

# TANGIBLE MIRAGES

## THE AUTHENTIC ILLUSIONS OF **JACQUES VESERY**

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*PROFESSIONAL OUTREACH PROGRAM'S  
2015 MERIT AWARD RECIPIENT*

Michael C. McMillan

The Professional Outreach Program gives merit awards to individuals selected by the committee who have shown exceptional development in their careers as artists, and whose artworks have directly influenced or had a significant impact on other artists within the field of woodturning. Jacques Vesery is this year's worthy recipient.

As humans, we continually encounter pressure from the social and physical environments that make up our lives. We also have the remarkable ability to gather these familiar elements of our experience and transform them into novel ideas for practical and artistic purposes. The career of Maine's Jacques Vesery is a testament to this ingenuity, as his artistic vision over the last twenty-five years has been forged through the varied groundwork of profession, environment, community, and family.

Jacques (pronounced, "Jack") Vesery, this year's Professional Outreach Program (POP) Merit Award recipient, has made extensive and multifaceted contributions to the field of contemporary woodturning. He has captivated audiences and influenced a generation of colleagues and students through his mesmerizing fusions of reality and illusion. Vesery's fanciful and decorative amalgams of the real and imaginative evoke odd-paired reactions of familiarity and déjà vu, accompanied by feelings of wonderment and the otherworldly. There is a dichotomy always at play in Vesery's compositions, as they are strikingly familiar in the heart, but far from being fully grasped by the mind. They effectively function as Rorschach tests, evoking an assortment of interpretations from viewers. Vesery's surrealist warpings of recognizable motifs—such as leaves, water, and feathers—have layers of appeal for individuals with wide-ranging conceptual and aesthetic tastes.

These lathe-turned, textured, and colored masterworks are excitingly complex, but never suffocating. Bound in principles, but never exercises of cold calculation. Richly decorative, but with ornamentation that avoids pretension. These careful balances come to

(Left) Detail of *Whisper Around the Wind*, 2009, Cherry, acrylic, 3" (8cm) sphere



Jacques Vesery applying fine details on a turned piece using a woodburning tool.

Photo: Joseph Cronin

fruition thanks to Vesery's patient and disciplined temperament—a mental makeup that has resulted from a wealth of life experiences.

### Early life

Like many twenty-first century studio artists in the medium of wood, Jacques Vesery has arrived at this place of recognition through an unconventional life path. He was born in New Jersey in 1960, and it was clear from an early age he possessed the creative spark common in prospective artists. Vesery's penchant for small sculptural work began with a range of industrial arts projects pursued during his adolescence. During high school, he received more than twenty awards for work incorporating cast bronze, photography, printing, and architectural design.

Upon graduation, Vesery enlisted in the Navy and served on the *USS George Washington* in Pearl Harbor, calling that submarine his living quarters for four years. While this was undoubtedly a period of structured routine and discipline, his quartermaster duties and community-based living did not prevent him from exploring artistic passions—Vesery became the submarine's photographer and de facto illustrator. He admits the cramped quarters and imposed efficiency left a lasting impression on him ("Psychologists would have a field day writing about submariners," he quips) but maintains that those conditions have brought tidiness and discipline to his artistic practice.

Upon leaving the Navy, Vesery engaged in a notable variety of occupations. His first job outside of the ►



Photo: Joseph Cronin

military was as a Zamboni driver at the sole ice rink in Hawaii. He later began working as a scrimshander—and continued that work in New Jersey and on Cape Cod. In 1985, he relocated back to New Jersey where he became a Boy Scouts of America Ranger, as well as a firefighter and district fire warden for New Jersey's fire service and search-and-rescue operations. During his time as a forest ranger, he became acquainted with woodturning through experimentation on an Oliver lathe—his first in-depth foray into the craft.

In 1991, his wife Minda opened a family medical practice, while Jacques worked in the Cumberland region



(Left) In Jacques Vesery's meticulously organized studio (Damariscotta, Maine, 2015), Jacques (right) and author Michael C. McMillan discuss the artist's remarkable career and work.

