

Binh Pho

2018 POP Merit Award Recipient



Binh Pho setting up his *Shadow of the Turning* exhibition at York Performance Hall, Anderson University, 2015.

Photo: Anderson University: Dale Pickett Photography, Anderson, Indiana

Binh Pho passed away in August 2017, yet his influence and contributions to the woodturning field remain broad and far reaching—from contact with local woodturning clubs, to collectors and other artists, all the way through dealing with very high-end galleries. He was an extremely dedicated artist who saw no limits to what turned wood art could become; he even incorporated glass

and bridged the gap between these two disparate art fields.

Most people probably don't know that the past ten or fifteen years of Binh's life were dedicated to the promotion and support of the AAW and the wood art field. Binh was presented with the AAW's Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017, and even during his acceptance speech at the AAW Symposium in Kansas City, he continued to make references to

his vision for the field and its future. It is because of all of these traits and more that we have chosen to name Binh Pho the 2018 Professional Outreach Program (POP) Merit Award recipient.

Following are accounts from people in our field who knew Binh. I hope they offer a glimpse of the broad impact of Binh Pho and help explain this important posthumous award.

—Trent Bosch, POP Committee

Darrell Rader, Studio Assistant

My knowledge of Binh Pho comes from a unique perspective: I was his ever-willing assistant, the mouse in the shop few people knew about. I worked well over a thousand hours with Binh, turning, carving, and helping with an endless list of tasks. Not all work was in the shop; I helped him harvest wood, teach classes, set up and repack exhibitions, and much more. Everything we did came out of Binh's mind. Except for a very few situations, I was just a technician, but I loved every moment.

My days with Binh normally started at 8:30 a.m. and ended between 10:00 p.m. and midnight. One time it was 3:00 a.m. when I got home, and another work session ended at 5:00 a.m. I took a nap before driving home.

Binh was called a fountain of ideas. More correctly, he was a volcano of amazing, colorful, and delicate art creations. He could have filled years, perhaps a lifetime with just one day's visualizations.

Always months or years behind completing projects and almost always late for deadlines, Binh still took time to mentor anyone who needed his help. Everyone, professional or not, considered



Binh Pho mounting a log on the lathe with the help of studio assistant Darrell Rader, Maple Park, Illinois, 2008.

Photo: Courtesy of Darrell Rader

him their best friend simply because he treated people that way. Collaborations requiring only a few hours work for the other artist required many days for Binh to complete. He never gave any indication it was unfair, such was his delight in bringing others into the limelight.

Few knew Binh could draw pictures to look like a photograph. One of the pictures in his book *Shadow of the Turning* is of a piece he didn't have time to create before the book's publication deadline. He quickly drew it! Yes, it is a picture of a picture and I challenge anyone to identify it in the book. The actual piece was completed by opening night for the exhibition in Mobile, Alabama.

His signature vessels were always evolving: adding an internal stabilizing ring, cutting them in two, adding a fabric hinge, casting in glass, then bronze, using his raw vessel shapes to cut out the feathers used on many of his later creations. His body of work was always evolving, as evidenced by pieces remaining in his shop after his death. He really wanted to do another book and major exhibition.

It would be difficult to estimate the number of woodturners who have transitioned into professional careers after seeing and trying the airbrush, use of color, and power carvers that Binh championed.

Sally Rogers, Sculptural Artist

Wood and the act of woodturning itself are visual metaphors for who Binh Pho was—solid, earthy, richly grained, always shaping his contours toward perfection, and always spinning at a great rate of speed. He was a flurry of activity, carving himself and his work into objects of great beauty and depth. He “turned” his friends, as well, allowing them to see the world through his eyes—a world made richer by his gentle presence, subtle humor, and kind heart. His wood and glass creations are unique and inspirational, but Binh himself was truly the greatest work of art. He made you think, hope, dream, believe.

Graeme Priddle, Artist

There are many words I could use to describe Binh Pho as an artist: creative, talented, original, narrative, supportive, collaborative, committed, and one of the best friends/mentors/teachers you could ever hope for. But I always come back to one word that sums up Binh for me—*prolific*. I recall one year when Binh was a featured artist in del Mano's booth at SOFA Chicago. He pointed out to me one of the other featured artists, whose artwork label indicated 375 (the number of pieces shown with the gallery). Then he pointed to one of his own labels, which had a number greater than 4,000.

