



Richard Roffan
First bowl - turned Jan 1970

Richard Raffan

I don't feel the need to be different, but I would like to be good.

Terry Martin

There are few woodturners as well known as Richard Raffan. Over the decades, he has built his reputation through the simple and rapid turning of inexpensive objects for daily use, and then teaching others how to do it. Richard has been working as a self-employed turner since 1970, has been an outstanding demonstrator and teacher, and has produced more how-to books on turning than anyone else, so his ideas have stamped themselves on a worldwide generation of turners. In 2012, the Professional Outreach Program (POP) is recognizing Richard for his extensive contributions to the turning field. This Merit Award is also an acknowledgment that traditional turning should continue to be recognized and respected by the contemporary turning world.

The raw facts of Richard's life are interesting enough, but of equal interest is why he has remained true to his craft roots and why he struggles to hide his scorn for what he sees as fleeting fancies. I don't know anyone else who would be confident enough to say, as Richard recently did, "I'm sure my simple bowls will long survive much of the turned wood art in big collections." So where did this strength of conviction come from? Not surprisingly, it is partly a result of the influence of his family, but it is also because of the key personalities he met during his early development.

Origins

Richard was born in 1943 in Devon, England, into a family that valued tradition. "I was brought up in a house full of antiques and Georgian silver on the table," he says. He started a basic course at Exeter College of Art in 1962, but dropped out after two years. It may be more significant that he then worked for a company that sold Scandinavian furniture and manufactured household wares, an early influence that helped shape his personal philosophy. "I learned that you can make something both very well and very quickly without compromising quality," he remarked. This work was followed by five years in the wine trade, which he says taught him about promotion and sales, key ingredients in his career as a turner.

Richard became bored with selling wine and when he was discussing his future with his sister, she mentioned a woodturner who lived near where she apprenticed as a potter. When she suggested he try woodturning, Richard was immediately interested, "I just thought it sounded right. It was a genuine leap into the unknown, but I reckoned I'd know if I was going to enjoy it in a few days or weeks, and if I would be any good in a couple of months. I took to it like a duck to water. I was also attracted by the relatively low cost of getting started and by the ease and speed with which a finished ▶



Ash bowl, 1970, 2½" × 12"
(65 mm × 305 mm)

My first bowl, used by my mother for 25 years, washed thousands of times, rarely oiled. Great patina—pity the shape isn't better. —RR



Crumpled nut bowl, 1987,
Tasmanian stringybark burl,
3" x 5½" (80 mm x 140 mm)

Citadel boxes, 1992,
Jarrah, 9" x 4½" (230
mm x 115 mm) (tallest)



me. Soon I was nonstop making things like sugar bowls with scoops. It was exceedingly boring, but very good practice." A gallery owner saw one of Richard's sugar scoops in his sister's kitchen and ordered four dozen. Richard always enjoys pointing out that since then he has made "at least twenty-two thousand sugar scoops." By 1975, Richard was well established, providing bowls, scoops, and boxes

to kitchen shops and finer pieces to galleries. These were important years when he honed his production skills and when his sense of identity as a production turner developed.

Powerful influences

As a potter, Richard's sister was strongly influenced by the Arts and Craft movement, and Richard also came under its spell, as he explains: "I was very influenced by well-known potters. At a potters' camp in the seventies I was branding my work with a stamp made by David Postern, a well-known jeweler, when David Leach [son of the legendary Bernard Leach] walked past shaking his head. 'No Richard,' he said, 'your work doesn't need that sort of thing.' When a god of the crafts commented, I tended to listen. These potters sold heaps of stoneware to kitchen shops and had solo exhibitions in galleries. I started turning surrounded by those people, so as far as I was concerned that was what you did running a craft business."

Exhibitions

Since 1971, Raffan has taken part in around 150 group and solo exhibitions around the world, beginning with his first show at Chagford Galleries

and satisfying object can be produced on a lathe and then sold." He ended up paying for training with Rendall Crang in a small country workshop. Richard often mentions how many pieces he has made in production work and it is not hard to see how those early days with Crang were important. "He was never happier than when he had a run of work," Richard explains. "For one run of 100 salad bowls he said, 'Something you can get your teeth into lad! Don't have to think too much!'"

Building a career

Richard soon decided to strike out on his own, but it was not easy. "There was practically no hobby turning and art turning was non-existent," he explains. "It was difficult to find tools and you even had to wait months to get a decent lathe."

