

true to **form**

The Life Work of John Jordan  
2012 AAW Honorary Lifetime Member

Kevin Wallace



Untitled, 2011,  
Cherry, 8" x 8"  
(20 cm x 20 cm)

Aspiring artists create. Established artists teach and inspire. Successful artists—like John Jordan—do all of these. Artists affect others in two ways: *creating* work that inspires and *teaching* aesthetic and technical approaches to benefit aspiring artists. John Jordan excels in both.

This year, in recognition of his contributions to the growth of the woodturning field, John Jordan is being made an AAW Honorary Lifetime Member.

The AAW has been a significant part of John's life. He has been involved with many aspects of the organization, including several years on the Professional Outreach Program (POP) committee. He joined the AAW in its first year, and has attended all the national symposiums. In John's words, "I am privileged to be able to call some of the most talented woodturners in the world my friends. They also happen to be a caring, generous group of people."

### A lifetime of contributions

John's contributions as artist and teacher are difficult to separate. He entered the field in what now appears to be a Golden Age of artistic woodturning, when pioneering artists Bob Stocksdale, Ed Moulthrop, and Mel Lindquist were appearing in *Fine Woodworking* alongside the next generation, which included David Ellsworth, William Hunter, and Merryll Saylan. A new language of lathe-turned vessels was emerging, with works defined by an embrace of simple form, exploiting the natural beauty of the material. In a world where woodturning exhibitions can feature dozens of artists and the AAW Instant Galleries boast hundreds of works, it is difficult to imagine a time when the field was small

Untitled, 2010, Carob,  
9" x 7" (23 cm x 18 cm)  
Arkansas Art Center

and the work was just beginning to gain attention.

"It all seems like a huge fortune of timing," says John. "I feel incredibly fortunate that when I started, things were where they were. There weren't a lot of people doing gallery woodturning and the field was small enough to allow me a place to get my foot in."

John found his voice early on, and throughout his career his work has been consistent. A John Jordan creation is easily identifiable. The forms are deceptively simple and utilize texture and carving to create visual and tactile contrasts. John excels in subtle changes of surface enhancement.

"My work tends to evolve rather than take quantum leaps," he says. "Achieving that intangible quality, that the piece is *right*, results from putting emotion and feeling into the work. A simple object can be powerful and emotional, just for what it is. My decorative vessels reflect my interest in surface textures, contrasts, and form and the personal responses that I have to them."

John's early work includes endgrained bottle forms with radial flutes carved on the shoulder, lidded jar forms, and tall textured forms. Recent work is often

Untitled, 2005, Red maple burl, 10" x 8"  
(25 cm x 20 cm)

Carnegie Museum of Art

*My friend Stoney Lamar and I found this wood in Saluda, NC; Mark Gardner and I cut it up and shared it.*

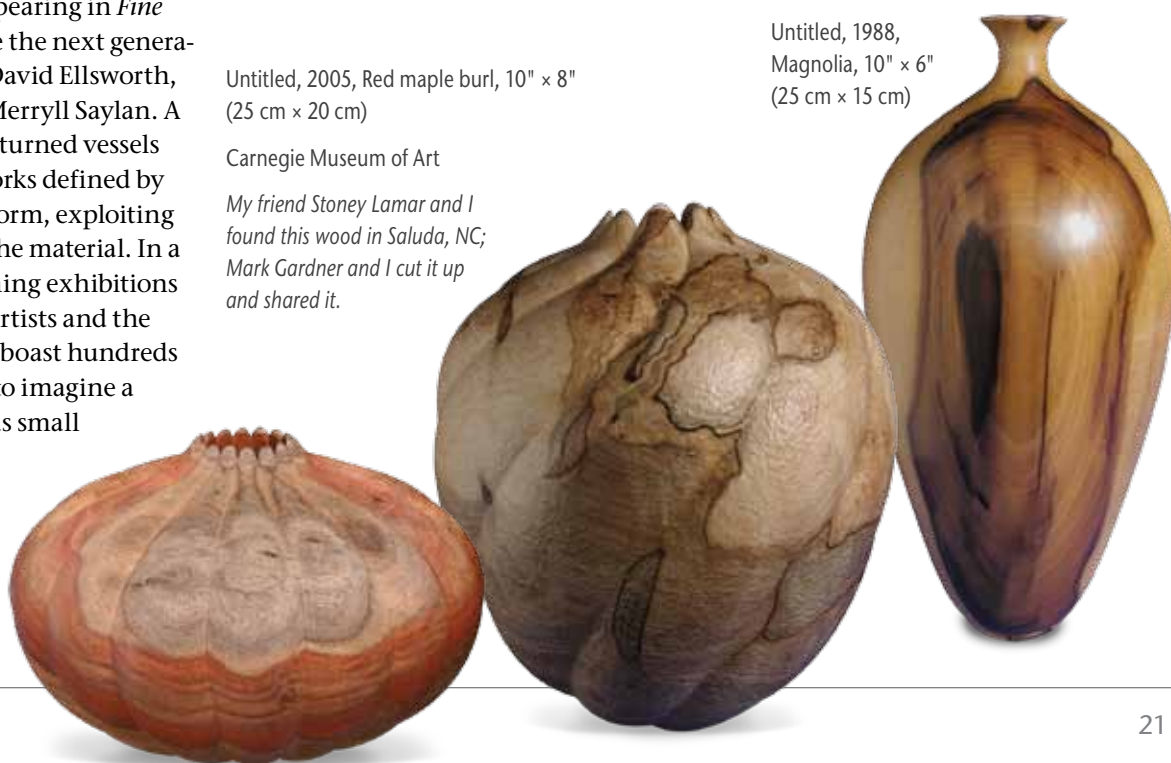
side-grained oriented vessels with a looser quality and feel, and typically feature carved, textured, and wire-brushed surfaces. John sometimes revisits its earlier forms and techniques and combines them with more recent textures or surfaces. The organic aspect of a piece of wood has never overpowered the form and sometimes the works are bleached white or dyed black to accentuate the line of the form.

