

Anniversary Profiles
Steve Loar
Member #1197



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

It was what was happening, along with the Wood Turning Center. They were the organizations that were focusing on my passion of woodturning, promoting it out of its home in industrial arts, and developing exhibitions that focused on contemporary turning. I entered shows in other venues, but these two are what actually propelled the movement.

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

I see a career well under way and exploring life-time core interests in narrative, exploring color and texture, and woodturning propelled by design, not entertainment or therapy.



In the thirty weeks leading up to AAW's 30th Anniversary Symposium in Atlanta (and for a few weeks after!) 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.

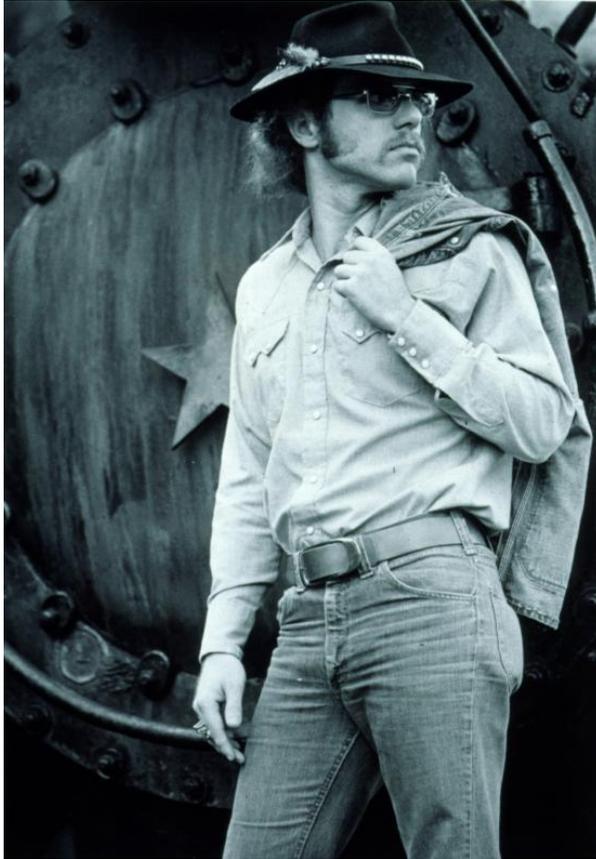
About Steve Loar

The son of an art teacher, Steve Loar was raised in Richmond, Indiana, close to the Ohio border. After some tentative early experiences with the lathe, he honed both his technical and design skills as an adult, through studies at Murray State University in Kentucky (B.A., Studio Art) and Northern Illinois University (M.A., Design).

During college he was introduced to fine woodworking, studying with a former student of the influential furniture-maker [Wendell Castle](#). He also took a basic woodturning class where, not unexpectedly, he created bowls that were anything but basic. Following college, his work as an industrial arts instructor at SUNY-Oswego provided access to a Rockwell lathe, and he was able to continue

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

Learn to use the cutting tools better and learn to sharpen them better - then, pursue the controlled surface in order to reduce sanding time.



Steve Loar

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

Most people are lucky if they encounter one mentor in life, so I've been unusually fortunate in having several. While I fearfully rubbed and rubbed a round nose scraper against hard maple in 7th grade, my real entrée to turning was a course that was totally focused on turning and was only offered one time, circa 1970, at Murray State University in Kentucky. The course was way ahead of its time. John Belt was the instructor's name and he is the number one influence on my life. I was in the industrial arts shop all the time as the long-haired hippie guy, even though I was a studio arts major. I absolutely loved drafting and totally smoked my classmates. I found welding very tedious, but that was in the days just before MIG & TIG welding. John also facilitated a college teaching position for me at the State University of New York (SUNY)-Oswego, something that many people chase for years, if not, their whole lives.

exploring its creative potential.

Steve is well-known in the woodturning world, and it isn't unusual for established artists to point to a class, or even a conversation with him as having been an influence on their perceptions and work. Always a risk-taker, he developed work that was narrative and personal during a period perhaps better known for technical finesse and dedication to the materiality of wood. Since the early 90s, most of his work has been collaborative, working with, as he puts it, "the broken, misdirected, or incomplete creations" of his contemporaries. It is "what I think of as found-object art," he says. "I enjoy identifying those marks, strokes, and strategies that speak of the original maker's intent, then merging their attitude with mine in such a way as to form a seamless 'logic' or intent to create an exciting, intriguing, and complete sculpture."

Steve has work in many private and public art collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Mint Museum of Craft and Design. He has made significant contributions to the field as an artist, researcher, editor, critic, teacher, historian, and writer, and has been recognized by the AAW and other organizations for his service as a mentor and leader. He has served on the boards of the Center for Art in Wood, the Craft Organization Development Association (CODA), and the Rochester Woodworkers Society, among others.

