

Anniversary Profiles Merryll Saylan, Member #377



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

I did not go to Arrowmont when AAW came to be. I was rejected from the exhibition after being invited to submit slides. And it was a long way to go. I'd been involved in woodturning since the mid '70s, so when I heard they started this organization, I decided I'd better join.

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

In 1986, I had been turning as a professional for quite a few years so it's hard to think of that time in particular and easier to think back to the earliest work I did. When I first started I had been making sculpture, but to pay my studio rent, started turning bowls. I also made turned and constructed furniture.



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 Merryll Saylan

Merryll Saylan was following a path that she thought would lead to a master's degree in architecture when she began turning in the 1970s. Her spirit was captured by the aesthetic possibilities inherent in woodworking, and she instead completed her post-graduate degree in art and wood.

As a woman in the field, Merryll was already unusual, but her approach to turning was also different from that of many peers. Her interest in the "rules" was minimal, and her bold explorations, including combining materials, and the of surface texturing and color, set her apart during an era when technical finesse and the beauty and nature of the wood itself dominated wood art.



Jelly Doughnut, 1979. Poplar,



Salad Bowl Table: Homage to Greens, 1988.
Claro walnut, poplar, black bamboo. 29" x22" x 22".

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

I went back to university as an older undergraduate student majoring in design. I feel very fortunate for the classes UCLA offered. I had a year of the history of design, looking at images of pottery, architecture, furniture across cultures and time. I had some amazing teachers like John Neuhart who worked with Eames; George Foy, the architect and industrial designer; Bernard Kester in fiber, and Nathan Shapira, who brought famous Italian designers to visit. It was mind-expanding. And then I'd go home and cook dinner for three kids.

What was your funniest turning moment?

I was turning a large 24" piece of satinwood for a platter; I was very tired, so sat on a stool to sand. I had an old lathe where the headstock swiveled. I heard an odd noise and shut the lathe off. A piece was missing from the edge of the disk and had cut across the top of my knee. The doctor said it was like pulling out pieces of shrapnel, except the light-colored wood was hard to find.

cast resin, 14" x 3"

A respected teacher, writer and artist, Merryll's contributions to the field have also included serving on the board of the Center for Art in Wood (then the Wood Turning Center) and as president of the AAW's board from 1995-1996. Testament to the strength of her vision, Merryll's life and work are documented in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and her artwork is held in the collections of many major museums, including the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, Yale University Art Gallery, and the Mint Museum. In 2008, one of her pieces was selected by curator emeritus David McFadden for the Museum of Art and Design's exhibition *Re: Collection*, for which he chose 70 favorite pieces from the museum's holdings of over 4,000 works.

In 2009, Merryll was selected as the AAW's Professional Outreach Program Merit Award honoree, in recognition of her contributions as an artist, teacher and leader in the field of woodturning.

Merryll currently lives and works in Berkeley, California. She loves to cook and entertain, and enjoys sharing food and conversation with many artists in the Bay Area. She has three adult children, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

You can learn more about Merryll Saylan and her work on her [website](#).

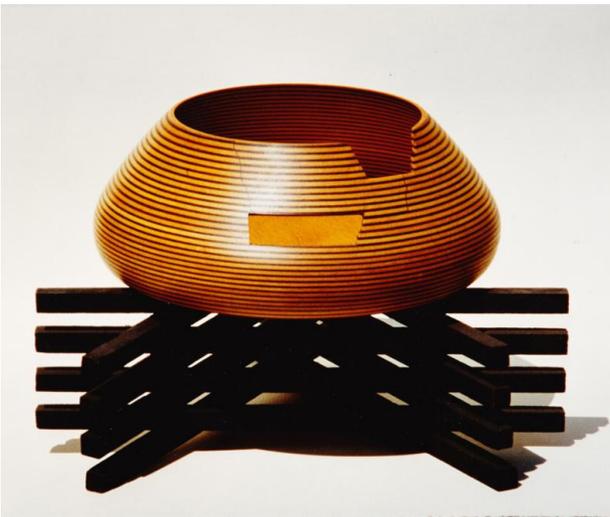
A biography and sampling of her work can also be found in her POP Merit Artist [brochure](#).



2009 Merit Award, created by Mark Sfirri.



Merryll at the lathe, 1980s. Below, the completed piece.



What was your happiest moment?