"I am connected to wood, just as a potter is connected to clay. I use fresh-cut logs; the wood is direct and responsive. ▶



The Jordan family home.

Untitled, 1988,  
Magnolia, 10" x 6"  
(25 cm x 15 cm)





*Bottle on a Stand*, 1990,  
Boxelder, iron (stand  
forged by Joe Miller)  
15" x 6½" (38 cm x 17 cm)

The Contemporary  
Museum, Honolulu,  
Gift of the Lipton Family



section of wood home, I am only concerned with the next piece, not how many pieces I can get from that log. I would rather have one outstanding piece, than ten pretty good ones."

### Craft show beginnings

"I applied to a craft show in Memphis and took my work there," John says of the beginning of his career as a professional woodturner. "That's when I quit my job and started doing craft shows. It was a good time for craft shows. There was a lot of enthusiasm and energy. It was great to know that I had a peer group—people who were

working and doing similar things in different media. I learned a lot, not only from working craft artists but also from the public: People only buy what they are attracted to."

"I did the shows that seemed appropriate for the time," Jordan continues. "The first were local or regional and I offered work for that audience. As my work improved, I started doing high-end shows, such as those at the Smithsonian and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There, the quality of the buyers and

gallery people was on par with what I was making. Museum curators connected with my work, which led to several acquisitions. Craft shows were a formative part of what I do and I wouldn't trade that experience for anything."

### Friendship and aesthetic dialogue

John enjoys spending time with other woodturners outside of shows. Early on he benefited from knowing Helga Winter and Nick Cook. Helga was living nearby in Nashville at the time, and he wanted to get to know her because she was creating interesting work. After meeting, John and Helga were part of a small group that started the Tennessee Association of Woodturners, one of the first AAW chapters. Nick helped simply by letting John hang around with him a couple of days when he first started.

"I got to know Del Stubbs and learned how to make things like the thin-walled goblets," Jordan says. "But there were a lot of artists, William Hunter, David Ellsworth, Todd Hoyer, Michael Hosaluk, who were probably equally influential in one way or another. I always like seeing what Clay Foster is doing, it's often surprising and always good. Al Stirt was an inspiration; I wanted my work to have some

With my knowledge of the material, I can exert a great deal of control over the desired result. I am able to work with surface textures and shapes that would sometimes be difficult in other materials. Effective balance of grain and color, such as sapwood highlights, can make a piece stand out. This careful orientation is also important to minimize the movement as the wood dries. When I bring a large



*Black Jar*, 1992, Wood,  
13" x 10" (33 cm x 25 cm)

Renwick Gallery of the  
American Art Museum,  
Smithsonian Institution

Untitled, Silver maple,  
2005, 13" x 12"  
(33 cm x 30 cm)

Hruska Collection

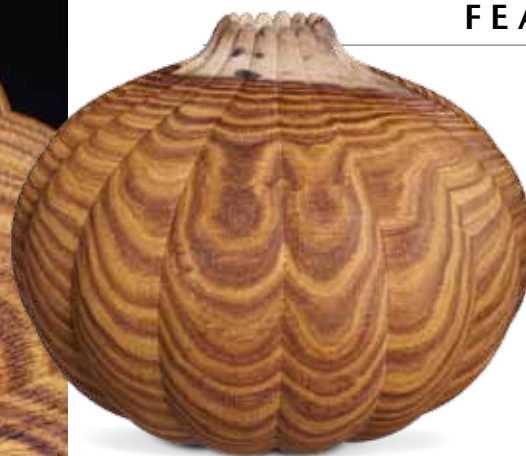


*Black/White Pair*, 2007,  
Ash, bleach, dye,  
13" x 8" (33 cm x 20 cm)

Untitled, 2010, Red maple,  
9" x 9" (23 cm x 23 cm)

Books Collection





Untitled, 2010, Rosewood, 13" x 10" (33 cm x 25 cm)

Long Collection

*Although I primarily use local woods, I've come to enjoy working with Florida rosewood. I select the logs when I travel to Florida.*

of the qualities his has, those subtle, quiet aspects that appeal to the one in ten who stops and carefully looks.”

