

Anniversary Profiles Ray Key, Member #368



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

I was part of the discussion group at Arrowmont in 1985 where the original aim was to form an International organisation. Pragmatism correctly came down in favour of an American organisation.

When you look back at you pieces from 1986, what do you see?

Purity of form, and using what nature offers to best effect. I have hung in there for forty-three years with the following bywords: 'Keep it simple stupid' 'If in doubt leave it out' and 'Let the wood speak for itself'. This philosophy continues to still serve me well.

Who or what was your greatest teacher?



In the thirty weeks leading up to AAW's 30th Anniversary Symposium in Atlanta, we will be sharing the stories of members who joined in 1986 and are still members today. We hope you enjoy their memories and insights!

Click [here](#) to read this and other profiles online.

About Ray Key

Ray Key grew up near Birmingham, England, a city of tradesmen recognized for knife and toolmaking as early as 1538. At age 10, he was fascinated by the work of a local woodturner and realized that he would always work with his hands.

Ray began his career as a pattern-maker, learning to make objects to fine tolerances. By 1965 he was working as a clay modeler for a British automaker, had bought his first lathe, and met his wife to be, Liz. With her encouragement, he began teaching himself to turn. In 1971, following a local exhibition featuring his work, Ray began production turning of all types and continued until 1984, when he narrowed his work to the bowls, platters, vessels, and boxes for which he is now known.

Ray first visited the U.S. in 1981 to participate in the Philadelphia Woodturning

My father. He was a workaholic, very practical, and could turn his hands to most things. He taught me the value of hard work, and he told me never to start smoking; I took that advice on board.

What was your funniest turning moment?

That's a difficult one, there are so many; most are related to my irreverence to many of my peers. One event, the 1988 AAW Philadelphia Symposium is high on the list. I was demonstrating in the next room to Dale Nish and mounted a roughed-out bowl on the lathe, remarking that I had this guy in the US that roughed them out for me. "Some of you may have heard of him, his name is Dale Nish," there was uproar. Later Dale asked what was going on in my room, I told my story and he huffed and puffed a little. Next day I did the same demo and told the same story with Dale at the back of the room, even more uproar. As I finished the bowl he appeared at my side grabbed the bowl and strode off saying that's mine. Great fun, the story had its origins back in Utah, I had been down in his basement and un-earthed box after box of roughed out bowls, remarking he needed a woodturner to finish them off. With a wry smile he said take some of them on your travels, which I duly did.



Nick Agar, Michael Hosaluk, Ray Key and Glenn Lucas at Ohio Valley Woodturners Guild Symposium

What was your happiest turning moment?

This could also go under the funniest I guess. My first time demonstrating in the US was in 1981 at Albert LeCoff's Philadelphia Woodturning Symposium. I jam-chucked a platter to take the chuck marks out of the base and popped it out of the lathe. Mike Hosaluk caught it and threw it back to me. I caught it and without stopping banged it back into the jam chuck and carried on. Everyone did a double take and I got away with it.

No one got hurt; Mike and I became firm friends overnight, and if we had practiced it thousand times we could never pull that off again.

Symposium. In 1985, Ray attended the *Vision & Concept* conference at Arrowmont, where the initial foundations of the AAW were formed. Returning to England, he applied the AAW concept to British woodturning circles, and by 1987 had united more than 300 parties into the Association of Woodturners of Great Britain (AWGB). He was the AWGB founding chairman and has served as its honorary president since 1997.

In 2001, Ray was recognized for his contributions to the field of woodturning with an AAW Honorary Lifetime Membership. In 2012, he received the first ever Master in Turning award from the Worshipful Company of Turners, and in 2015 he was awarded the [British Empire Medal](#), is a British medal awarded for meritorious civil service worthy of recognition by the Crown.

An author, instructor, speaker and leader, Ray has lent his talents in service of woodturning for many decades. He has work in major private and public collections, is the author of three books on turning, and demonstrates internationally. He and his wife Liz live in Worcestershire, England.



Ray receiving the British Empire Medal, with the Lord Lieutenant of Worcester, the Mayor and Lady Mayoress, and members of the Worshipful Company of Turners, friends and family.



A set of Ray Key's signature Pagoda Boxes, here in spalted beech. AAW Permanent Collection, 2009.

What is your favorite tool and wood and why?

Tool: the Henry Taylor Super Flute gouge designed by Roy Child which came on the market around 1980. Its parabolic flute makes it the most versatile bowl gouge out there.

Wood: Masur birch. There is nothing I don't like about this wood; it's just a joy.

What do you see as the biggest change in the field?

Turning accepted as an art form; and the lathe being used sparingly by many in the creative process. More and more pieces are being embellished in some way off-lathe. There are still a few of us old purist dinosaurs out there though.

If you couldn't be a woodturner, what would you do instead?

A ceramicist. I have always had an affinity with those who work in clay.

Do you still have *American Woodturner* back issues? Where do you keep them?

I have them all, I am a hoarder of numerous publications; they are all filed in my office area above the workshop.

Has being a part of AAW affected your life and work? How?

I was fortunate that through being a presenter at a number of the early AAW Symposiums I got to know many of the pioneers of the modern movement that we have today, Osolnik, Stocksdales, Moulthrop, Lindquist, Prestini and Nish; most became true friends. I had met many of them in 1981 but I got to know them better over time.

The opportunity to share and critique the Instant Gallery with some of the best in the business. And making life long friends.

One memorable experience was travelling across Philadelphia in 1988 with Rude Osolnik, James Prestini, Mel Lindquist and Dale Nish. Between them they had forgotten more than most will ever know. Rude was assigned as Prestini's minder.

What's your favorite project/piece?

I have selected this Masur birch hollow form, made last year, for a number of reasons. It's made from my

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favorite wood and owes its origin to David Ellsworth (I would never have made hollow vessels without David's pioneering, nor would most turners out there if they were honest.)

Finally and embarrassingly, Nick Agar picked this piece from the AWGB 2015 Seminar Instant Gallery, for the Critique and declared it museum quality. (It's really not the done thing, as I was part of the Critique team, but Nick had his say).



*Hollow form by Ray Key, 2015.
Masur birch, 10.25" x 8.6" (26cm x 22cm)*

Favourite piece turned by another artist?

Difficult to choose, I have pieces from eighty turners many by top names.

I have plumped for this David Ellsworth piece from 1981 as I had to prise it out of him. Memory tells me it cost me a number of pieces to complete the trade.



Hollow form by David Ellsworth, 1981. Maple.

If you could give your 30 years-younger self some advice about being a turner what would you say?

Idealism is fine, have been there and got the 'T' shirt. If you have no other forms of outside income its pragmatism that puts food on the table.

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