

AAW Symposium Keynote Address  
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Woodturning and the Art World – by Kevin Wallace

“Contemporary woodturning is undergoing a period of tremendous growth.”

Now then, is this a good thing or a bad thing? There’s a very good chance that if I was presenting a sort of pep talk and shouted out: “is this a good thing?” everyone would sort of say “yahoo”, because you’re a bunch of woodturners at an American Association of Woodturners symposium and it would be ridiculous if you were to all to feel, “oh, that’s bad... contemporary woodturning is currently at a point of tremendous growth. That is a real problem.”

So then, here’s the question: Is it an entirely good thing? Is there a downside? What could possibly be wrong with contemporary woodturning being at a point of tremendous growth?

Well, there are growing pains. There’s the learning curve. Tremendous growth creates challenges. I am going to address the challenge of being accepted in the larger realm of contemporary art in this talk, because that is largely what I concern myself with. However, I want to start by recognizing that this is only one aspect of contemporary woodturning and that there is a great deal of work that does not seek the mantle of art. From pretty much the beginning of time, people have been creating wood bowls for utilitarian purposes. Salad bowls... nut bowls... You know, I had to stop putting turned wood bowls by leading artists on the table in the entryway of our home because guests assumed it was a place to put their keys. Now I put wood bowls meant for that purpose there. People like to use wood bowls and I believe that woodturnings created for utility are as important as those that are meant to be art. One gets placed on a pedestal or a shelf and is admired. Another gets placed at the center of your dining room table and is part of your daily life. The bowl that is used is viewed more often, touched more often and has a greater role in your life. Sometimes such things make their way into museums, but they die a bit in such surroundings - deprived of usage and the life they were born for. And museums are a tough environment for wood in general, as it is a material that beckons you to touch it and they have those pesky security guards who keep telling you not to. Ultimately, utilitarian woodturnings are a more important part of our daily lives, even though they seem to get less respect than the “works of art” that get more fanfare.

That said, I am going to address woodturning in the contemporary art world, because that’s probably why I’ve been invited to speak. I curate exhibitions for museums and art centers and write books about woodturning largely from this perspective. I’ve gained some amount of insight into the world of contemporary art and seek to share these lessons and experiences to the extent I can.

In order to understand the state of the art of contemporary woodturning, we need to understand the larger art world that it is increasingly part of. We need to understand the preexisting structures and the criteria against which we are judged in the larger art world. I mentioned challenges and I'd like to share with you some differences between the two – how the contemporary art world and the current woodturning field are out of step.

In the woodturning world, there is great respect for innovation, originality and technique. In the art world, there is a respect for history. They are interested in how a language – a means of communicated through a medium or approach – develops. And one of the problems is that we are so interested in the new that we don't really understand, appreciate or honor our history. I believe that the POP program and exhibition at this year's AAW symposium is a step toward righting that wrong. I have seen work that is influenced by artists who were influenced by artists who were influenced by the three artists who are receiving the POP Merit Awards. In most cases, the newer artist didn't even realize that they were influenced by the pioneering artist or knew who they were. And when they do, quite often that influence is not readily acknowledged by the artists – as though it takes something away from them to do so.

In learning about Mark Lindquist's early sculptural works, one is led to a greater understanding of not only woodturning history, but also the history of the material and the language of art. Mark often refers to the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi as his mentor. Brancusi sculpted wood using the technique known as "direct carving", meaning that he did not work with preliminary studies. He considered it a means of achieving complete engagement in the creative process and the genuine path to sculpture. Brancusi was not a woodturner, but many of the artists who are working with the lathe and using carving techniques today work similarly, allowing the piece to develop and reveal itself in the process. We need to understand how this language developed and the ideas involved in order to truly grow and gain respect in the art world and to make it clear that we are part of a continuum. Great art does not just appear from nowhere.

Giles Gilson was breaking rules before anyone really admitted that there were rules. It was quite a shock to the burgeoning woodturning field, which was all about the natural beauty of the wood, to have someone covering that beauty up with bright colors. But you know, someone had to come along and piss everyone off. And in doing so, he left the door open. A door that previously didn't appear to be there.

Stephen Hogbin, who has also been known to explore color, expanded the field by cutting his woodturnings up. He knew that woodturnings didn't need to be round. They could be sectional. He could create a giant turning and slice it up to create a sofa and chairs. Or cut a piece up and put it back together differently to create a new dynamic. These artists all worked with knowledge of art history and they, along with a number of others, created a new language in wood. However, they are themselves only part of a continuum. There is a rich, inspiring history in wood. It cuts across cultures and the centuries and has taken many names: tribal, decorative, craft, design, sculpture... art.

