

# Far from the Tree:

*An Evolutionary View of Contemporary Woodturning*

STORY BY  
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I have an 18th-century farm-made chair with a ladder back and turned rails. Turning, a technique several thousand years old, is a descriptive term: A material, usually wood, turns against a stationary lathe (or cutting edge) and material is removed. In my chair the knobs are of slightly different sizes and shapes, a human and appealing touch.

Technological advances have perfected the turning process and continuously extended its range. Today, computerized lathes can produce endlessly identical turned objects of little intrinsic value. At the same time, the technique is being employed in highly individual works demonstrating extraordinary skill, remarkable attention to detail, sculptural sensibilities and unapologetic artistic aspirations.

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## Messler Gallery

Center for Furniture Craftsmanship  
Rockport, Maine  
September 14–November 22, 2007  
[www.woodschooll.org](http://www.woodschooll.org)

Left:  
**Robyn Horn**  
*Fractured Millstone*  
2000  
Redwood Burl  
{h. 3½ in, dia 15 in.}







Top Left:  
**Mark & Melvin Lindquist**  
*Early Turned Bowl*,  
1969–1971  
Spalted Maple Burl  
{h. 5¼ in, dia 11¼ in.}

Top Right:  
**Merryl Saylan**  
*Vessel*, 2004  
Mahogany, paint  
{h. 23½ in, w. 20 in,  
d. 2½ in.}

Bottom:  
**Ed Moulthrop**  
*Untitled*, 1994  
Georgia hackberry  
{h. 3½ in, dia 4 in.}

It has not always been so. “Far from the Tree” is an exhibition demonstrating the breadth of technical and aesthetic possibilities in wood turning since its emergence from chiefly utilitarian origins in the 1950s. Today the only possible restraints are imposed by limitations of imagination or skill—limitations not in evidence here.

Jacques Vesery, a leading wood artist, and Kevin Wallace, an independent curator, author and director of the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts in Ojai, California, are co-curators of what they describe as a “visual history” of the craft. Originating at the Messler Gallery of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship—the rapidly expanding facility founded by furniture maker, Peter Korn—the exhibition will travel to at least three, and perhaps four more venues in the United States.

Those who parented the emergence of the craft from its more humble roots—turners James Prestini, Ed Moulthrop, Rude Osolnik and Bob Stocksdale—are at the center of a spiral arrangement of stylistic chronology. While Stocksdale’s work searched

for the unpretentious essence of “bowl,” Osolnik’s forms exhibited a mid-century sympathy, Moulthrop focused on creating swollen, volume-filled vessels, and Prestini perfected an icy, vitreous elegance.

Melvin Lindquist and Mark Lindquist, father and son, claimed ground in the craft’s evolution by exploiting natural boundaries and flaws inherent in their material to produce seminal works of organic inevitability. Traditionalists—both creators and collectors—still expect the inherent beauty of wood grain and color to be developed in turning, and there are artists, such as David Ellsworth, Christian Burchard, John Jordan, Betty Scarpino, William Luce and Robyn Horn, who oblige. But just as often today these qualities may be equal or subordinated to sculptural, surface or even decorative concerns.

Works may incorporate carving, shaping, painting or other embellishing and sometimes no wood grain is visible at all. Paint is applied by Merryl Saylan, Al Stirt and Mark Sfirri, but the turned vessels of Giles Gilson have an airbrushed ▶







Bottom:  
**Alain Mailland**  
*Dancing Pelagie*, 2006  
African Blackwood  
{h. 11 3/8 in., w. 9 in.}



Top Right:  
**Michael Lee**  
*Object of Our Affection*,  
2006  
Gabon ebony, fine silver  
{h. 5 in., w. 10 1/2 in.,  
d. 3 in.}

Top Left:  
**Ron Fleming**  
*Phalaenopsis Mania*,  
2005  
Mahogany  
{h. 12 in., w. 7 1/2 in.}



exterior that actively denies the wood of which it's made, paradoxically affirming it by the very process of negation.

This spiral display, itself evocative of the turning process, takes you past masterful multiturned objects, such as Hans Wiessflog's *The Boat*, or those both turned and elaborately carved, such as Ron Fleming's *Phalaenopsis Mania*.

At the exhibition's outermost edges are pieces in which the turning process is incidental or forgotten in other pursuits. Michael Lee's *Object of Our Affection* in Gabon ebony, with a silver egg nestled between carved swollen shapes, resembles a pagan cult object. Michael Peterson's *Slot Canyon*, which assembles pieces looking like rough-hewn squared logs within logs, has never seen the lathe. Yet in both turning remains "somewhere in the gestation," as Vesery puts it.

Almost all these "edge" works are capable of seduction by their conceptual originality and the masterful use of technique. Yet I returned again and again to one in particular—*Dancing Pelagie*, by Alain Mailland of

France. This lyrical prancing organism has been both turned and carved of a black wood, the edges of which are blond. This natural contrast has been exploited to its fullest decorative potential. A black, turned jellyfish-like head has blond, fringed edges. From it extend painfully fragile, spindly splayed legs of black, ending in flat black delicate duck feet with naturally frilled blond "toes."

The evolution of this craft has taken place in a brief 60 years—it has scarcely begun—yet looking at this piece it's hard to imagine a way of using a particular piece of wood, aesthetic sensibility and technique to any greater advantage. ✦

*The exhibition travels to the American Association of Woodturners Gallery, St. Paul, Minnesota (January 11–April 18, 2008); the Ohio Craft Museum, Columbus (July 13–August 24, 2008); the Southern Ohio Museum, Portsmouth (September 12–October 31, 2008), and to other venues into 2009.*