“The most influential are my friends Robyn Horn, Stoney Lamar, and Michael Peterson,” Jordan continues. “We’re all close and we’ve worked together in various ways. I like being able to see a little bit of what they see through their eyes, as well as the processes involved. Then there are people I have become close to who have supported me, whether by sharing what it’s like to make a living as a craftsman, or with a great gallery owner like Martha Connell, or with the collectors who have been so supportive over the years.”

### **A pocketful of inspiration**

One moment that resonates with John is when he studied a large Philippine ebony bowl by Bob Stocksdale, exhibited in the International Turned

Objects Show in 1988. “It was large and had a slightly flattened rim. The edge of the rim had been rotated against the bandsaw to create light striations. The wood was largely black and the striations were shallow, so the effect was subtle. I’m sure that not even one person in ten saw the subtlety, but I did. I knew I was one of the people he made this piece for—I got that. When I see that quality in other

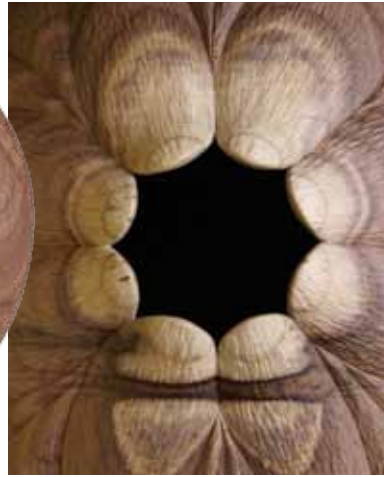
work—jewelry, metalwork, or clay—that excites me.”

John finds inspiration in the world around him: trees and plants, rock formations, coral reefs and sea life, ancient and modern architecture and pots, baskets, and weaving. “I frequent museums in my travels, and enjoy everything from antiquities to modern art,” he says. “I like paintings and sculpture, ethnic objects, as well as custom, antique, restored, and fabricated motorcycles and cars. Anything with pattern, repetition, and texture, including music in many forms. While I don’t often incorporate a direct influence into what I do, I think everything about life does influence a person’s work. As Clay Foster says, ‘It may appear that some people pull ideas out of their pocket, but it’s important to ▶

*“Of the three true friends I have, one is John Jordan. Robert Louis Stevenson said, ‘Quiet minds cannot be perplexed or frightened, but go on in fortune or misfortune at their own private pace, like a clock during a thunderstorm.’ Sometimes John is the clock, sometimes the thunderstorm when forced into it, but he always acts on his own sense of values in a quiet way, unperplexed, and unfrightened. I respect and admire John, and love him dearly.”*

—Clay Foster





Untitled, 2008, Walnut, 8" x 9" (20 cm x 23 cm)

O'Donnell Collection

note they have spent a lifetime filling that pocket.”

Yet, for John, the most powerful influence at any one time is the work he is currently making. “When I am producing work, it never fails to provoke and provide ideas. I’m continually motivated by my curiosity to see what comes next.”

of woodturners were on hand. “I remember that well,” he says. “The whole back of the room was lined up with people like David Ellsworth, Michael Peterson, and Todd Hoyer. I figured if I was comfortable demonstrating there, I’d never worry about being nervous working for a crowd.”

John has demonstrated in at least forty states for clubs, universities, woodworking shows, and art shows. He has made multiple teaching trips to England, France, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, and Australia. “Teaching probably accounts for one-third to one-half of my year,” he says. “I was recently invited to Bogota, Colombia, where I’ll be teaching in a school with young people who are learning a craft to make a living. I’ll be there at least a month. That’s pretty exciting.”

One of the most rewarding aspects of John’s teaching is being regularly approached by individuals who tell him that they first met him years ago in a class, thanking him for the influence it

## Teaching

When asked why he began teaching, John says, “I always knew potters had to make mugs, or a woodworker had to make weed pots or letter openers, in order to survive. I consider teaching to be a replacement for production work.”

Teaching opportunities grew at an astonishing rate. Soon after beginning his career as a woodturner, he was asked to give a demonstration at the Appalachian Center for Craft. Soon, he was teaching weekend workshops, followed by weeklong classes.