He started out making small items such as bowls, lamps, and pestles and mortars. "I put them all in the back of the car and drove around looking for craft shops. I only had to do that twice and afterwards people came to



Verdigris Pipes, 2006, Elm, verdigris, acrylic (inside),
2½" (65 mm)

I like the element of fraud with my verdigris work; it's difficult to discern the material at first glance, or even when holding the objects. —RR

Photo: Richard Raffan

in Devon in 1971. In 1973, Richard took part in two significant exhibitions that started his rise to turning fame. His work was shown in *The Craftsman's Art* at the Victoria & Albert Museum and then in *Domestic Objects* at the British Crafts Centre, both in London. Richard explains why these two shows were so important: "I was the only turner represented in *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition and it was a key boost to my career. Selling through the British Crafts Centre in Earlham Street and also their gallery in the V&A couldn't have given anyone better exposure. After that I was invited to just about all the big craft exhibitions put on in Britain and a few in Europe. I was definitely in the right place at the right time and would hate to try to get established today." Over the coming years there were other shows that marked significant stages in Richard's career, such as his first show in Australia in Mittagong, New South Wales, in 1977; a European tour under the auspices of the World Crafts Council in 1979; and his first U.S. Instant Gallery at an early LeCoff symposium in Philadelphia in 1981.

A unique role

Around the time Richard started turning, all across the western world trade turners were laying down their tools. Richard's entry into turning coincided with this decline of turning as a trade, but it was just in time for him to learn from a turner who still had the old skills. Also, as the last generation of production hand turners gave up the trade, Richard was able to step into his role as guardian of a traditional craft and pass on these skills to the rapidly growing numbers of hobbyists. He had a foot in both camps and developed a split-personality career as a solitary turner

working in a small workshop, and as a public personality performing for hundreds of hobby turners every year. For most of his life he has proudly described himself as a production turner, even while he was traveling the world demonstrating and writing books for hobbyists.

First demonstration

Richard's explanation of how he began demonstrating opens with a typically blunt assessment of other people's work: "In 1980 I was invited to a show organized by the Worshipful Company of Turners in London. I had never seen so much appalling work in one place. I talked with John Makepeace, founder of the influential

Parnham Wood School in Britain, and he organized a symposium to counteract all this bad work." Makepeace invited two innovators in the turning world, Stephen Hogbin and David Ellsworth, as well as Paul Smith, curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Held in June 1981, it was the first international turning symposium in Britain and Richard did his first major presentation there. He says, "I had never spoken in front of a crowd, but to my relief I managed to pull it off."

Ellsworth told Richard about Albert LeCoff's symposiums in Philadelphia and he and Ray Key received grants from the British Arts Council to travel to the U.S. for the last of these ▶



Spillikins, 1978, Maple, laburnum, 8" x 2½" (203 mm x 64 mm)

One of about 200 sets. I made the first in 1978 in response to a commission from John Makepeace when I was a visiting tutor at his Parnham Wood School. The brief was something "to wow them technically." —RR





Red Verdigris Quintet, 2012,
Manchurian pear, verdigris,
acrylic, 3½" x 3½"
(90 mm x 85 mm) (tallest)

symposiums in 1981. Again, he is not afraid to make a brusque observation, "There was nobody there who knew how to use a gouge. Dale Nish had one, but he wasn't very good with it." So after inquiries about how to use a gouge, Richard agreed to demonstrate. "David Ellsworth was sitting right in front of me with his legs sprawled. First thing, I had a catch and the bowl shot off straight into his crotch!" Despite this shaky start, Richard says the symposium was a great introduction to the American scene. It was also important that he met John Kelsey, editor of *Fine Woodworking*, who was to foster Richard's later development as a writer.

Rediscovering Australia

Richard migrated to Australia in 1982, but he has a much longer pedigree that fully entitles him to claim to

be Australian. His whole family had migrated to Australia in 1947, as he describes, "I spent the crucial years from four to seven in Sydney. Later in England I painted pictures with clear blue skies, but I was told such skies didn't exist. I suppose I believed that until I saw it again for myself. Later I discovered I had seemingly endless relations in and around Sydney, all going back to my great grandfather."

When Richard revisited Australia in 1975 he was surprised to learn that his reputation had preceded him and he was quickly invited to take up a residency in Mittagong, where he spent three months in 1977. "I enjoyed working there," he says. "The Tasmanian woods they gave me to work with were very plain compared with the figured woods I'd worked in Britain, so I had to concentrate totally on form without distractions of the

grain. Several of the bowls and boxes I made there were purchased by the National Gallery of Australia for their permanent collection."

