



Giles Gilson, 1942–2015, pictured here at the SOFA Chicago Icons exhibit, 2008.

Photo: John McFadden

## REMEMBERING *Giles Gilson*

Giles Gilson, an iconic, influential figure in contemporary woodturning, died January 20, 2015, at his home in Schenectady, New York. An AAW member since 1986, Giles was awarded a POP Fellowship Award in 2006 and earned the distinction of Honorary Lifetime Member in 2009.

I did not have the pleasure of knowing Giles but have learned he was a renegade, a truly creative spirit unafraid to blast through boundaries. Among woodturners, he became known for his impeccable technical execution, innovative use of graphics and automotive paint/lacquer, incorporation of metal, and an undeniable urge for playfulness and absurdity.

Following are memories and impressions of Giles, written by some who knew him. Hopefully, these varied accounts convey a sense of what Giles was like. For more, refer back to Terry Martin's 2009 profile article of Giles, published in *AW* vol 24, no 2, page 18. Additionally, Kevin Wallace has kindly provided a short video about Giles, which can be found at [tiny.cc/GilesGilson](http://tiny.cc/GilesGilson) or by scanning the QR code.

—Joshua Friend, Editor ▶



### In the Words of Giles Gilson (culled from video footage)

“Imagination is the ability to dream—to fantasize—to visualize and create sequences of events in the realm of thought. There’s the human process... the sequence of emotional and intellectual events a person experiences as a result of a set of circumstances. I have found that my process—the sequence of emotional events that I go through in creating a piece—has many levels. Some of the triggers for these events can be traced to very early childhood. Many of them can be traced to more recent experiences. Because I’ve had so many experiences in the past that can best be described as

bizarre, I have long felt that it is important to include a sense of the ridiculous. Yet, when I’m doing a piece, I must be careful not to clutter a work with this. I use the absurd elements when they bring something to the final work.

All of the choices I make in the design of a work will be influenced by the circumstances around me, current perception and emotion, and the culmination of past experience. I have asked philosophical questions as long as I can remember and I often find that this quest influences the work in subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways.”

## David Ellsworth

It always hurts when you lose a very close friend, especially when he was a brother in the arts. And when that friend was also a true icon in your field, it stings.

Giles was a revolutionary, a daring bandit of creative ideas that were so ahead of their time, woodturners often rejected his work as being too modern, too avant-garde, too off the wall... too innovative. He was the first to use paint on his turned wood pieces, specifically transparent automotive lacquer, which changed color as you walked around a piece; the first to incorporate materials like Plexiglass, fiberglass cloth, and metals; and the first to



**Giles Gilson**, *Incident at the Crossroads*, 1997, Various woods, metal, Corian®, acrylic paint, 18¾" x 5" (48cm x 13cm)

Permanent Collection: Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Provenance: The Lipton Collection

use humor in his artwork, like a turned jar that was actually a jewelry box. You raised the lid and a tiny box popped up from inside with a tiny door, which, when opened, engaged a hinged shelf that would drop the jewels into the jar below.

Giles was a consummate 24/7 artist who lived alone in his studio in Schenectady, New York. The range of his creativity went beyond wood into metals, plastics, computers, and film. He rarely slept. His artistry was supported by his drive for superior craftsmanship in everything he did. Often considered a lovable wild man, a product of the '60s, his passions were old cars, old airplanes, and RCAs (radio controlled aircraft). He had an RCA helicopter that he once flew inside his studio... once! He also built a prototype racecar *inside* his studio for Honda Corporation (for which he never got paid). He had a succession of old Jeep Cherokees in various stages of drivability—all lined up in his driveway until a tree came down in a storm and crushed them all. But his crown prize was a '32 Ford "Deuce Coupe" that he rebuilt piece-by-piece, part-by-part. He had only a few months to enjoy it before his death.

Stories? Sure. How about the message on his answering machine: "Hello, this

is Giles... Leave your name and credit card number and I'll get back to you real soon." Or, when asked where he got his ideas: "Hell, they're chasing me down the street." Or, when demonstrating turning a walnut vase during a workshop and someone asked how he was going to finish it, he covered the entire surface with Elmer's glue, picked up a handful of turned shavings off the floor, tapped them down carefully over the sticky surface, and calmly declared, "It's finished." And, of course, one of the many times I visited and slept on a lumpy antique mattress with no box springs on the floor of his guestroom, I was awakened by the itch of a deer tick buried in my butt. And, yes, he dug it out with a pair of pliers that he quickly ground down to look something like tweezers. Anesthetic? Of course... 90 proof!

