

EMBELLISHING TURNED OBJECTS

Betty J. Scarpino

Humans have been painting, burning, carving, and texturing wood for centuries, but contemporary woodturners are just beginning to more fully embrace the possibilities for expression that exist when woodgrain is paired with opaque pigments, woodburning, and texturing. The intrepid turners who are already exploring the delights of adornment are rapidly acquiring new skills and knowledge and, in turn, teaching others. Freely sharing techniques and processes continues to define the rapid growth and expansion of the woodturning field. In this article, I will explore why embellishing is such a satisfying endeavor and give pointers for how you, too, can join the fun.

The concept of limitations

The idea of limitations is a powerful concept for inspiring growth and stimulating discovery. While that statement may seem counterintuitive, Steve Loar, former



Betty Scarpino,

She Moves On, 1996, Maple,
2" × 8" (5cm × 20cm)

I made this turned, cut, and carved sculpture while taking Steve Loar's design class at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in 1996.

Songs were our inspiration, and I selected Paul Simon's "She Moves On."

Photo: Judy Ditmer
Collection of Fleur Bresler

professor of design at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, taught me otherwise. In the 1990s, I took two design classes from Steve, held at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts (arrowmont.org), where I began to understand why limitations in the creative process can be helpful tools.

We woodturners love and appreciate beautiful bowls made with gorgeous wood—burl, curly, crotch, figured, birdseye, exotic. But what if your selection of wood is limited?

When I first started woodturning, the wood available to me was primarily locally harvested and plain-grained. After turning hundreds of everyday-type objects over the course of many years, a desire to make things uniquely expressive began to emerge. To move beyond the limitation of plain-grained wood, I acquired and developed techniques for surface embellishment.

Woodturning itself is also inherently limiting: Lathes are machines that help woodworkers make round objects. I wanted to work with lathe-turned forms, but at the same time make objects that encompassed a



INVITED SYMPOSIUM DEMONSTRATOR

Betty Scarpino will be featured as one of the invited demonstrators at AAW's 2017 International Symposium in Kansas City, Missouri. For more, visit woodturner.org.

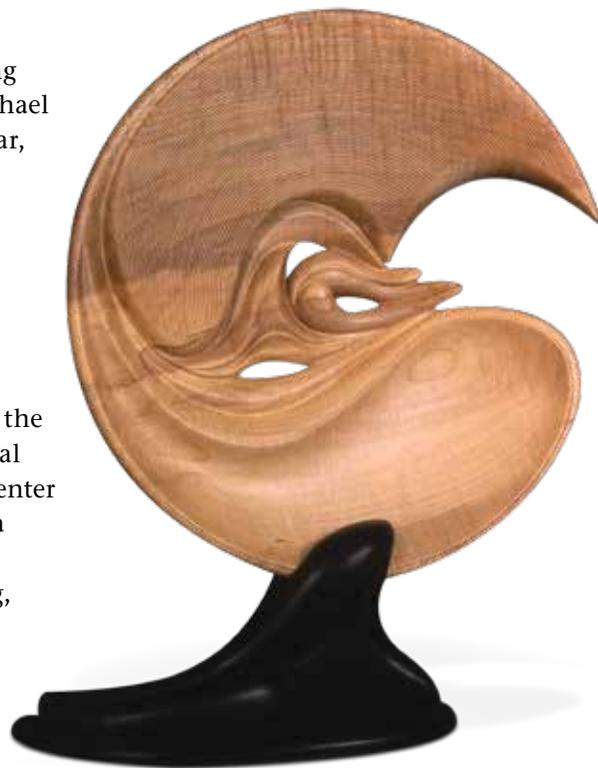
wider range of shape, so I began cutting apart turned plates, bowls, and spindles, carving them, and applying texture and color. Paired with the desire for fuller expression, the limitation of “roundness” helped me develop new ways of considering turned objects—they became sculpture, more visually intriguing than their origins as bowls, plates, and discs.