In 1986, Richard demonstrated at the annual symposium in Provo, Utah, where he has remained a perennial favorite. He is happy to give credit to Dale Nish, the initial organizer of those events, for much of his subsequent success in the U.S.: "Dale really put me on the map." Utah was a significant destination because it linked Raffan's two distant home countries, Australia and Britain, enabling him to take extended demonstration and teaching tours in all three countries, a relentless schedule that paid well and cemented his dual identity.

Collections and collectors

Although Richard's work is held in significant museums, including

the British Crafts Council, the New Parliament House and National Gallery Collections in Canberra, Australia, the Power House Museum in Sydney, and the Victorian State Craft Collection in Melbourne, collectors rarely purchase his work. In a story he wrote years ago, Richard offered this explanation, “Functionality is generally anathema to collectors, so the hollow vessel has been a favorite vehicle of expression for those aiming at that particular market. Following the lead of David Ellsworth, there have been a bewildering number of variations on this fairly conventional theme already well explored by potters and glass blowers over several thousand years.” His disdain is even clearer when he writes, “Although universally plagiarized, the turned hollow vessel has become a distinctly American art form with seemingly infinite variations made by every man and his dog easily found in galleries across the USA.” There may be some truth to this, but the choice of language is revealing, especially when we consider that bowls, a form that Richard has devoted much of his working life to, are also usually plagiarized versions of conventional forms.

Strong opinions

Richard respects some contemporary turners, but he makes it clear that he dislikes a lot of contemporary work. In his own words, “I am amazed that some of it is taken so seriously. People seem to think that being different somehow makes a piece art. Some are desperate to be taken seriously as artists and known internationally, and galleries encourage them. It’s all too pretentious for me. Many of these turnings are collectible, but realistically they belong in a museum of technological how-on-earth-was-that-made wonders rather than a museum of fine art. I suspect most will end up buried



Wavy bowls, 2012, 3" × 7" (75 mm × 180 mm) (largest)

I have turned a couple of thousand very thin bowls using green wood. By aligning the grain in a blank, the warping is predictable. This pistachio is the best wood I've ever used for green turning. —RR

in store rooms.” These are strong judgments. It’s true that the two styles of work have a common link—the lathe—but that seems to have blinded Richard to the fact they are two very different things that cannot be judged by the same criteria.

Looking back

Almost certainly Raffan never expected to become a famous person when he began as a woodturner. For many years his days were filled with production work interspersed with occasional shows, but as the woodturning revival developed, he was well placed to become a must-have demonstrator at turning events. The fact that it was unexpected didn’t mean he was reluctant, and he embraced the life of an itinerant demonstrator and relished the attention. Gradually the turning world has been almost overwhelmed by demonstrators and competition has grown for valued slots at clubs and events. To distinguish themselves, many of the new demonstrators have relied on novelty. Also, many of the new demonstrators are not professional turners and are happy to just earn enough to help fund their lifestyle. All of this worries Richard, ▶



Square plate, 1970, Pin oak, 6½" × 7¼" (165 mm × 184 mm)



Huon pine boxes, 2012, 6¾" × 3¾" (175 mm × 95 mm) (tallest)

It's humbling to know you can count nearly 500 annular rings on the base of each box. —RR



Rocking Boat, 2012, Claret ash, verdigris, acrylic, cotton, found objects, 6" x 5" x 3" (150 mm x 130 mm x 80 mm)

Mostly turned, this is my entry for the 2012 POP exhibit, "Beyond Containment." —RR

who has remained true to his early convictions. He says that "the essential traditional turning skills are being lost." This is a surprising judgment in light of his comment that gouge use was poor when he first visited the U.S. There are many turners in the U.S. today who are very good with the gouge, and maybe he can take some of the credit for that.

"Having money in the bank beats being famous."

When he assesses his career, Richard Raffan always stresses the production work. He seems to believe the respect he earned as a production turner outweighs his reputation as a demonstrator and writer. He confirms

Manchurian pear bowl, 2009, 3½" x 7" (90 mm x 180 mm)

Some bowls seem to be just right, and I believe this is one. —RR

enties and the fame that came with the books and videos was on top of all that. As a turner with no other means of earning a living, I initially took on everything that came along, preferring to sell the bowls and scoops, but willing to do runs of spindles and turn bits for antique restorations. However, after a couple of years I was able to concentrate on work that sold to galleries and retailers who paid on time. Having money in the bank beats being famous every time. As late as 1981, when I had a good reputation, I had a regular order for 2-inch-diameter plinths to go under porcelain figurines. It was stuff most artistic turners wouldn't and maybe couldn't do, but it was very good money. My bowls did attract a lot of attention in Britain in the early seventies, but scoops were my main small item and I sold at least fifty a week throughout the seventies. Of the 26,000 or so bowls and platters I've turned, fewer

this impression with these words: "Many people have no idea that I was well established as a craft name by the mid-sev-

than 3,600 were 12 inches in diameter and above. Half were between 8 inches and 12 inches. About 3,000 bowls were less than 3 inches. I like to think my work was well designed, conservative, traditionally based, and what the market demanded."

