 2011: *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.*
- Jerry Bennet, 2013: *Personal styles do not happen in a one-night inspiration session.*
- Kip Christiansen, 2017: *Beginning woodturners are often impatient and unrealistic. They expect to create beautiful work without spending time developing the fundamentals.*

What Betty Scarpino said is still true—among all the words that have been written about adventurist woodturning over recent decades, you will find almost no objective criticism. I recall a Wood Turning Center conference I attended in 1999, where established curators from outside the field were invited to critique turned “wood art.” There were howls of outrage as works from famous turners were systematically shredded by the highly qualified panelists. An attendee

next to me said, “Don’t they know who they are talking about?” And that is exactly the point I am trying to make: when you are inside the warm embrace of the woodturning glee club, it is easy to be blinded by reputation, clever technique, and self-obsessed publicity.

During the 90s, the internal conversation about turning increasingly assumed that the wider art world would eventually recognize woodturning as art. Many looked with envy at Mark Lindquist, who was the first and perhaps the only woodturner to make the full transition to being a fine artist. As he explains, “In 1978, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art took two of my pieces into their permanent collection, I felt as though I was validated as an artist, or at least everyone was telling me so. So I began working entirely outside of what everyone’s expectations were, and most of them did not like it. Once I learned that I was aiming to make sculpture within the confines of the vessel, the rest came easy, except for the struggle of working in the dark and not knowing what would come of it. If you aspire to become an artist, you better have vision.”

Since then, several private collections have made their way into major institutions and Mark makes this sharp observation: “Once certain collectors began enticing museums to take their shows by allowing them to cherry-pick

collections, or by offering funding to museums, the stakes suddenly became higher and money influenced the acceptance of objects as fine art. With the advent of the well-heeled collector and their agenda of writing off donations to save tax, slick publications became a tool for elevating the work in those collections to ‘art.’ In many cases, the curator could only go along.”

Final thoughts

Perhaps it is the very vagueness of the word “artist” that makes it so tempting—it seems all you have to do is call yourself an artist and you are covered in glory. This is particularly true of undeserved social-media praise. It is hard to resist, “Wow! You are such a great artist!” And if a maker has no broader knowledge of what constitutes creativity and quality, he or she is sure to be hooked on endless rounds of ego-stroking, and nobody will have the courage to say it may not be true.

David Ellsworth believes turners need to understand the implications of the labels they choose, especially in areas where they are fundamentally weak. “The point,” he says, “is to provide a functional means of establishing honest debate *within* the [AAW] membership, as opposed to projecting ideas *on* the membership from persons like myself and other professionals... which is just another way of keeping our members out of the loop of credibility.” To support this endeavor, David has spearheaded a new video series, *Voices*, which is meant to encourage dialogue *within* our ranks. Look for *Voices* on the AAW website, woodturner.org. Coming full circle from the photo of David’s piece on the first cover of *American Woodturner*, this new installment reinforces that the discussion will always change and should never end. ■

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Rolly Munro,
Vessel, 2000,
Unknown wood,
ebonized and stained,
8" (20cm) diameter

This vessel by Rolly Munro is a superb example of creative turning, whatever we call it.