Another significant limitation some turners face is lathe size. My first lathe would only accommodate wood up to 12" (30cm) in diameter, and yet I wanted my work to *look* larger. I began making stands for my turned-and-carved plates to elevate them above tabletops. Exploring the vast design possibilities with plates and stands led to my *Altered Plates* series, something I doubt would otherwise have happened.

The influence of what other turners are doing cannot be overstated. In the early 1990s, I connected directly with several significant woodturners

who were well into embellishing their work: Merryll Saylan, Michael Hosaluk, John Jordan, Steve Loar, and Giles Gilson. Over time, these woodturners, and others, would influence my work as I began dabbling with paint and texture. It wasn't until this year, however, that the act of painting wood felt completely natural. While participating in the 2016 Windgate ITE International Residency, sponsored by The Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia (centerforartinwood.org), I felt right at home painting, carving, and texturing wood.

Now I freely obliterate grain with paint, cut apart turned forms, and combine wood with other materials. My original reluctance has been transformed to fully embracing surface embellishment for all types of wood. As much as anyone, ▶



Betty Scarpino, *Parting for Circumstances* (*Altered Plates* series) 2003, Maple, 14" × 15" × 4" (36cm × 38cm × 10cm)

Photo: Judy Ditmer
Private Collection

STEVE LOAR, Michigan DIXIE BIGGS, Florida

Formal instruction on design theory can be essential to helping artists develop their work, but for a variety of reasons, the contemporary woodturning field is devoid of that type of information. Unlike the field of ceramics, for instance, woodturning instruction is not offered in art school curricula, and besides, the vast majority of woodturners did not arrive here via art school.

One glowing exception is the art department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where Steve Loar helped start a woodturning program twelve years ago. From the beginning, there was a strong emphasis on design theory, taught by Steve. I was already well acquainted with Steve, having taken two formal-design classes from him at Arrowmont in the early 1990s. As a result of that and of our longtime association as colleagues, Steve invited me to be the first resident artist at IUP in woodturning, and, while there, I also taught IUP's first woodturning class in 2006.

The possibilities of using turned forms for creating sculpture has always intrigued Steve. In 2015, he collaborated with Dixie Biggs to design and make a piece for AAW's member exhibition, *Turning 30*. Over the course of months, he and Dixie exchanged drawings and ideas and deliberated construction. Steve is known for using castoff woodturnings, offered up by various woodturners. Dixie's approach is more intuitive and direct. The resulting piece, *Gold Leaf*, successfully combines the two approaches.

Steve has since retired from IUP, yet he continues to be interested in the woodturning field, where he sees opportunities for sharing his formal-design knowledge and also more actively participating as a maker. For a return appearance, Steve, along with Dixie Biggs, will co-teach a two-week class on woodturning and design at Arrowmont this summer. For registration information, visit arrowmont.org.

—Betty Scarpino



Dixie Biggs and Steve Loar, *Undiscovered Symphony*, 2016, Bleached jacaranda, maple, cherry, 32" × 10" × 14" (81cm × 25cm × 36cm)

Photo: Randy Batista

MERRYL SAYLAN

California

Tower of Bowls II, 2012–2013,
Various woods, almost 7' (2.1m) tall

The tower is vertical-grain fir dyed black, and the base is lightweight MDF (medium-density fiberboard), painted and glazed.

Photo: Kim Harrington
Collection of the Yale University Art Gallery

For many years, I made sets of Japanese tea and rice bowls, five in a set. Eventually, it grew to three sets, fifteen bowls. This one was planned for fifteen bowls. The bowls have one unifying parameter, in this case size—each one fits into a 4" × 4" (10cm × 10cm) opening.