Binh's dream was to be an artist like the old masters, having a studio buzzing with apprentices, ▶



Binh was a frequent collaborator with other artists. Here, he is working on *Phoenix Rising*, 2014, created with Derek Weidman.

Photo: Courtesy of Darrell Rader

and he did this. Whenever I visited with Binh and his wonderfully supportive family, there was a constant stream of friends/protégés—slaves, as we jokingly called ourselves, coming through his workshop to help with the incredible volume of artwork he was committed to producing. It was always fun and Binh was always willing to do anything to help his friends—to teach and mentor, to help in getting someone into a gallery or show, or to collaborate. There was always a backlog of other people's work

stacked around his workshop waiting for “the hand of the master.”

Binh had an incredible life journey he wanted to share with the world, not just through his artwork but with stories, books, and documentaries. He was a skilled master, not just at expressing his life in his art, but also at gathering people around him to help with the multi-leveled approach he took to expressing his life and dreams. Binh also was quick to acknowledge other masters, Fletcher Hartline and Frank Sudol to name just two, who helped him on his journey.

Steve Sinner, Artist

My friendship with Binh began in early 1999, when he invited me to spend a week in his studio, studying with Frank Sudol. It was obvious from the start that Binh was a special person. His integrity drove everything he did. Sharing and attribution were principles he lived. He never

forgot those who led him along the path to success, and he did everything he could to help others seeking the same. In those early days, we spent much time talking about those principles as well as searching for the outer edges of our chosen field.

Binh's determination and ability to survive on far less sleep than most

of us helped him achieve an amazing degree of accomplishment. His work revolutionized our field and even amazed the glass world with his very thin glass castings.

Of course, he had a lot of help, as he tended to gather many who aided his quest. As Frank Sudol said about his own homebuilding experience, “When you have a mission in life, the whole world will conspire to help you.” And those who helped Binh reaped personal rewards and enrichment.

When I walk through any woodturning instant gallery today, I see innumerable examples of Binh's influence. And that is his reward. —Steve Sinner

John Hill, Former AAW Auctioneer

I think Binh was always an artist, as opposed to someone *becoming* an artist. He told me his first lesson in woodturning was a class at Arrowmont taught by Rodger Jacobs, in which he learned the basics of bowl turning. Armed with basic skills, he quickly began to express his artistic talents in his turnings. He learned the techniques of

thin-wall turning, piercing, and airbrush application of color from Frank Sudol. Then with these new ideas and skills, he developed his own artistic voice.

I like to ask artists not how they made a piece but why. Many can't answer that simple question, but to my knowledge, every piece Binh created expressed a memory from his past or told a story from mythology or something in his imagination. Each piece

had a story to tell. The symbols that adorned his work—dragonflies, butterflies, peacock feathers, cranes, water and waves, the moon and stars, all were part of the story. Every piece was filled with emotion and feeling. Some makers just make another “widget” but not Binh.

Binh's art influenced hundreds if not a thousand other woodturners. He taught all over the world and left his mark like no one else has.

Paul and Sheri Robbins, Collectors

We acquired our first turned wood vessel created by Binh Pho in 2005. A few months later, we got a phone call from Binh, whom we'd never met, asking if he could borrow that piece to display in an upcoming exhibition of his work at the Long Beach Art Museum. We were honored and happy to oblige. We flew to Long Beach to attend the opening of that show, where we met Binh for the first time, and where our love for his work—and for him—began.

Since that first meeting, we have purchased/commissioned seven pieces from Binh for our home, and we also purchased two of his pieces, which we donated to museum collections. We have been collectors of wood art for twenty-five years. Our collection represents some of the most highly respected names in the field. Binh Pho is at the top of the

list. His creativity, skill, enthusiasm for promoting the craft, prolific output, and eagerness to collaborate with other artists and mentor others all helped set him apart. He was unassuming and modest, yet he had a big, warm personality with a zest for life that was contagious when you were in his presence. He also had a big, generous heart. When fellow artists were in trouble, he went out of his way to help them.