(Right) A sample of scrimshaw work by Jacques Vesery, 1984, Ivory, ebony, ink, 4" x 4½" x 3" (10cm x 11cm x 8cm)

of Maine outside Portland. There he immersed himself into a community of studio furniture makers. The timing was right: the eighties and nineties were a time of tremendous growth for the studio furniture movement in New England, with the Rhode Island School of Design and Boston University/UMass-Dartmouth's Program in Artisanry turning out influential furniture makers and other artists in craft-based media. After a time of working on spindles and finials, Vesery was further drawn into the process and broader possibilities of the lathe, and soon he focused on promoting his own vision rather than one prescribed by the expectations of those around him.

"Why do I have to be driven by what everyone else around me is doing?" Vesery notes of his thoughts at the time. "I am a good woodturner, so why don't I just do the turning?"

### A reflection of one's space

Upon moving to the Midcoast town of Damariscotta, Maine, Vesery determined he could raise his family while also pursuing the studio work he valued. Initial solo endeavors in turning began in segmented forms, a tradition that demands precision, patience, and an eye for order. However, this practice proved too limiting for the expression of his narratives and imaginative leanings. As

he states in regard to his past segmenting, "There was a rigidity to it—there was too much symmetry." Nevertheless, upon arriving at Vesery's home, one might mistake his studio for that of the most formal and faithful practitioner of segmented woodturning—or perhaps a focused surgeon in wood. Every tool has its proper place. No excess is allowed. It is clear his military structure and adeptness has bled its way into his self-described "space."

The cleanliness and efficiency of Vesery's studio transforms what might be a setting of material aggression into a tranquil environment where creativity can flourish. The patience necessary for his intricate carving and application of color is undoubtedly more achievable in this atmosphere of peace. Whether constructing furniture elements, turning bowl blanks, or crafting one of his Norm Sartorius-scale wonder works, all of his initiatives are predicated on an orderly mental framework.

The sculptural forms of Jacques Vesery would appear contrary to the approaches of other turners working in motifs of the illusory. He does not shed the formality of segmented turning, but rather reinterprets and wields the underlying principles of organization through the lens of a storyteller and transcendent naturalist. Vesery's design principles, woodturning skills, and detailed textures are treated with the rigor and focus of a technician or engineer. However, this technical rigor is countered by a fusion of form,

**Vesery's technical rigor is countered by a fusion of form, texture, and color that reveals the heart of a visual poet.**

texture, and color that reveals the heart of a visual poet.

Despite reveling in the domains of the imaginative and illusory, Vesery's works never fly off the rails into the overwrought. No burned line or mark of the gouge ever emerges from a Pollock-esque and action-oriented approach. While Vesery's works could earn him credibility from surrealist aficionados, his compositions are always calm, balanced pieces with an overarching unity of structure—never lofty, disjointed, or pretentious. By taking objects and imagery we all know and presenting them in ways we don't, the three-dimensional canvasses draw us in for a deeper look as we attempt to understand. This is Vesery's proud calling card, an approach that echoes Oscar Wilde's statement, "No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist."

This perspective reveals itself in Vesery's *Pleiades* series, a body of work investigating the contextual elements connected to the Pleiades star cluster (also known as the Seven Sisters). Imbued with history and mythology, works such as *Second Sister from the Skyforest*, *The Sun Sets on Elm Street*, and *La Soeur de Transformation* have elements that look freshly stripped from natural surroundings, but embody a flowing and lyrical quality that concedes, "These forms can't be found in real life."

### Perspective on material

Over the last thirty years, several influential woodturners have espoused an almost spiritual connection with the patterns, color, and natural idiosyncrasies of wood. However, Vesery's relationship with his material is void of any spiritual semantics. He tries to shed any stereotype of a philosopher-turner who adopts an emotional connection to the chosen material.

"I always laugh when people say, 'The wood spoke to me,'" he remarks. "I say, 'The wood never speaks to me.'" ►



*La Soeur de Transformation (Sister of Change)*, 2009,  
Quilted maple, acrylic, 3½" × 6" (9cm × 15cm)



*Second Sister from the Skyforest*, 2008,  
Madrone burl, curly oak, mica, acrylic,  
8½" × 8½" (22cm × 22cm)

Collection of John and Patty Hill



A recycled dentistry chair provides comfort and good lighting for Jacques' precise carving/texturing process.