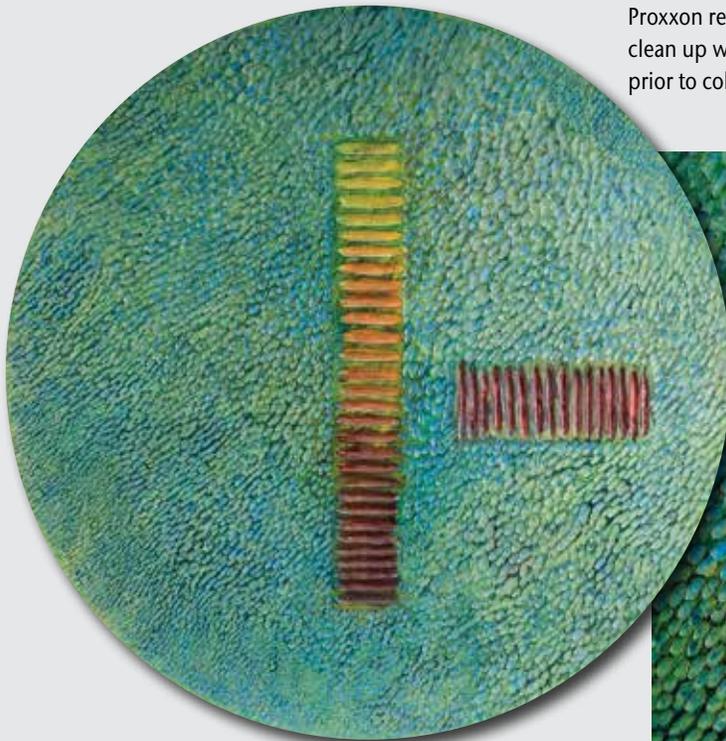
Making multiple bowls has become a great avenue for me to play—each bowl is different from the other: materials, form, painted or natural, dyes or acrylics or milk paints or metal paints, textured or not. Whatever I feel like doing; I do not plan.

In the sets of five, I tried the grayscale with dye on pale woods, I did shades of blue, all black, all bleached. But this tower is complete play. It helps to have an art supply store nearby—or a very big paint cabinet.

The patterns of texture illustrate water movement. I lived adjacent to a bay and there was a salt marsh behind my house. The patterns in the water movement, patterns left in the sand when the tide went out, and my neighbors' piers and docks slowly appeared in my work more and more. They were images I saw closely every day, walking my dog twice a day down to the bay and over to the breakwater near a marina.

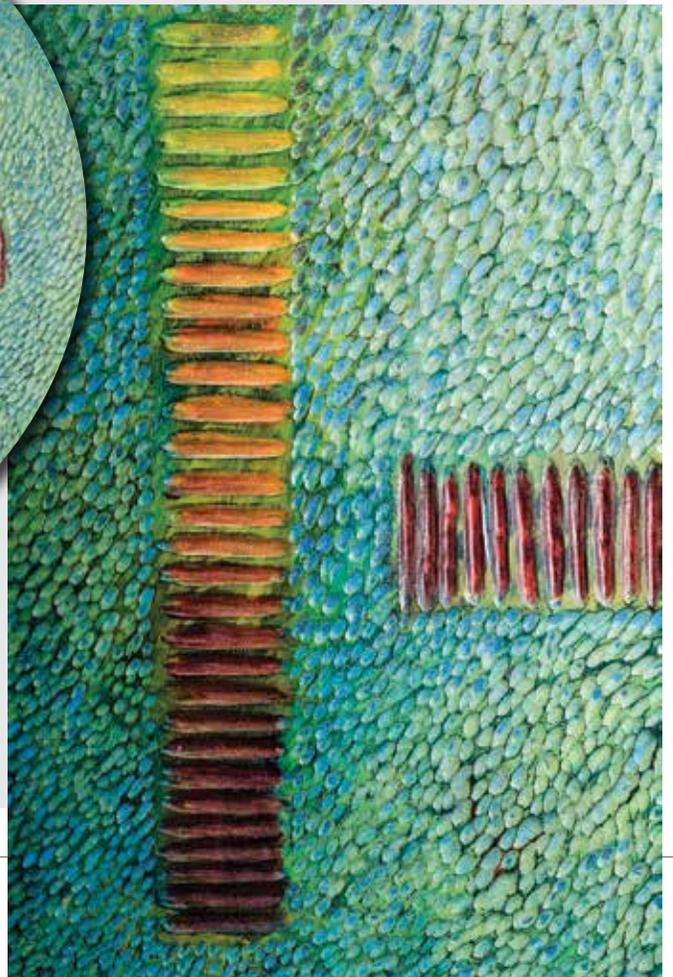
For color, I use several techniques at the same time to achieve depth: I may use dye under milk paint for a color that comes through as I sand the milk paint surface, and then I finish with an oil glaze sealer with additional color to tone the milk paint or to add another layer of color. I find that each layer, like a painter does on a canvas, adds depth and interest.