Binh continued to evolve as an artist, constantly challenging himself to try new techniques—woodturning, painting, sandblasting, piercing, and even venturing into new media, marrying wood and glass. Each of his artworks tells a story or represents a fragment of a dream or a piece of his incredible personal narrative as a Vietnamese immigrant. He created art that radiated beauty, passion, and depth of feeling. The pieces' dynamic colors, imagery, and shapes compel



Using an airbrush to add color is just one of many ways Binh inspired others, 2008.

Photo: Courtesy of Darrell Rader

viewers to engage with them, and they evoke deep emotional reactions.

Our friend, Binh Pho, will be deeply missed. His legacy will live on.

Bill May, Executive Director, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts

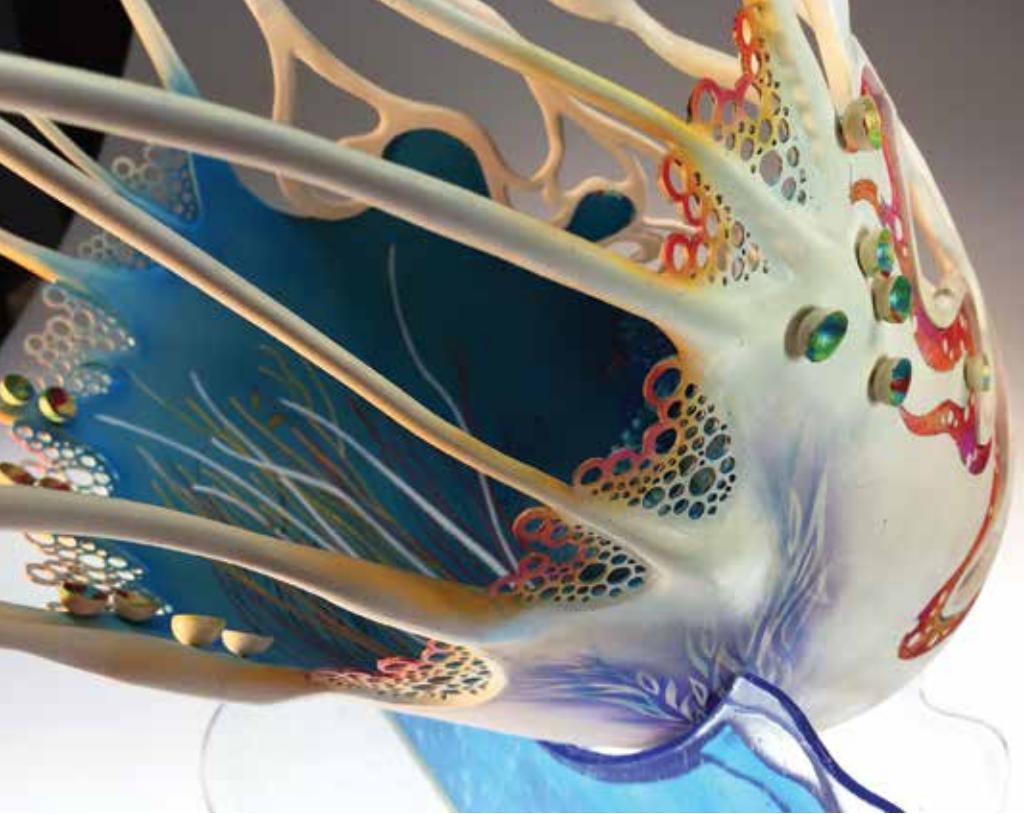
Those at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts had the experience of seeing Binh Pho as a beginning student and as a master teacher—developing his skills and later sharing generously what he continued to discover throughout his life.

Binh embodied qualities that distinguish true artists: his interest in developing technique was always in service of an artistic vision and, even as a master, he continued to have the curiosity of a student. His later work incorporated all of the techniques he learned—form, piercing, airbrushing, sculpture, and glass casting.

His work represents culmination, a distillation rather than a conglomeration. More significantly, the work expresses a uniquely personal narrative that communicates insights, emotions, and values that are universal.