There are lots of those, but probably the one that was the most thrilling was when I was still in the graduate program at Cal State Northridge. A bunch of us wood students decided to enter the California Design exhibition with our work. I boxed up my first set of turnings, a set of Japanese rice bowls and server, and brought them down to the jurying process. Later at school, students were grumbling about who got in. It turned out I was the only one who did, but I was so embarrassed I couldn't say that I was accepted. It was bought in the exhibition by Joanne and Jim Rapp who owned The Hand and the Spirit art gallery in Scottsdale; we've been friends ever since.



Merryll Saylan teaching in Fiji in 2004. She was a visiting artist through ART in Embassies, an [international program](#) through the US Department of State.



Set of bowls displayed at the U.S. Embassy in Fiji.

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Merryll's first set of turnings, birdseye maple, 1976.

What is your favorite tool or wood? Why?

My favorite tool is a scraper. Jerry Glazer came and demonstrated at my school. He brought a bunch of steel bars which many of us bought. We made handles for them, routing out grooves for the rectangular bars, glued up the two parts for the handles. Because this was pretty expensive for a student, we made two tools, one at each end of the bar and held it tightly into the grooves with thumb screws. Not sophisticated but it worked. Jerry always remembered exactly just what steel it was years later.

What is the biggest change you've seen in the field?

I see two changes from when I first started. One is less emphasis on tools and techniques and more emphasis on design. And the best change is the growing number of women turning. It was definitely a guy's game in the beginning. I remember reading that in one of the earliest newsletters.



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

I'm an artist, if it isn't wood, it's drawing, painting, bookmaking or cooking. All of those take practice, dedication, working with your hands and creativity.

Do you still have *American Woodturner* back issues?

I'm afraid not. I've cut them up, given them away. Moved too often. I still have a lot.

How has AAW affected your life and work?

Being part of AAW is one part of my being a member in a larger world of craft and art. When I first started there was much more interaction between artists working in all mediums. I still have that in my life. Connections like you make at AAW, friends everywhere is fantastic. I feel so

fortunate to be a member of such a large and varied world

What is your favorite piece?

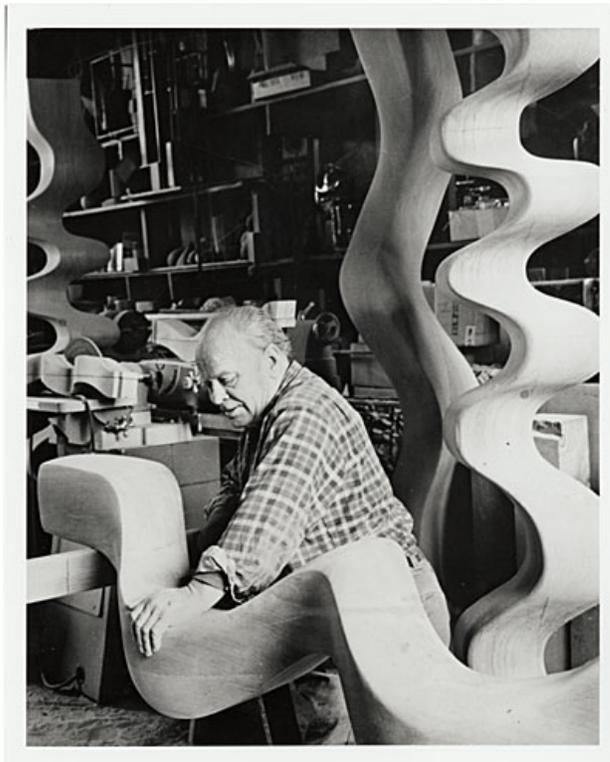
That's always the most current work. That's what I love now.

Favorite piece turned by another artist?

That's a hard one to do, but in some ways, it's an artist I was introduced to by an instructor at UCLA and then again by one of the wood teachers. I still love [Jan de Swart's](#) work. Granted some of it looks a little dated. But his whole house was his work, he made his furniture, doors, lights. His approach was so child-like, and he was a genius on the band saw. He'd start with a block of wood, cut it up, reglue it, cut it some more and then repeat the process again. He influenced my early work quite a bit.



Work by Jan De Swart, above. The artist in his studio, mid-1970s, below.



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

I don't know if I'd give myself advice, but say, do you know you're going to be doing this for 40 years?



Merryll receiving the POP Merit Award from fellow turner and 30-year member, David Ellsworth.

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