I do most of my carving with a Foredom carver and various-sized burrs. For the large sections cut for the "pier," I may use a Proxxon reciprocating carver or mini Arbortech rotary carver and clean up with hand gouges. I do all the carving off the lathe and prior to coloring.



Boardwalk at St. Ives, 2007, Mahogany, milk paint,
oil color glazes, 2" × 27" (5cm × 69cm)

Photo: Richard Sargent



though, I understand the disinclination to try new techniques and step outside comfort zones. It took me quite some time. What I can testify to, though, is the excitement I have seen happen when someone ventures into the world of embellishing wood-turned objects. Let's begin with bowls.

Embellish a bowl

A turned wooden bowl is a useful object for investigating which embellishments might appeal to you. First some basics: Bowls have three distinct parts—a rim, a body, and a base. Each of these elements has a variety of options for size and shape. For instance, rims can range from almost nonexistent to extremely wide; thick or thin; round or square; sloped upward or tilted down; natural-edge or formal; and everything in between. After considering the possibilities, be intentional with your choices. A wide rim, for example, can serve as an excellent area to embellish, but a wide rim might not style well with a skinny, tall base. Don't just focus on one element—consider all three together and plan for areas to be embellished. Tying together the various elements into a cohesive whole takes practice.

Grain pattern is an element of design, so consider your choice of wood. For example, it might be challenging to figure out what embellishment will play well with curly maple. Perhaps just dyeing the wood is enough. Painting a flower design onto a curly maple bowl might result in the two elements competing with each other; in that case, choose wood that has plain grain. On the other hand, with careful planning, stylish grain could be enhanced with the right kind of carving, as is the case with Al Stirt's vessels. The rims of natural-edge vessels demand attention and their natural look requires consideration when applying

AL STIRT

Vermont

The focus of my work is the visual and emotional power of pattern. We are pattern-seeking and pattern-making creatures.

I am uncomfortable using the word "embellished" to describe my work. It implies added decoration to a piece that has already been created. The carved and colored attributes of my pieces are integral to the whole, and neither they nor the underlying form are meant to exist without the other.



Tidal Rip Pattern, 1995, Black cherry, milk paint, 3" x 17" (8cm x 43cm)



Ceremonial Bowl, 1987, Maple burl, 2½" x 24" (6cm x 61cm)

embellishments—bark edges are attention-grabbers. Perhaps bark, along with the natural flow and shape of the vessel, is enough. Don't just add design elements for the sake of embellishing. Sometimes a lovely bowl is perfect.

The method you use to attach the bowl to your lathe may dictate its design. Chucks have many uses, but they can also impose limitations. When turning bowls, I always use a thick glue block attached to a faceplate, which allows me to design bowl bottoms without interference from a cumbersome chuck. Bowl bottoms can range from stately and tall to almost nonexistent. A bowl with a round bottom fits perfectly in one hand while munching popcorn with the other. Salad bowls are best made with substantial bases, ideal for containing and serving greens.