Binh was constant in acknowledging and crediting Arrowmont for the part it played in his career, but the satisfaction is in seeing the artistic legacy he created continue to inform and enrich students today. His body of work illustrates his talent and his passion. ▶

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Gene Colley, Owner, Canyon Studios

As the owner of Canyon Studios, a woodturning school in Texas, I was fortunate to watch Binh's patience with new turners as well as those wanting to turn their hobby into something more. Binh was always specific in his instruction and his advice. Several of the students came to Binh's classes to see if they could develop into a professional artist. One in particular was able to develop her own style, inspired by Binh's work, and

start to sell pieces at a new professional-level dollar amount. Had she lived closer to Chicago, I am sure Binh would have continued to mentor her growth and career. Binh was very aware of his influence in the wood art world and took that responsibility seriously.

Binh's artwork was influenced by the old masters as well as by his culture and life experiences, which would amaze most people. A weaker person would not have survived the years he spent trying to escape communist Vietnam.

Michael McMillan, Associate Curator, Fuller Craft Museum

It is my goal as a craft curator to showcase the accomplishments and effects of material culture; that is, to illustrate *how and why* people fashion objects of both utility and artistic purpose. Any opportunity to highlight the work of Binh Pho—such as when Fuller Craft Museum presented *Shadow of the Turning* in 2014—provides the opportunity to chronicle dialogues about material,

biographical background, cultural heritage, and technical virtuosity, all simultaneously.

Binh's richly colored, painstakingly detailed vessels and sculptures reflect his mental makeup: one of extreme passion and tireless work ethic. Binh is well deserving of this year's POP Merit Award. Whether exhibiting work in the gallery, working collaboratively with other artists, or demonstrating at the lathe, Binh made contributions to the development of the "studio woodturner" at an unparalleled level.

Binh Pho and Annette Barlow,
Drifting Away, 2017, Boxelder, fused glass,
acrylic paint, compressed maple,
25" x 30" x 16" (64cm x 76cm x 41cm)

Photo: Binh Pho

Drifting Away, the last piece Binh completed, is a virtual jigsaw puzzle with many parts all joined as one. Annette Barlow painted the interior aquatic scene.

As someone who covers the spectrum of craft—wood, fiber, jewelry, ceramics, and other media—I can attest that Binh's work has left an imprint on artists, gallerists, collectors, and curators, both inside and outside the field of woodturning. I had the privilege to know him professionally and personally, and his support of makers at the individual, local, and institutional levels brought tremendous benefits to those with a passion for the arts.

Albert LeCoff, Co-Founder, Executive Director Emeritus, The Center for Art in Wood

Binh Pho made it to the big time, while paying it forward through teaching and collaborating. His life, job, family, and art show his skill at multitasking. He personified capturing personal history and resilience and how to write, illustrate, and publish books. He credited veteran artists who inspired him, then embarked on a seamless artistic journey from small, colorful, airbrushed vessels to huge totems, wall pieces, and vessels.

When his *Shadow of the Turning: The Art of Binh Pho* exhibition traveled to The Center for Art in Wood in 2013, the broad public was enthralled with the work. It set new standards in scale and use of wood and glass. Binh had so many ideas, so much energy, so much love for his fellow artists. Did the man sleep?

From now on, when I squint at colorful, pierced work, Binh Pho's path, genius, and drive will live on forever.

JOURNAL ARCHIVE CONNECTION

Further reading on the work and influence of Binh Pho can be found in AAW's journal archives at woodturner.org.

- “Binh Pho at the Mobile Museum of Art,” by David M. Fry, October 2013 (vol 28, no 5, page 48)
- “Binh Pho: AAW Honorary Lifetime Member,” by Kevin Wallace, June 2017 (vol 32, no 3, page 13)
- “Binh Pho Remembered,” by Chloe Rahimzadeh, October 2017 (vol 32, no 5, page 12)



Setting up *Shadow of the Turning*, Anderson University, 2015.

Photo: Anderson University: Dale Pickett Photography, Anderson, Indiana

Shadow of the Turning: The Art of Binh Pho exhibition installation at The Center for Art in Wood, 2013.

Photo: From the archives of The Center for Art in Wood