The woodturning field has been greatly enriched by Giles' energy, vision, perseverance, passion, humor, and the guts to go "where no man has gone before." As Kevin Wallace said, Giles was a true American original. So the next time we think about using color in our work, or have what we think might be a crazy idea, or if we're at all hesitant to go in a new direction, think about Giles. His influence is everywhere and permanently embedded in our field.

## Mark Lindquist

Giles was a long, long-time friend. He was first a friend to my father Mel. They met in the early 1970s when Mel was doing a craft fair at the Schenectady Museum in Schenectady, New York. They became fast friends, and soon Giles was visiting Mel in Mel's basement shop. Mostly they drank a lot of coffee, smoked a lot of cigarettes, and laughed and told jokes over and over again.

If there's one thing I will always remember about Giles, it was his laugh. How he could laugh. When Giles and I met, he was routinely getting up at 4:00 a.m. to do his paper route, which gave him money to pursue his dream—"to make things in

wood." He was already an accomplished hot rodder, and he could play the sax seriously, and fly "round engine planes" as he called them. He had a particular style or manner of doing things his way. In a sense, he was an "Elvis" in the making. Both Mel and I saw it, and because of Giles' warmth and odd sense of humor, he just became family. You might say we adopted him.

This was a guy who fit the description of "starving artist." He rarely had any money because he spent it all on wood, machines, paints, materials—anything and everything he needed to reach his goals. He didn't have a clue how to get his work into a show. In the beginning, I helped him the best I could, and eventually he began to fly more on his own.



Left to right: Giles Gilson, Mark Lindquist, David Ellsworth

Saint Paul, Minnesota, 2011

Photo: Terry Martin

“Giles was a wild and crazy guy on the outside—a true thinker and profound individual on the inside.”  
—Mark Lindquist

We had a lot in common. His grandfather had been a big part of General Electric, where Mel had been a quality control engineer. We both had played in many of the same clubs and bars in our own bands in the Tri-City area, and we had a goal of changing the world of craft, in our own ways, moving it toward and into art.

There were so many conversations, so many things we did in the realm of the theoretical, that I don't even know where to begin, because a conversation with Giles really never had a beginning or an end. It was a continuum—just the way Giles' influence will be felt.

I used to tease him about his use of paint and his “Harley-Davidson motorcycle gas tank finishes” and he'd grin and smile and say, “Yeah boy, and don't they look nice!” We'd laugh and laugh.

Visiting his first studio on Troy Road, was “a trip,” as we used to say in those days. Harry, Giles' dad, had parts and pieces of torn down engines all over the shop, and

the jazz and blues always playing while Giles patiently moved the greasy parts to the side and somehow kept working.

He drove our van for us out to the first ACC Craft Fair East Coast-West Coast Exchange in 1977. The event was in San Francisco at Fort Mason, and this was where Giles met David Ellsworth, Hap Sakwa, Ray Leier, and others for the first time. Giles was supposed to drive straight through, but he took a several-hundred-mile detour to see the Grand Canyon. That was Giles. All he would do was grin that big grin, head down, piercing eyes, and laugh and laugh. It was fun—and fun in a big way—for Giles and anyone around him.

The legacy Giles leaves is significant and only somewhat realized. There is significant documentation of his work in books, catalogs, and essays, but it will never tell the story of what he really accomplished, which was to meld ideas, experiences, materials,

methods, and technological innovation into exquisite, outrageous, unique works of art that only he could have made.

His influence has spread far and wide. Giles was the epitome of creativity, never at a loss for ideas or plans for new and interesting work. He remains a pillar of the studio woodturning movement, and his influence will continue to be felt in the world of woodturning and wood sculpture.

Just two days before hearing of his passing, I had visited his website (which I had made for him some time ago) to see if he had added anything new. I had meant to be in touch with him, but he disappeared as quietly as he originally appeared in my life. I know I'll always have the memories of the many projects we did together, the many, many good times, and the memory of the hardships he endured. The laughs, the music, the blues, the skat, the jazz, and dirty sax. A wild and crazy guy on the outside—a true thinker and profound individual on the inside.

