

An interview with David Ellsworth
By Steve Worcester

I first met David Ellsworth at the AAW symposium in San Antonio. Brad (from Wood World), my son Nate, then about 11 and I watched him demonstrate his hollow form tools as he easily cut away the waste to reveal a beautiful hollow form in the log. After the "show" as is customary, we went up to check it all out, and maybe eavesdrop a little on the masters.



Well David had quite a group up there, about 20 people ogling and talking. Here I was, a man whom I idolized for his abilities, in his aura. With all these people around, David turned his attention to my son, gleefully shoved out his hand and introduced himself. "Hi, I'm David Ellsworth" he said. While my son, not realizing exactly who this bearded man was, introduced himself, I was in awe. He shut out the crowd, to meet my son.

At that moment, I figured that since I really could fly anywhere in the US to learn woodturning from anyone, thanks to frequent flier miles, I wanted to learn from him. The next year, instead of going to the AAW symposium, I spent the money on going to David's for a class.

In the small town of Quakertown, Pennsylvania on a dark, tree covered road, is the home of David and Wendy Ellsworth. On 20 some odd acres of deciduous forest is a large open house, designed by David, two workshops, his -n- hers, a garage and some other assorted buildings. Another gentleman, and myself were the only ones that showed up the night before for the "getting to know one another" session.

To our luck, we would be the only ones in his class for the next three days. A 2 to 1 student teacher ratio! Well, through out meals and turning over the next three days, I can say that that first impression of a genuinely caring and humble individual was dead on. You couldn't meet a nicer guy (teacher?). I would like to go back this year for round 2 of instructions. Where else can you sit in the "forest" on his back porch, and have a beer with David Ellsworth.



By the way, he is also a founding, and lifetime member of the AAW.

By the way, his house is filled with art, in every medium, from the current day masters of their field. You see, David is called upon to be a jury member for art shows and to demonstrate quite often, and he picks up a little something every time. From a Sam Maloof rocking chair to a Vic Wood square edged platter, to an 8' tall glass and iron sculpture, he has a heck of a collection.

Anyway, I e-mailed David with the idea of an email-based interview for this newsletter, and he cheerfully agreed. I will publish a few questions a month, for however long it takes to get it all out of my system. Could be a while. Starting with an impressive resume, and a few of the first questions. By the way, thanks David, and I hope to be back this year!

Steve: When you first started school, what did you plan on doing with a degree in fine arts?



David: I came from an academic family, so it was assumed that I would teach sculpture, drawing and design at the university level. Job. Security. Insurance. Benefits. Family. Dog. Teaching was the primary goal of all MFA candidates...and part of the origin of the endless controversy over whether universities train students to become teachers or artists.

Steve: Was wood your first choice for a medium, and if not, how did you come to start working with wood and on the lathe?

David: I began working with wood in early childhood. Tree limbs and off-cuts from the boards my father used to build the mountain cabin in Colorado were my materials...along with nails, screws, wire, and the usual assortment of hand tools. Mostly I made containers for small animals I would catch, plus lots of weapons; bows, arrows, tomahawks, knives, whips, slings, rifles. It was part of the cowboy and Indian 'thing' of the '50's. I was always the Indian, so I also made leather clothing. To my playmates, I was always the "maker". Was first introduced to the lathe in the 8th grade, 1958. First project was a 24" diameter tray from 24 pieces of walnut. Turned avidly throughout high school, then stopped to do three years in military and eight years college. Worked mainly then in stone, metal casting and cast polyester resins. Turned off-and-on last two years of graduate school and in 1973, instead of a university job, I was hired by ceramist Paul Soldner to be the "Woodworker in Residence" at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass, Colorado. Here I taught furniture design and construction (mostly by the seat of my pants), and developed the design for the salt-pepper-sugar shaker set that would become the production item I would support myself on for the next three years. Made about 5,000 sets. \$18 per set, retail. Started working on the concept of "hollow forms" with bent tools in early 1975. There was no one to go to to study with, so it took me over a year of full time turning to develop the bent tools and learn how to hollow the shapes I wanted to make.