Art. There's a word. Only three letters... yet it's such big word. And people want to own it. New York City wants to own it. All manner of pretentious characters who imagine they might become famous and make lots of money want to own it. You can seemingly rise above the others in this manner: "I create ART – *they* just create craft."

I want to address the craft/art issue fairly early, so that I can move on with it. Any confusion in the craft/art issue comes from the fallacy of duality. The idea that it's either this or it's that. Is a David Ellsworth vessel art or craft? It is similar to asking if David is a human being or an American. You see, it's not an either/or question. Art is big and encompasses everything that human beings have created from their world - from cave paintings and hand-built clay pots to conceptual work, film and sculpture. Craft refers to an aspect of the art field that is closely associated with process. I'm sure you've heard it before: art concerns what and craft concerns how.

Art. Such a big word. And yet, in reality, it is an invention... a concept. In the beginning, humans didn't need the word or the idea. In fact, indigenous cultures tend not to have a word for art. They carve, they paint, and they create sculptural objects for magical rituals and bowls and vessels for everyday life. It's not art - it's life. They paint their faces and dance. Is that theatre?... choreography?... art? No - that's life. It's only when we look at it, through invented definitions, that we view it as art.

Quite often I talk to artists and find that they are having trouble getting a handle on the art world; understanding museums, galleries, collectors and critics. In so doing, you have to remember that it's an invented world. It has of course become manifest as a reality, populated by makers, dealers, curators, collectors... but it's constantly changing and shifting. But there are those who feel they must guard the gates of the art world and not let just anyone in.

Before coming to the field of woodturning, I was very much interested in the art world. I read everything I could... went to museums and galleries, talked to artists and professors... I wanted to understand this world and, once I did, I wanted to be part of it. And then, through a strange series of events, I ended up in the craft world. And at first I thought, well... this is craft... this isn't art. You see, it's cool to be an art snob. But then I realized that very little is 100% good or 100% bad and that "everything cuts both ways". I realized that there were great works of art being created by artists in clay, glass and wood. And I came to know some of the artists who were leading woodturners and I became their champion. Because, you see, I found that not only was there something that was truly "art" to be found in the world of craft, but that there was also something lacking in the world of contemporary art that the craft world had to offer. This was and remains particularly true of woodturning.

However confusing and invented the art world is, it's important to understand that there are pre-existing structures. The gates are guarded - largely by people who feel the emperor's clothes look fine the way they are. But it has a history and you have to understand that your strong opinions or stubborn denials aren't any match for the curators and art professors who have written books and the legion of artists, dealers and collectors who are part of it.

To a large extent, woodturning falls under the category of the “decorative arts” rather than the “fine arts” among museums and the larger art market. What is the difference between “fine art” and “decorative art”? For those of you who go to museums or gallery exhibitions of contemporary art and find much of it inaccessible and sometimes horribly unattractive might think that the difference is that “fine art” is ugly and badly crafted and “decorative art” is pleasant to look at, and well done. This is not so far off the mark, because the fact is that beauty and craftsmanship are indeed suspect in the world of contemporary art. How did that come to be the case?

There have been a number of currents in modern art over the last century that have led us to this place. Marcel Duchamp and the rise of conceptual art, where the idea is more important than the object itself, has a lot to do with the current state of contemporary art. Duchamp created “readymades” – taking every day objects and calling them art – doing away with the idea of craftsmanship altogether. Some time later, influential critics praised the immediacy of abstract expressionism over carefully crafted paintings. Now these currents in modern art were not bad, they just need to be recognized in facing the challenges involved in the market... how the battle must be fought. The fact is that gaining acceptance for conceptual art and abstract expressionism were battles that had to be fought and won. The status quo initially rejected found objects and abstraction, saying: “that’s not art.” The definition of art is always being expanded. These were all battles that were fought for art world acceptance, just as there are new battles facing woodturners and others who work in craft media.

Now I’m going to address another difference between the world of woodturning and the contemporary art world, and some might find it really shocking. The woodturning world loves technique and process, while the art world isn’t really interested in such matters. It’s not what matters to them. They don’t care if a piece has a wall that is a sixteenth of an inch thick or if it is turned on five different axis. In fact, while we work to hide the joints in woodworking and carefully sand surfaces, the art world embraces evidence of process. What really matters to the art world is whether or not a piece operates as a means of self-expression and how it utilizes the language of art. I’m not saying that these other matters shouldn’t be of interest to us, because it’s important to have mastery of your craft. What I’m saying is that these are we can’t expect them to care. It’s not what they are looking at.