During two intensely creative decades at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), he taught, developed his own work, published several dozen articles and had work in close to one hundred shows. In 2005, Steve left Rochester, lured by the opportunity to help grow an existing furniture/wood program into the Center for Turning and



My other most significant mentor was Bobby Falwell, who hired me as an assistant in furniture making during my undergrad and graduate years. Bobby had been one of Wendell Castle's early students at the Rochester Institute of Technology. That taught me a whole lot about discipline, rigor, and uncompromising quality as well as shaping and finishing wood.

Later, [Ernie Conover](#) taught me to use the cutting gouge in exchange for sketching lessons over a New Year's Eve visit. My wife and Ernie compared family trees and established that they were 23rd cousins.

What was your funniest turning moment?

An early AAW scholarship took me back to Ernie's school for a week with Rude Osolnik. Rude had a great laugh at the cherished scraping tools that I brought to the workshop.

What was your happiest turning moment?

I've had many happy woodturning moments!

A particularly cherished moment is my Raised Vessel design class in 1991 at Arrowmont. The energy and visions were so intense and fun. I had juried a show for Arrowmont and at the opening I got to finally meet many of the people whose names had been showing up on exhibition notices with me for years - my peers. At the opening, John Jordan yelled, "Let's all take Steve's class!" and they did. It was like the Big Bang for me. Students included Stoney Lamar, John Jordan, Robyn Horn, Christian Burchard, David Sengel, Ric Stang - all in one place for a week. It was electric. It was also documented in [Wood Turning in North America Since 1930](#) (Yale University Press/Center for Art in Wood, 2001) which is a real thrill.

I also taught two two-week classes at Arrowmont with John Jordan. Our skills and sensibilities were a great combination. For the auction, I turned a plate and we took it down to one of the tacky airbrush shops in Gatlinburg, where the guy told us, "If you can bring it in the door, I can paint it!" It had a mountain scene with banding around the edge that read, "John and Steve's Excellent Adventure." It went for some silly low price and I wish I had it with me today. I loved working with John.

Furniture Design at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. His own artistic work took a backseat as he dedicated himself to the students and to facilities and program development.



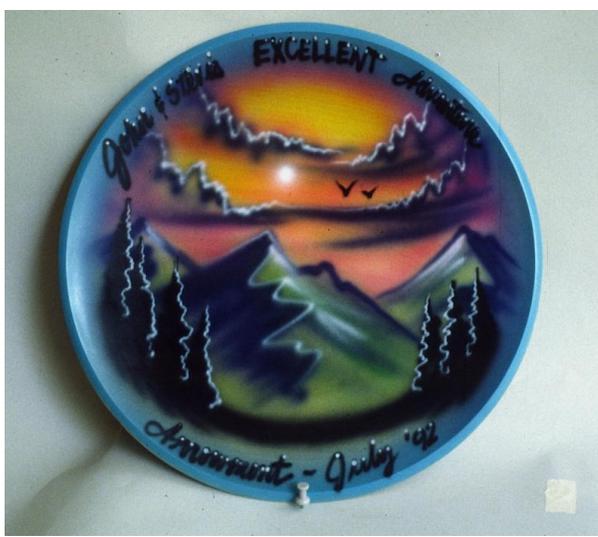
Steve Loar with a student, c. 2009. Photo by Keith Boyer

The Center features a large, dedicated turning studio with 13 Oneway lathes, within an expansive and well-equipped set of woodworking shops and studios. Crucially, it also provides a rigorous, integrated arts and design curriculum, possibly the only such program at a four-year college in the United States. At IUP he also taught three-dimensional design foundation courses, and developed a study abroad program, One Island, that paired his passion for teaching concept and design with an equally intense interest in environmentalism.

Although deeply rewarding, teaching, writing, service and research have sometimes subsumed Steve's work as an artist. Recently retired, he is looking forward to creating more art and watching as his former students make their own marks in the world. His teaching time is by no means over: in 2017 he'll be teaching a design course at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts with Dixie Biggs, and he recently qualified as a basics instructor in Triyoga.

When asked about interests outside of the arts, Steve replied, "I have a collection of used toy ray guns, a collection of recently old technology (especially computer mice), enjoy the early robots like Robby, and am still looking for that one wheat penny that will fund my retirement."

Married for forty years and the



What is your favorite tool and why?

The basic bowl gouge is incredibly versatile, but I also have several wide off-center diamond point scrapers that I use a lot. They don't give a smooth-cut surface but they allow me a degree of subtlety in arcs and intersections that I feel confident with. Rude would just laugh at me, I'm sure.

Favorite wood?

Cherry is superb, but I usually use woods that have visual characteristics that help with my narratives. I like figured woods and have recently used some quilted maple, omery but hypnotic stuff!