“Arrowmont asked me to teach,” he recalls. “Not a lot of people were doing that at the time. I don’t know how many classes I’ve taught at Arrowmont over the years—many, though.”

When he demonstrated for the first time at the AAW symposium at Arrowmont in 1990, the Who’s Who



Untitled, 2002, Boxelder, 10" x 10" (25 cm x 25 cm)

Victoria & Albert Museum

*“Whenever I hear of someone wanting to learn how to turn, I tell them to go see John Jordan before they have an opportunity to develop bad habits. He’s the absolute best I’ve ever seen handle a tool. His work is exquisite and he has made a tremendous contribution to the wood field with his expertise. He and Vicki are truly genuine people, and the kind of friends you can count on whether wood is involved or not.”*

—Robyn Horn

had on their woodturning. John influenced many leading figures in the field in their career. Betty Scarpino says, “I first met John when I was taking a class at Arrowmont from Michael Hosaluk in the mid 1990s. Mike invited John to visit (John lives close to Arrowmont). He arrived on Wednesday, stayed the rest of the week, and offered several informal demonstrations in between quietly carving and sharing his approach to embellishing. I learned techniques from John that I still use in my work.”

John sums up his teaching philosophy, “My emphasis is on teaching techniques for producing work that involve using simple tools and methods, to gain complete understanding of material and tools, along with control and finesse. This approach is preferable to complex methods and brute strength.”

### Home and studio

For the past thirty-four years, John and his wife, Vicki, have lived on a 28-acre farm in a home built in 1806. Their children are the eighth generation to be associated with the house. The dwelling represents an ongoing challenge, requiring John to engage in what he refers to as “real woodworking.” For the first few years, John created his work in a little room off of the porch, but in the 1990s, he completed a 1,000-square-foot modern shop near the house. The building features floor-to-ceiling windows on the north wall and is painted bright white

throughout, with gray floors and heat and air conditioning.

An artist benefits from ideal working conditions, so John added a new turning/carving room, as he started accumulating more metalworking equipment and materials. “It’s best to keep the wood and metal separate,” John advises. “I keep no wood, logs, or blanks in the shop and studio, which helps keep it clean. I used to have a lot of lathes because I taught classes here for a while, but now I have just one,” John continues. “I use a minimum of equipment, relying on a few good tools.” His studio is a bright, clean space, which has a positive impact on his work and state of mind.

### Momentum

A few times a year, in anticipation of upcoming exhibitions, John acquires fresh wood and roughs out vessel forms. “The turning is relative quick compared to the carving,” he says. “I find that momentum is a fairly important part of what I do. When I return from a trip and get back to work, I start slowly . . . it’s hard to just jump into turning. By the same token, when I’m immersed in my work and have momentum, it’s difficult to stop. No matter what is going on in other aspects of my life, when I am turning or carving, I’m happy.”

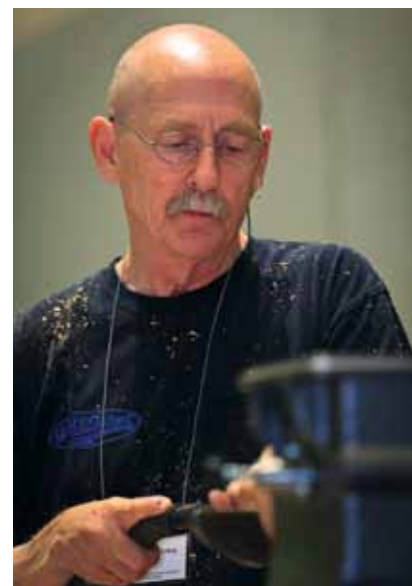
Woodturning is John’s sole source of income. He has managed to support his family for twenty-five years as a woodturner, putting his two children

through college. He also makes specialty hollowing tools that he sells at workshops, through retailers, and on his website.

“It’s basically a lifestyle,” John says. “Most of my close friends are woodturners or artists in other media. A large part of our family’s life is planned around my work. My wife is a partner in the enterprise, and while Vicki doesn’t often get directly involved in pieces, she’s essential in every other aspect; it would be impossible to do it without her hard work and support.”

John produces fifty to sixty one-of-a-kind pieces a year for a market made up of collectors. He rarely produces work on commission, but keeps in mind the expressed interests of various collectors. “I have to produce the sort of work that I’ve got my heart in,” he says. “When you can create things that people like and that you enjoy making—and are able to make a living—it’s a great thing. I’m still amazed when I complete each piece. There’s a sort of wonderment and appreciation and I think, “This is a nice piece I’ve made.” It makes it all worthwhile. ■

*Kevin Wallace is Director of the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts, Ojai, CA.*



John Jordan turning during a demonstration.