Say “Hey” to Mel when you see him, Giles. God speed, brother. ▶

### Terry Martin

Some people leave more ripples in the pond than others. Giles Gilson was a rare person—larger than life, brilliant, irreverent, and outrageous, but always fun to be with. He retained a childlike ability to see the world differently than most of us, and so he made art that was never predictable, never boring. Even when he was very ill, Giles liked to make people laugh and enjoyed shocking everyone, but his roguish play could not hide the fact that he was a technical and creative genius. His mastery of processes, materials, and ideas was second to none. When Giles was finished making his latest artwork, he would

lay back and riff on his saxophone, lost in contemplation. Who knows what was going on in his head? He might have been designing a new aircraft, adjusting the suspension on a vintage car, making a precious jewelry box, or dreaming of loves lost. There never was and never will be anyone like Giles. We need him now just as much as we ever did—to challenge, to provoke, and to delight. He will be sadly missed.

**Giles Gilson**, *Reversal Graphic*, 1986,  
Wood, lacquer, 38" × 13" (97cm × 33cm)

Photo: Courtesy of Lindquist Studios: Mark Lindquist, John McFadden





Giles Gilson was many things, including an acrobatic pilot and jazz musician.



**Giles Gilson**, *Whisper the Wind*, Wood, metal, paint, 7½" × 10" (19cm × 25cm)

Photo: Courtesy of Lindquist Studios: Mark Lindquist, John McFadden

**Giles Gilson**, *Uptown*, Basswood, aluminum, acrylic lacquer, 6" × 7¼" (15cm × 18cm)

Photo: Terence Roberts  
Collection of Lisa and Bernard David



“Initially scolded by collectors and dropped by galleries, Giles Gilson is today considered a major influence on a new generation of woodturners who embrace painting, sculpture, concept, and emotional content.”

—Kevin Wallace

### **Mark Sfirri**

My first demonstration on the road, as it were, was in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 1992. I had the pleasure of being a demonstrator with Del Stubbs, Richard Raffan, Michael Hosaluk, and Giles Gilson. While at the conference, we all stayed together in a house for four or five days—and there is nothing like close quarters for getting to know people. Richard and I assumed the roles of meal

organizers and chefs, as we quickly saw without stepping forward we wouldn't be eating. Much has been shared about the fact that Giles had other interests outside of woodworking. One night, he would share story after story about being a pilot. Another night, there were many stories about being a jazz musician. He was a really good storyteller who could make you feel like you were right there in the story with him. He is and will be missed.

### **Michael Hosaluk**

I have many memories of Giles, but what stands out the most is when his brain was whirring. His enthusiasm for his art was contagious. He made you want to take your own work to the highest level you were capable of and beyond. He always had time for you and what you were doing and would add to your ideas in a way that made you feel good. I am lucky to have experienced time with this

special man and will cherish my memories of a dear friend.

I remember when Giles was at our conference in Saskatoon demonstrating the spraying of lacquer finishes. He had a small fan behind him to blow the fumes away, a cigarette in his mouth while spraying highly flammable liquids. A true trained professional.

Happy trails, Giles...

### **Kevin Wallace**

The work of Giles Gilson wasn't remotely like the work of any other artist and, truth be told, we still aren't quite sure what to make of him. He didn't believe in rules—if there has been one aspect of Gilson's work that has stood out over the years, it has been his penchant for breaking rules and challenging the status quo—yet he embraced excellence when it came to his own standards.

He became involved in industrial design and engineering at an early age, and they remained central to the creation of artwork that was inspired by music, theater, graphic arts, automotive design, aeronautics, women, and what he referred to as “mysterious things.”

Having gained prominence as a woodturner, Gilson rejected the limitations

of conformity and began painting over the wood, shocking many in the field. He further frustrated his critics by creating work that was neither made of wood or lathe-turned for exhibitions of turned wood objects. Gilson made clear that the work of an artist is not concerned with how it's made or what it's made of, but whether it captures what it is to incarnate as a human on this planet at this point in history. Initially scolded by collectors and dropped by galleries, he is today considered a major influence on a new generation of woodturners who embrace painting, sculpture, concept, and emotional content.