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

I wrote a commentary, [Themes and Directions: Trends and Traditions](#), for the journal way back in 1992, that looked at four areas of exciting exploration at the time. These have become part of the basic language of turning. There is still much that could be explored with them, though.

The lack of artistic training or design aptitude in the field still hampers a genuinely intense exploration of what's possible. I truly believe that we're still on a Big Plateau, as I've described it before.

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

My life has been in the university, primarily with freshmen, teaching three-dimensional design. For me, it's been grand. Not all that many people are fond of dealing with 18-year-olds, but the moment is so vital and powerful to engage them in intense work of the hand and the creative mind.

If I was another brand of artist, I would like to have the virtuoso skills and daring of Ohio wildlife carver [John T. Sharp](#). His work is fabulous in concept and execution.

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

I've made sure that the Wood program at the university has a full set and that they are available, but they are really old news to the young ones. If it's not on the Net, it essentially doesn't exist.

father of two, Steve and his wife, artist, teacher and jewelry-maker Kim Conover Loar, recently made the move from Pennsylvania to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to be closer to family. Along with their two large dogs, they are camping out in a 576 square foot apartment while searching for the home that can accommodate family, dogs, art-making, and ray guns.

-Tib Shaw



Robby the Robot at work



Steve at work, assisting a student in Scotland during [One Island - Arts as Environmental Remediation](#) a 3D design study abroad program through IUP. Initially intending to use trash - abundant in previous sites - the group found their creativity challenged by the Scottish habit of reusing and recycling instead of tossing things out

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

I've chafed at being a woodturner and not the "famous artist" but the AAW has consistently given me a basis for my work and has repeatedly recognized my efforts, especially in design and education.

What's your favorite project/piece?

Two early collaborations using discards gifted from Mark Sfirri and Stoney Lamar are in significant collections and epitomize my skills at maintaining the hallmark aspects of the original artist while creating a vivid composition that they would not do themselves.



Nikki's Lurid Past Comes Calling, collaboration with Mark Sfirri, c.1985. Poplar, cherry burl, mixed media, 28" high. Photo: Nancy Stuart

Favorite piece turned by another artist?

How about three? Ron Fleming, Ron Layport, Stephen Hogbin.



Undiscovered Symphony (aka Gold Leaf), 2015, by Steve Loar and Dixie Biggs. Jacaranda, maple, cherry, gold leaf, 32" x 10" x 14" [\(read more\)](#)

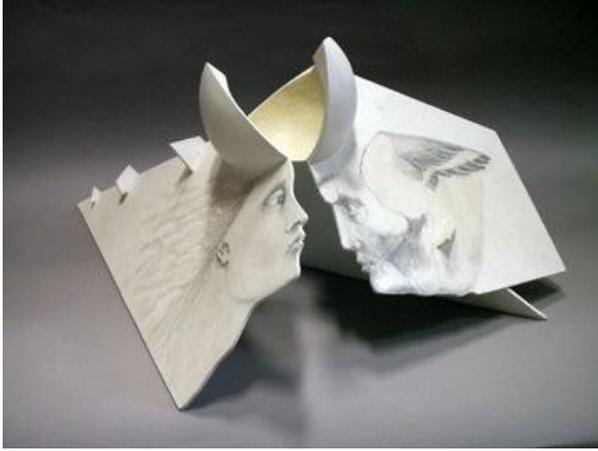
Learn more:

[Green Design: Harvest to Use](#) an article on the architecture woodworking program at IUP

[Green Design: Recycling the Beach.](#) an article on 3D design courses at IUP

Rodger Jacob's 1996 AW article, [A Design Class at Arrowmont](#)

[Bartram's Boxes Remix](#) at the Center for Art in Wood. Steve is featured at 14:54 in the video.



Dialogue Series: Psyche and Mercury, by Stephen Hogbin, c.1990. 10" x 15" x 23" Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, gift of the collection of Mari and Irving Lipton



Earth Offering by Ron Fleming, 1992. Buckeye burl. 9" x 23" x 20". The Center for Art in Wood Museum Collection, donated by Neil and Susan Kaye



Spirit Whites (on Sky Blue Pale), by Ron Layport, 2006. Maple, bleached and pigmented. 10.25" high

Additional Works:



River Geode, collaboration with Robyn Horn, 2005. Primavera, cocobolo, maple, fish bone, gold pearl pin, 10" high by 13" diameter



Bowl for the Coastal Tribes, by Steve Loar, 1985. Spalted maple, veneered plywood, paint, 13" x 16" x 12". Collection of David Ellsworth. Photo by Jamey Stillings ([read more](#))



What's at the Center? by Steve Loar and Stephan Goetschius, 2008. Maple, redwood, mixed veneers, Post-its, 6" diameter.