Interview with David Ellsworth, Part 2

This is part two of the email interview with world renown woodturner and artist David Ellsworth. What I figured was that now that he was comfortable with my (lack of?) style, I would ask some tougher, more controversial questions. I sent them on the premise that if he didn't want to answer them, for whatever reason, he didn't have to. My intent wasn't to stir the pot of controversy stew, but to get answers to my burning questions, oftentimes related to artist's on the inventive and innovative edge. It's not like I have my Hard Copy cameras in his face on national television, and to some of them, he had every right not to reply.

My initial statements of David being a truly humble man, rang through. I was somewhat surprised, and very pleased with the answers.

Steve: I think about production and art as two different ways to make a living in turning. First you have to have a name to be able to put food on the table as an

artist so most do production work. What was the art climate for woodturning like "back then"?



David: Imagine yourself as a woodturner, circa 1975... You probably make shallow bowls and platters out of laminated walnut and cherry, each with green felt on the bottom to cover up the screw holes; if you happen to know another woodturner, "he" is probably an old classmate from high school; you 'scrape' while he 'gouges', so you rarely speak; you've never heard of a burl; the term 'vessel' won't cross your path for another five years.

Richard Kagan in Philadelphia has the only woodworking gallery in the country, but you can buy a 9" diameter lignum vitae bowl by Bob Stocksdales at Fraser's Department Store in Berkeley for \$49.95; the Rhinebeck Craft Show in New York is still a sleepy little table-top street show in Stowe, Vermont; Fine Woodworking Magazine is two years old and has just pictured a thick-walled bowl made out of something called 'spalted' wood... the maker is a young guy named Mark Lindquist, and it was turned down with a body grinder.

The Amaranth Gallery and Workshop, Albert LeCoff's production shop in Philadelphia, is a year away from holding his first Turning Symposium.; you've probably never heard of Arrowmont, Penland, Haystack, or the Anderson Ranch, much less James Prestini, Rude Osolnic, Dale Nish, Ed Moulthrop, Melvin Lindquist, Richard Raffan, or Stephen Hogbin.; David Ellsworth has just finished his first successful hollow form. The AAW is still eleven years down the road.

Looking at 1975 from another perspective... Twenty-five years ago, Peter Volkous revolutionized the concept of the clay 'pot' as 'sculpture'; Paul Soldner began to develop 'raku' in clay twenty years ago; Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi from Japan and Bernard Leach from England have already visited America, and Yanagi and Leach have published the legendary book "Unknown Craftsman"; Jon Holstein has helped establish traditional American quilts as a legitimate art form through an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York; Alfred University in New York is well into its second generation of graduate students in contemporary ceramics; many academic artists now making craft in all media have begun leaving the universities to form the Studio Craft Movement; the Modern Movement of Contemporary Craft is well into its second decade. Again, you're a woodturner, and the most common questions you get are: "Is it wood?", and "What do I do with it?".

Steve: Talk a little about the process of coming up with the hollow tools; was it a need you had? Often we think up tools to solve a specific problem.

David: Creative people are problem solvers, and my development of the bent tools came out of the problem that I simply couldn't make a hollow form with an opening smaller than the overall diameter with conventional straight scrapers. The desire to make hollow forms evolved from my experiences in ceramics as an undergraduate. Remember that I was trained as an artist, not as a woodturner. I



was conditioned to developing 'objects' and necessarily, the tools to make them if they didn't already exist.

Steve: You see so many other types of hollow tools on the market today from the likes of Jamieson, Hugh McKay (Isn't this the articulated cutter system?) and such, have you tried them? Any feedback? Any new design we will see from David Ellsworth?

