



# Honoring David Ellsworth

## Terry Martin

The AAW Professional Outreach Program was established in 2004 to help raise the profile and participation of professional turners within the AAW. For many years most attention had understandably been given to the majority of members, mainly hobbyists, but several board members felt the importance to the AAW of its professional members was not being fully acknowledged. It was the professionals who were featured in most of the magazines, who did much of teaching and demonstrating at local chapters, and who were the primary drawcard at conferences. A committee of professional turners, educators,

authors, administrators, and other influential stakeholders was formed.

David Ellsworth was selected to be the first Chairman and termed the group the *Professional Outreach Program (POP)*. John Hill was influential in this process and he envisaged professional turners and AAW local chapters communicating directly to arrange demonstrations. Chapter members would be able to observe the best turners in the world firsthand and, in turn, demonstrators could earn much needed income while traveling to new states and new countries. David Ellsworth described it as “a win-win for everyone.”

By 2007 the committee decided that POP needed to be more inclusive. The new mission statement meant that it wasn’t even necessary to be a “professional” to be a POP member, just a member of the AAW. It focused on “... promoting a greater understanding of professionalism within the field of contemporary woodturning.”

POP continues to be a great resource to members. The extensive POP database offers the entire membership direct access to professional turners. In addition, POP arranges a variety of activities at the annual AAW conferences, including panel discussions on subjects relating to professionalism, guest speakers, plus an annual themed exhibition and auction that supports the POP’s Emerging Artist program. There is a POP news and information page in *American Woodturner* and the committee is responsible for Fellowship Grants and the Merit Award, which is awarded every other year. The Merit Award was created to recognize one artist’s career achievements and the influence their artwork has had on other artists within the ▶



David's first private studio, 1976, Boulder, Colorado

*Beach Pot-Tall*, 2004, Spalted English beech,  
16" x 7" (41 cm x 18 cm)



*Helmet*, 1986,  
Redwood lace burl,  
12" x 9" (30 cm x 23 cm)

woodturning field—which leads nicely to this year's recipient.

David Ellsworth is never far from the center of woodturning action and he is hard to miss: a tall presence with a prophetlike beard and a large, charismatic voice. He has been well known and respected for so long in the international woodturning world that he is, paradoxically, sometimes taken for granted. If you ask most turners what David's biggest contribution has

been, they will tell you that it was his creation of the thin-walled hollow wooden vessel. True, it continues to be the most imitated form of turning and has been a benchmark for turning skill for decades, but I don't think this is his greatest achievement. He has distinguished himself by building an unassailably preeminent position in the turning world and then, most important, he uses that reputation and experience to promote his chosen field. Even more, David has been instrumental in guaranteeing that hobbyists and professionals alike have shared in the flood of creativity that has swept us all along for the past forty years.

David first began turning in 1958 as a 14-year-old in school woodshop. After studying sculpture at college he eventually worked as a production turner making small objects such as salt- and pepper-shakers, but his reputation started to grow in 1976 when he began making thin-walled hollow forms that broke all precedents. No one had ever thought such work could be done, let alone done so breathtakingly well. In the following years, against all odds, he single-handedly created a whole new genre of turning and inspired generations of turners.

David's turning career alone would justify the current award, but right from the start David was

helping others to share in his dream. In 1974 he started the woodworking program at Anderson Ranch in Colorado and its woodturning program in 2002; he was a participant in Albert LeCoff's groundbreaking Philadelphia symposia in 1977 and 1979; attended worldwide conferences from 1979; has taught at Arrowmont every year since 1983; and he created his own school in 1990. To support his teaching, David has produced five tutorial videotapes and nearly fifty articles on woodturning and related topics, most recently his book *Ellsworth on Woodturning*. Thousands of turners have purchased his tools for hollow turning and his Ellsworth Signature gouge and sharpening jig.

David was co-founder of the AAW in 1986, was its first President, and the first to be awarded Honorary Lifetime Member. His devotion to the AAW has been extraordinary and he has always felt a particular responsibility toward it: "I've tried to encourage a balance between beginner-level turners and professionals. That also means constantly reminding people that the AAW is charged with the responsibility to represent all those who are interested in



Salt-Pepper-Sugar Set, production items, Walnut, zebrawood, 2 1/4" (6 cm) (tallest)



*Stratum Sphere*, 2003, Spalted maple,  
12" dia. (30 cm)

woodturning, not just one particular faction." David has been a significant representative for the turning movement on the American Craft Council and has helped build a two-way bridge to the wider community of what he calls the "crafted arts."

Along with these personal contributions to a growing field, David has always had an unselfish interest in the work of others and has devoted considerable effort to introducing other artists to galleries, museums, and other opportunities. A visit to David's home to see his personal collection of other artists' work shows that he is prepared to make a significant investment in promising careers. It is a powerful statement of his values.

Jacques Vesery, a member of the POP committee, explains why they wanted to honor him: "When the committee established the Merit Awards, David was the chair. If that conflict of interest hadn't existed, I am sure he would have been the first choice. Once David retired, the entire committee chose him and it gives us all great pleasure to bestow this honor on him."

Trent Bosch was also on the committee and he agrees: "David has given so much to so many as teacher, mentor, philosopher, historian, and maker. He has contributed greatly to the open and sharing culture that exists within our field. There could only be one choice for the 25th Anniversary Merit Award: David Ellsworth."

In a moment of downright honesty that is typical of David, he highlights another important reason for his success: "I've always been very competitive and ambitious. I think this kept me going in the early days when my work



Detail of inlay

was appreciated for being unusual, but when very little was selling. If it hadn't been for support from my friends and colleagues in the field, including many artists from other fields, it would have been easy to fall back and make what everyone else was making. Now, I'm particularly thrilled to be honored with the 2011 POP Merit Award, especially as it will be presented at our 25th Anniversary [Symposium]. To be the first member of any group, and then to see it bloom into the multidimensional service organization it has become, is truly a remarkable, once-in-a-lifetime experience."

*Black Pot-Dawn*, 2011, Ash,  
6" x 8" (15 cm x 20 cm)

*Untitled*, 1988, Redwood lace burl,  
37" x 10" (94 cm x 25 cm)



*Oak Pot*, 2006, Red oak burl,  
4" x 8" (10 cm x 20 cm)