AAW symposia are a great place to learn new techniques. These techniques are a means of expanding your vocabulary – to improve your ability for self-expression. However, it’s important that they are not viewed as an end in themselves. Just because you’ve learned a lot of big words, that doesn’t mean that you should work them into every sentence. Better to pull out a choice word at the appropriate time. It’s problematic that just about everyone in the woodturning world buys into the fallacy that in order to have a style that is totally original, one must create work unlike anything that came before. This is problematic, taking people away from reflecting who they are in order to create work that is flashy, clever, tricky and attention getting. I attend woodturning exhibitions knowing that I’m going to see something totally new, but a bit worried that I’ll

be chased by brightly colored remote control wood sculptures with big turned wheels and flashing lights.

Art concerns self-expression – the manner in which we share our view of the world. It only needs to be as original as the human that created it and because a lot of artists who work in wood are fairly straight-forward in their concerns and aesthetic, there's no reason self-expression shouldn't sometimes result in fairly simple and straight-forward work. Not everyone needs to create work unlike anything that came before it – because that is naïve and we need to knowingly build upon what came before.

As woodturning finds its way into the art world, it will increasingly encounter criticism. People will say seemingly bad things. You see, when you're an artist – whether you exhibit in museums or create DVDs of music or theatrical presentations or movies – you run into critics. There are those who do... and those who criticize. And even if they say it's brilliant, they go on to point out the flaws. It's their job. Are we ready for this? We need to be. Criticism is an important part of the art world.

One of the wonderful things about the field of contemporary woodturning is that it's a big family where everyone is so supportive of each other. And you have to realize that, as nice as this is, it's not an entirely good thing. In this environment, no one would think to say, "You know, Joe, that new piece of yours really sucks." Because love is all about being supportive and although parents know the importance of "tough love", we don't usually exercise that option on our peers. But we need to look at ourselves closely and critically. We need that self-knowledge and we shouldn't kill every messenger who brings it.

The fact is, that we need to be more critical. I'm not suggesting that anyone should be more opinionated. Heaven forbid. I'm saying that if we want to be part of the larger art world, we should learn the criteria for judging art and apply it ourselves. By doing so we will be better prepared for future criticism.

Why do those who want woodturning to be taken seriously in the world of contemporary art need to understand the art world? Because the fact is that each of you is a citizen of the world of woodturning and you are the future. These battles are not just fought in the art world. They are fought on several levels, including exposing the general public to the work and assisting them in understanding it. You each have great power - even if it is a seemingly small personal environment: your family, your friends, your own town or your AAW chapter.

As the field of contemporary woodturning continues to grow, increasingly finding it's way into major collections, important galleries and museums, it's important that we maintain our support system. While I feel we have areas where we need to grow, we have indeed benefited from the tremendous support system we have enjoyed over the last three decades. A successful field is not just about artists, but involves collectors, galleries and magazines - an entire network.

There is a group called Collectors of Wood Art – CWA for short – who have been very active in promoting contemporary woodturning. The members realized that they had greater power to interest new galleries, museums and other collectors by working as a group to promote the field. Collectors have been very important to this field. They create validation. Collectors share their work, by loaning it for exhibition or giving works to museums. Collectors inspire others to collect. And one doesn't have to have dozens of works by major artists to be a collector. For instance, I'm willing to bet that there are a number of individuals who collect in this room. Aside from those of you who are here mainly as collectors, how many of you have a small collection of works by artists that were acquired during AAW symposiums or other events? How many of you have in-depth collections of your own work. You see – a room full of collectors. That's good.

I began this talk with a bit of criticism... ways that I felt we could grow. I'd like to conclude by pointing out that we've done a lot of things right. We have had a great support system. We have had visionary artists and visionary collectors. There have been galleries who have supported the work and publications and writers who have covered it.

Earlier I spoke about the importance of history. I am not only speaking about looking backward, but suggesting that we be conscious of how what we do today will be viewed through the lens of history. Each of us has a certain amount of power in promoting that which we feel is important and shaping the field. We are all in this together, during a period tremendous growth. The future of the field of woodturning, the way it will be viewed historically and how it finds its way into the art world is in your hands.

Thank you...Kevin Wallace