Photo: Joseph Cronin



*Shifting Gears*, 2010, Cherry, ash, acrylic, 3" (8cm) sphere on 4½" (11cm) square base

Jacques Vesery's approach to wood is more akin to that of a potter than of a lover of natural edge bowls. For most ceramicists, clay is an element of the earth to be transformed, rehydrated, manipulated, and fired to achieve practical and conceptual desires. Vesery sees the spiritualization of wood as detrimental to the traditions of craftsmanship, echoing sentiments of turners such as the recently deceased Giles Gilson, who was also a POP Merit Award recipient.

"Woodturning becomes backward to everything

that's handmade," he states. "Life's too short to save a piece of wood."

Vesery is representative of turners like Mike Lee, Binh Pho, Frank Sudol, and the aforementioned Giles Gilson, who affirmed material as simply a means to conceptual ends. Viewed from this perspective, wood is something that can be thrown away, enacted for instruction, and used toward any objectives that fulfill personal needs. Likewise, Vesery's tools are just as open to pragmatism as his materials. The best tool to get the job done, according to Vesery, is the one that gets the job done. If a piece of rusty steel found on the side of the road were the most effective roughing gouge, he'd use it—and unashamedly at that.



*Whisper Around the Wind*, 2009, Cherry, oak, acrylic, 3" (8cm) sphere on 4¼" (11cm) square base

Vesery's process typically begins with turning a block of cherry, his wood of choice for its receptivity to carving and texturing and for its balance between rigidity and malleability. After turning the form, he undertakes a delicate process of low-relief carving using a small woodburning tool. Jacques does this while seated in a salvaged dentistry chair that is decorated with a playful assortment of stickers. He uses woodburning for its subtle carving capacities, not for drawing and shading. Upon completion, the wood is covered in a dark India ink wash, with the goal of getting the black ink to seep across the form and into the low-relief crevices. After this step, the wood is ready for Vesery's renowned application of color—usually a minimum of seven layers, but ranging up to fifty. The start-to-finish process can take weeks, but the final forms are nothing short of remarkable in their simultaneous embodiment of humility and dazzling wizardry.

### Form and mathematics

Aiding in Vesery's success is his devotion to the "divine proportion" and "golden ratio," guiding principles that structure his compositions for conceptual purposes. Form is of primary concern in all his works, and patterning adds a sense of order. None of Vesery's pieces are a suffocating onslaught of psychedelic illustration and technical bravado for showmanship's sake. In fact, he questions the audacity of many works in today's turning world and notes, "Just because you have ten tricks, doesn't mean you put all ten tricks in one piece."

In Vesery's pieces, form, texture, and color all work toward a singular, meditative composition. This is why, despite working in illusion, he still speaks in terms of what "works" and "doesn't work," as every finished piece embodies a balance of design

principles. Considerations such as the ratio of height to width, Fibonacci numbers, and material thickness may seem overly structured, yet proportions based on these accepted principles are universally appealing and seem "correct" to the human eye. With this in mind, Vesery employs a useful self-criticism: "One thing I've realized over the

years is that we all look at things more subjectively than objectively. I've had to step back quite a bit and look at things more objectively. I've learned to be very good at self-criticism and looking at work in retrospect and saying, 'So what would make that better?'"

Vesery's *Diversity in the Round* series exemplifies the effectiveness of forms ▶



*Eolith in My Garden*, 2009, Cherry, acrylic, 3" (8cm) sphere

Vesery consistently unites the physical and the dreamlike—and clearly receives inspiration from both.

on a small scale. Whether illustrating entities of nature or everyday objects, he is always trying to see if he can “mimic form within the form.” He wants his motifs of leaves, for example, to emerge naturally out of the larger turned forms. Works in this series, such as *Whisper Around the Wind*, *Misguided Envy of Trees*, *That’s a Wrap*, and *Eolith in My Garden*, possess this quality of natural growth—using a vivid color palette in the realm of imagination.

### The inspiration of environment

For an artist blending the intricacies of nature, order, and illusion, New England is an inspirational utopia. Here, seasons change, colors weave in and out of the landscape, and ocean waters batter and soothe the rocky shores. During my visit with Vesery on a harsh and snowy

February evening, it was clear he understands the personal and artistic benefits of his surroundings, which oscillate between tranquility and ferocity. His works attest to his ability to recognize the changing aspects of his physical setting. Vesery’s *Primordial Orb of the Pemaquid Rock People* is an example of his taking visual cues from the waters of nearby Pemaquid Point and infusing them with Maine’s Native American heritage. Vesery consistently unites the physical and the dreamlike—and clearly receives inspiration from both.