David: The first adaptations that evolved from my bent tools came from Harry Arnal in Australia and Jerry Glaser in California. Arnal developed what he called a 'gate leg' system that used a flat bar for the tool shaft and a slotted tool rest that prevented the bar from rotating downward. It worked, but was by no means delicate. Using the tool gave people the impression that you were supposed to "conquer" the interior (with technology), so people did. The results were hollow forms with large openings and absolutely gross interiors; plus stiff shoulders and necks and very sore arms. Jerry's design was later manufactured by Dennis Stuart as the 'hooker' tool. This was/is a much more user-friendly tool and based on the principal that the tip won't dip down if it's kept in line with the shaft. The only new bent tool designs since have come from Melvin Firmager, Hugh McKay and Frank Sudol. All of these tools are designed to perform the hollowing process in some manner and all of them do a very good job.

It's exciting to see these developments, because I know that people are 'thinking' in ways that satisfy a variety of needs for a variety of people. But keep in mind that EVERY tool has its advantages and disadvantage, including my own, and that all tools are simply a means to an end. I am reminded that you can make a beautiful glazing brush from the hair of a dog's tail, some thread and a twig...but you still have to paint the pot!

Steve: Often in the wood turning circles we talk about form designs and speak of specific artists as their design. Granted there seems to be (or used to) a limited amount of shapes you can make, with only the angles varying, if we think in terms of "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery", what do you think about those that imitate your form design?

David: I am, and always have been, a teacher. So my primary concern when working with students is to focus on their opportunities to grow. I can teach people the mechanics of turning, and if they stand at the lathe they can learn how to perform these tasks. That's the easy part. Helping someone grow aesthetically, creatively, is much more difficult. It requires encouraging people to give themselves the "right to grow" in a manner that has nothing to do with hours spent at the lathe. This involves internal growth, including the right to take chances, to succeed and to fail.



Traditional to the fine arts, students have always been discouraged from copying the work of their teachers. I take a different approach. I encourage my serious students to produce my work— exactly if possible! Why? Because I originally set my own standards at a very high level and I know what I learned of myself to achieve those standards. If a student can do the same thing, they will establish a pattern

of achieving their own high standards. And when they say, "Now I see what it takes to do this well...", they won't be discovering 'me' in their work, but that special element of themselves that will carry them beyond me and into themselves. When that single flicker of self-awareness occurs, it becomes a revelation; it is the transition between the making of craft and what it takes to make art possible. Those who achieve it will end up contributing to a stronger field through their work. Those who don't will end up with objects that far exceeded their original expectations. Those who don't try will continue to be satisfied with the work they are now doing, simply because that work already represents personal achievements they have made independently and outside the challenge of the student-teacher relationship. In other words, there are many ways to learn and many reasons for learning. But there must always be room for all people to grow. Thus, if I were to look down on people who attempt copy my work, I might as well be looking down on myself for not giving them the right to experience some reason or need to grow.

Steve: What about the "Irish grind". Which came first, you or Liam O'Niell? What have you done to this seemingly radical departure from the standard bowl gouge design?

David: I was first exposed to the 'side grind' gouge through Liam O'Neill in 1982. He, Michael O'Donnell, Richard Raffan and Ray Key had all been working with the concept in the UK, and each had their own variations of the design. What I did was to further modify the tip shape by broadening the bevel and arching the edge until I got the right proportion between edge sharpness to bevel durability. This is particularly important because I use the edge of the gouge at an elevated angle of 45 degrees across the wood to 'shear' the surface for the final cut on the outside of a form. None of the other turners did this because they were trained in the traditional manner of rubbing the bevel.

The shearing cut doesn't use the bevel against the wood, but it does use the mass of the bevel beneath the edge to support the cut; that is, to keep it from vibrating against the wood. Equally important, my design allows the gouge to be used horizontally instead of at an elevated angle on three of its four primary cuts. This means that the force of the cut is now generated directly into the tool rest instead of into the turner, with the result that the cut is more efficient and the turner is less fatigued. In fact, the tool is so specific that if you put the same long edge on a gouge with a smaller diameter shaft, you lose the mass that's needed to support the edge and, therefore, the efficiency of the tool to do a proper job.

What's most important about this gouge design is that it was developed out of need and by people 'in the field', rather than on a drawing board. While its design is unique compared to traditional bowl gouges, its efficiencies are based on sound design principles.