

# Twirling

Mark Sfirri



## Garry Knox Bennett

### Stepping Away from Bowl-ness

*Oil Can Lamp, 1996*

Photo: John R. Bagley

Who is Garry Knox Bennett? And why does he deserve to have his own exhibition at the annual AAW conference in Albuquerque? That the first question is even asked tells us that the divide between the two main branches of woodworking—furniture and turning—is wide. As one of the few members of both worlds, I am continually amazed at how little they know of one another. Furniture makers are hard pressed to name more than one or two turners and vice versa. Here, therefore, is an introduction of Garry Knox Bennett and an explanation of the POP's (Professional Outreach Program's) decision to present him to you.

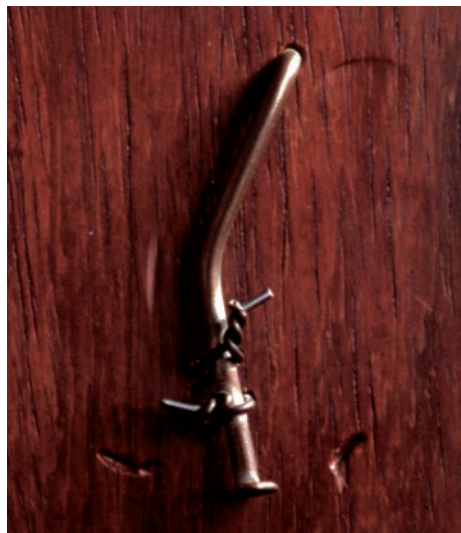
I first met Bennett at a conference in Saskatoon, Canada. His favorite machine is the bandsaw, so his workspace contained a 30" bandsaw with a brand-new blade. Bennett was pleased. I had a chunk of wood that, because of its size, could only be cut on "his" bandsaw. As I got halfway through the cut, the piece of wood got jammed and I couldn't move it forward or back it off. I had struggled with it for several minutes when Bennett walked up and said "I wish you #%&!@ twirlers would stay away from my bandsaw!" Then he walked away. That was my formal introduction. I mentioned that I was a furniture maker as well, but it had no effect on his assessment of the situation. One is a "twirler" or one is not. I detected a mild derogatory meaning.

Bennett is a furniture maker in Oakland, California. Since he is also quite proficient at metalworking, plastics, bronze casting, and painting, all of which he incorporates into his work, you could also call him a multimedia artist. He began his art and craft career with metal jewelry in the 1960s, building a very successful business, and expanded into wood in 1974. He made a big splash in the world of studio furniture in 1979 when he exhibited an exquisitely designed and executed curved glass front cabinet with one unusual detail. At eye level, Bennett had driven a nail into a wooden door panel and bent it over. A photograph of the piece appeared on the back cover of *Fine Woodworking* magazine with the title, "Decoration vs. Desecra-

tion" (September 1980, Issue 24). While the piece was on display in New York, someone made off with the nail for reasons of his or her own and Bennett was obliged to replace it.

Bennett's understanding of multiple materials allows him to blend them, seemingly effortlessly, in a fluid way. He tends to design in series, an approach that allows him to explore many solutions to a single problem. If he is exhibiting lamps, for instance, he'll make 100 lamps, using a range of materials and techniques and variations on themes. "100 Lamps" was a major exhibition at the prestigious Peter Joseph Gallery in 1996. Bennett fashioned some lamps from wood and brass pieces, dovetailed together. For one lamp, he used a commercial metal bucket filled with lightbulbs, one of which lit up when the lamp was turned on. A coffee can filled with pencils, sticks, and other objects, including lightbulbs fascinated me; when I touched the can, the bulbs turned on. The volume and variety of work, and especially Bennett's creative conceptual approach, made for an impressive exhibit.

In addition to a long list of other exhibitions, Bennett had four solo shows at Peter Joseph. Only a select few fur-



*Nail Cabinet, detail, 1979*

niture makers achieved the distinction of even one. In 1996, Bennett was named a Fellow of the American Craft Council.