### Transition to instruction

Vesery is one of many artists exploring the narrative potentialities of wood, just as Peter Voulkos did for studio ceramics during the mid-twentieth

century. Vesery is a valuable case study in turners who self-identify as craftspeople versus those who view themselves as artists. Woodturning is permeated by an emphasis on the use of the hands, appreciation of materials, and



*Primordial Orb of the Pemaquid Rock People*, 2008, Cherry, ash, granite, steel, gold leaf, acrylic, 3" (8cm) sphere in 6" (15cm) square frame

Collection of David Datwyler



(Above) *Hot Tea with a Tan*, 2009, Cherry, acrylic, 5" x 6¼" x 3¼" (13cm x 16cm x 8cm)

Collection of David and Karen Long



(Right) *Bark at the Moon*, 2005, Cherry, boxwood burl, maple, linen, acrylic, 6½" x 5½" x 4¼" (17cm x 14cm x 11cm)

a focus on functionality. In response, Vesery says, “It’s not about what it is made of nor how it is made—it’s the inspiration of function that renders and touches the soul and makes craft ‘art.’ Craft based on functionality and spirituality is the basis of art.”

Vesery has collaborated with professional turners who embody various approaches to the practice of woodcraft, such as Hans Weissflog, Graeme Priddle, Michael Hosaluk, Bonnie Klein, Michael Lee, Christian Burchard, Trent Bosch, and Mark Sfirri. As the 2015 POP Merit Award recipient, Vesery has been able to use his knowledge and experience in the field to be an effective mentor and instructor of students and colleagues alike.

Commitment to proper form is the cornerstone of Vesery’s teaching. Whether one is turning a fluted walnut bowl or using boxwood for piercing, Vesery believes in the principles of compositional balance. In many of his workshops, he will assign the same wood form to all of his students. No hollowing or advanced techniques are included—just the basic shaping. The

finished forms are painted black, eliminating any emphasis on grain, natural color, and texture. This is an exercise in mass, volume, and ratio. Upon comparison of the forms, students are able to see the vast differences between supposedly “equal” forms. Similarly, assigning ten great turners to turn the same bowl could reveal a multitude of differences.

Vesery’s design theories and teaching methods have been enjoyed by students around the world. He has taught at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Anderson Ranch, England’s Loughborough University, and the Journées Mondiales du Tournage d’Art Sur Bois Congrès in southeastern France, to name a few.

His works are widely exhibited in galleries and are part of the permanent collections of institutions such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, Carnegie Museum, Peabody Essex Museum, Contemporary Art Museum of Honolulu, and the Yale University Art Gallery. An exhibition of Jacques Vesery’s work can be seen at this year’s AAW international symposium, June 25–28, in Pittsburgh.

**JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION**

Ken Keoughan profiled Jacques Vesery in a 1999 journal article (vol 14, no 2, page 30). Michael McMillan’s current treatment, upon Jacques’ receipt of the 2015 POP Merit Award, provides a fitting update on this remarkable artist’s career. AAW members can access all past journal articles online at [woodturner.org](http://woodturner.org).



As someone who travels, teaches, curates, writes, and creates, Jacques Vesery embodies the spirit of the POP Merit Award. His methods will continue to influence both celebrated turners and those new to the craft, and his work will endure as an example of impeccable artistic endeavor. ■

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*On a Dark Wing of a Wave, 2007, Cherry, oxidized silver leaf, acrylic, 2½" × 4" × 2½" (6cm × 10cm × 6cm)*

Collection of Paul Cavanagh



*Left: A Celadon Sky Dream, 2006, Cherry, gold leaf, acrylic, 2½" × 5" × 2½" (6cm × 13cm × 6cm)*

*Right: Volez Mes Bleus Partis (Fly My Blues Away), 2006, Cherry, dyed silver leaf, acrylic, 2¼" × 5" × 2¼" (6cm × 13cm × 6cm)*



*On a Celadon Wing, 2005, Cherry, ebony, gold leaf, 2¼" × 5" (6cm × 13cm)*