Giles Gilson was a hot rod in a world of beige sedans. It will take a while for us to understand his work and there is a very good chance we won't ever really get our heads around who he was and what he brought to this world. Somewhere he's having a good laugh about that.

### Jane and Arthur Mason

The passing of Giles Gilson is very sad news. We treasure his memory, work, friendship, sense of humor, originality, and most of all his devil-may-care way of life. If there was fun to be had, Giles was there. Before we met him, he had already been through careers as an acrobatic pilot and a jazz musician. If you wanted to feel good about yourself or the world, Giles was there. He was one of those people who, now that he's gone, we say, "Damn, why didn't we call him up last week or go see him?"

We first became aware of Giles when we saw our first show in 1986, "The Art of the Turned Wood Bowl," which featured the collection of Edward Jacobson. In that wide ranging assemblage of twenty-one fine artists, he was the only one working in

color. And what color! It was baked on like the surface of a car, which was hardly surprising since he worked on cars and planes and appliances in Schenectady for GE. He went on from there to constantly surprise us. He wasn't bound solely to wood but would mount rifle sites, radar antenna, and other out-of-space gadgets to give his work a modern feel while reminding you what a superb wood artist and technician he was.

In the Jacobson catalogue, he joshed enthusiasm for the lathe by asking satirically, "How much turning must be used before a piece can be considered turned, and if a piece is turned, then what type of turned object may be considered 'art'?" Contemporary turners [circa 1985] are pushing these limitations farther than ever. Essentially, turning is a wonderful

technique that can be *part* of a larger creative whole in a work of art."

How farsighted in 1985! But we're getting too serious for Giles. He was fun even though he had personal problems of all kinds. He was first and foremost a friend and advisor. One time, he even pretended to listen to us when we told him the wood for a piece was too beautiful to be all covered with paint. He proceeded to leave a section of the piece in its original state to show its beauty.

When he was at an AAW meeting, or at David Ellsworth's house, or some other occasion, you knew the night would be late and the beer would flow and the laughs would go on forever. Now we know—not quite forever. We shall not see anyone like him again.

### Bernard David

I first met Giles through Mark Sfirri in 2002. Mark was my guide for the "Wood Turning in North America Since 1930" show at the Renwick. I saw a piece that really struck me. It was Giles Gilson's *Sunset* (1987). I fell in love. I couldn't believe the pearlescent paint and metal work. I not only admired the piece but also wanted an exact copy. I also felt compelled to learn how to do what Giles had so artfully done. Mark made the introduction to Giles, and that was the beginning of a lasting friendship.

Giles created a likeness of *Sunset* for me and entitled it *Sunrise*. It rests peacefully in the main entry hall of our home. All who see it admire its technical execution and exceptional beauty.

More importantly, after I had met Giles over the phone, I made the journey to the "Gilson Studio" in Schenectady and spent about a week learning how to turn metal objects and "paint like Giles" using his pearl essence technique—a method that gives Giles' work almost a glass-like

feeling. I was excited by my newfound skills but more honored to have begun a friendship with an exceptional human being.

A telling story about Giles began when Albert LeCoff decided to gather a number of skilled woodturners and give them the challenge to create some object(s) out of two small pieces of wood. When the time came to exhibit their work, Giles showed up with two vials containing the ashes of the wood. When asked why he had done what he did, Giles responded that he was moved to do so. Everyone was in disbelief. Giles didn't care because he saw the beauty in what he had done and hoped it would resonate with others.

Giles had tremendous technical chops and that gave him the ability to create whimsical objects. I was privileged to create one piece of work with him collaboratively, which I titled *Whimsy* after his passing. The piece incorporates metalwork and pearlescent paint. In keeping with Giles' tendency toward playfulness, he suggested we include a toggle switch on its side.

Giles Gilson was my friend and my teacher. He is and will be greatly missed by those who knew him. Yet, like all great artists, his work will endure in the eyes of many. I miss you "vertical mon." ■



**Giles Gilson and Bernard David,**  
*Whimsy*, Basswood, walnut, stainless steel,  
6" × 6¼" (15cm × 16cm)

Photo: Terence Roberts

Collection of Lisa and Bernard David