I am sure Richard could have done very well if he had stayed in his original workshop, but it was never going to happen. Despite his frequent protestations about being a nervous performer, I have never met a turner who seems to enjoy the recognition as much as Richard. Once he got a taste of fame, there was no going back—and there is nothing wrong with that.

Evolving work

Richard's move to Australia was doubly significant because it not only changed the materials he was working with, but it also meant a new market: "In the eighties after I moved to Australia I mostly supplied the tourist market that demanded much heavier and less practical bowls in red woods. I initially made thicker jarrah burl bowls to add variety to the forms in my book *Turned Bowl Design* and these were sold through my usual retailers in Sydney. Before that most bowls on



Food bowl, 2006, Elm, anti-rust paint, 3" x 11" (75 mm x 280 mm)

Photo: Richard Raffan



the market were thin and of relatively plain woods like rosewood mahogany or Huon pine. My theory is that the thicker bowls became popular because they were easier to pack and fly home with. Although I've sold fewer than 250 large platters and trays, they did encourage other turners into the craft as professionals."

Despite his respect for traditional values, Richard has always seen himself as an innovator, albeit at a more incremental rate than is common these days, "I've always experimented with color and texture, but few of those experimental pieces left the workshop until the Citadel Series of boxes and the groups of colored bowls, pots, and tubes. That was about ten years ago after I retired from production work. I am mainly interested in simple forms and refining those remains the challenge for me. I never did like shiny surfaces, and they aren't really suited to utilitarian bowls. I want pieces to be used and if they're too glossy, people are afraid they'll spoil the finish and won't use them."

Perhaps unlike many traditional turners, Richard has always felt he is a technical innovator. "I certainly promote the ways I work at the lathe as they've worked so well for me, but if I see a better technique or way of doing things, I use it. When I revised my book *Turning Wood*, my approach had altered so much over fifteen years that I needed new photos for almost every technique. I still get



Wavy bowl, 2004, Oak,
5" x 18¾" (130 mm x 480 mm)

Photo: Richard Raffan

major insights watching people like Mike Mahoney, Dave Schweitzer, or Les Thorn."

Richard has always had a strong sense of the legacy he will leave, as he explains, "I'm interested in making stuff that will survive generations. I have tools with tradesmen's names stamped on them that I bought at auctions and junk shops. I've no idea who these people were, only that they used these tools of trade, and now I am using them. I hope someone will continue to use them after me, because keeping traditions going does appeal. I also like the idea of someone decades from now knowing that an individual made the bowl they enjoy using."

Well-deserved award

When I heard that Richard was being given this award, my first reaction was to wonder why it took so long.

My respect for Richard's achievements is very deep and I have met turners all over the world, even as far away as Japan, who acknowledge his influence. I am sure he deserves the status of a respected elder in the turning world, but I also believe that respect would be even deeper if only he could temper his disdain for other ways of seeing turning. Somehow, though, I don't think he is going to hold back on his opinions! Congratulations, Richard. ■

Terry Martin is a wood artist, writer, and curator who lives and works in Brisbane, Australia.

Photos by Tib Shaw unless otherwise noted.



Scoops, 1970-1974,
Teak, yew, imbuia,
(largest)
3" (76 mm) dia

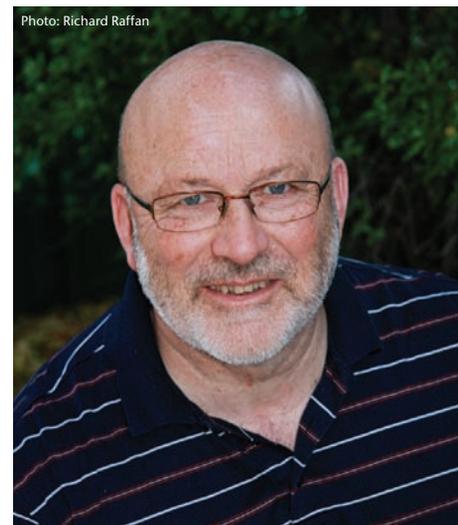


Photo: Richard Raffan