In 2001, the American Craft Museum in NYC (now the Museum of Art and Design) organized a major retrospective of Bennett's work. The show traveled to the Oakland Museum in his hometown. An accompanying biographical catalog, which took the form of a large hardcover book, is the best way to experience the full range of his work. (*Made in Oakland: The Furniture of Garry Knox Bennett* is available from [www.gkb-furniture.com](http://www.gkb-furniture.com).)

In 2004, The Furniture Society, contemporary studio furniture's only organization in the United States, presented Bennett with an "Award of Distinction." This international honor is given to a living person, not necessarily a maker, who has had a profound impact on the field of studio furniture. Bennett is one of only sixteen recipients to date. The award, conferred by a committee of museum curators, scholars, gallery owners, and makers, illustrates Bennett's importance to the field.

The PBS program, "Craft in America," features an entertaining and informative talk with him about his work. Recently, Bennett has been working on another series, in this case over a hundred chairs, resulting in an exhibition of more than half of them, titled "Garry Knox Bennett: Call Me Chairmaker." It's currently traveling throughout the United States. He has interpreted designs by many makers of historical importance, including George Nakashima, Rietveld, and Thonet. There is an accompanying catalog by the same name.

Bennett paints under the pseudonym Ambrose Pillphister. He often



Photo: M. Lee Fatherre

*Bucket o' Bulbs, 1996*

collaborates with Pillphister on projects that require painting. Bennett has embraced the notion of collaboration with people other than himself as well and played a major role in the collaborative conferences leading up to and during the now famous Emma Lake conferences.

So why does Garry Knox Bennett deserve to have his own exhibition at the AAW? Clearly, Bennett is a big-time furniture maker, but what is his connection to turning? While Bennett has used turned wood and metal elements, the turnings were done on his machinist's metal lathe for the purpose of making round dovetail shapes. For specially turned elements, Bennett used to call up Bob Stockdale, a useful resource, you might say. Since the number of turned parts in Bennett's furniture work was and is minimal, and he doesn't turn them ▶



Photo: M. Lee Fatheree

*Candle Holder, 2002*

himself, and the venues for his work focus on furniture and not turning, I have not yet answered that question.

In 2000, David Ellsworth invited Bennett to contribute to a turning exhibition at the Brookfield Craft Center. His submission was a block of square wood with a circle the full size of the block drawn on the end and the center marked. It was all ready to put on the lathe. "Preturned Wood Object" was written on the side in wide felt-tipped marker. The exhibition included pieces that demonstrated a variety of concepts in turning, but Bennett's piece was completely conceptual, in the sense that it hadn't even been turned. It would be easy for someone to say, "Anyone could do that," but the point is, no one else did. It's a glimpse of Bennett's wit.

With turning, so to speak, on his mind, in 2002 Bennett dedicated one of his many solo exhibitions at Leo Kaplan Modern Gallery in NYC to turning. He made his point, as Bennett will do, by titling the exhibition "Reconstructed Twirlings." There was only one problem: He didn't turn, nor did he have interest in learning. So he asked David Ellsworth, Michael Hosaluk, and me to send him turned parts with which to work.

In my case, he stopped by my studio. I had collected a bunch of samples and parts for him, put aside for one reason or another. He went through them one by one, studying each part, and deciding whether to take it. I didn't realize at the time that his mind is so quick that he had a concept for each piece on the spot or he discarded it.

It was a wonderful exhibition showcasing Bennett's cleverness and creativity in placing these "found objects" in a different context. One of the great rewards of collaboration is to see how someone else interprets your forms. For example, he took one of my multi-axis candlesticks and made a frame around it that captured the top and bottom. He then attached springs connecting the frame to the candlestick, creating the illusion that the frame was a torture rack that had taken a straight turning and made it crooked.

So the POP committee's motives in bringing Garry Knox Bennett and his work to the Albuquerque conference come from our admiration and respect for him, and from a desire to expose our members to fresh ways of looking at turning, in this case, by someone from outside the field. Whether it's a bent nail, or a block of wood that could be turned but isn't, one thing is certain, there will be a lot of head scratching going on. ■

*Mark Sfirri is a professor and coordinator of the Fine Woodworking Program at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania. He has a studio in New Hope, Pennsylvania where he makes furniture and sculpture that incorporate lathe-turned parts.*

*Pre Turned Wood Object, 2000, Collection of the Wood Turning Center*