Each application of surface embellishment adds one more element to the bowl's design. There is always a

point at which the vessel can become too busy, so knowing when to stop is essential. Even so, most beginners don't go far enough—at first be bolder than may feel comfortable. This is not, by any means, a hard-and-fast rule, but three embellishments are sometimes enough. Here's an example: 1) a raised band turned onto the bowl's rim, 2) carving on that band, and 3) painting the carved area.

Colors, paints, texture

Wood is made up of colors other than brown—yellow and red, for instance—so when thinking about which colors to use, take that into consideration. For a start, the color palette for milk paint has been developed to be compatible with wood. Begin by buying four colors, plus white and black, and give them a try: salmon, federal blue, mari-gold yellow, and tavern green. (One source is milkpaint.com.) My initial foray into using color began with ►

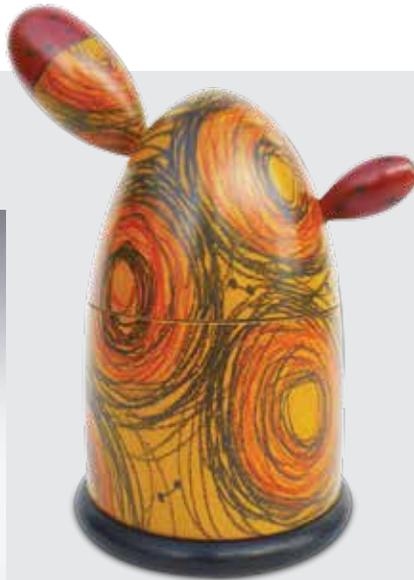
KIMBERLY WINKLE

Tennessee



Green Springy Stool, 2015, Poplar, tavern green and snow white milk paint, 15" × 15" × 15" (38cm × 38cm × 38cm)

Photo: Matthew Tate



Marigold Yellow Teapot Box, 2015, Polychrome poplar, milk paint, 6" × 5" × 4" (15cm × 13cm × 10cm)

I use hardwood, paint, and graphite to create my works. The forms are generally streamlined in order to better play the role of an empty canvas for color and line. I activate the wood by painting and drawing onto its surface. This painting is not an act of irreverence for the material; instead I am interested in realizing its potential as something other than its naked self.

federal blue milk paint, which I used for painting turned eggs blue. The color was perfect, as was the eggshell-like look.

True milk paint comes as a powder, which is mixed with water. Directions are included and a quick Internet search will provide tips. Kimberly Winkle has used milk paint extensively, and her color palate is delightful, so study her work to help you learn.

Color elicits emotional responses. When you are ready to explore beyond beginning basics, determine *your* favorite color and understand why it appeals to you, and then fully explore that color by painting a dozen or more bowls. Let your inner child have fun, and by all means, especially in the first stages, ignore inner and outer critics. Exploration is not a fixed point and a few bowls do not define you or what you make.

For texturing, start with an inexpensive rotary carver (a Dremel tool will suffice) and a few burrs. Any

SHARON DOUGHTIE

Hawai'i

When I started using Celtic knotwork on my vessels, I imagined that, had the Irish been Hawai'i's first inhabitants, petroglyphs might have looked similar to *Echo*. Its finished-wood design would be the petroglyph and contrast with the background of burned-and-ebonized stippling—the lava rock.

I intentionally design the graphics to flow around the vessel, and over time, I became intrigued with weaving knotwork around natural elements in the wood, as illustrated in *By a Thread*, where the graphic design actively responds to the woodgrain. More recently, my work has evolved to become just the embellishment—the knotwork becomes the vessel, as in *Weave*.



Weave, 2017, Mango, 4 3/4" × 10 1/2" (12cm × 27cm)



Echo, 2005, Norfolk Island pine, 2 1/2" × 13" (6cm × 33cm)

Collection of Hawai'i State Art Museum

By a Thread, 2011, Norfolk Island pine, 3 3/4" × 11" (10cm × 28cm)

Private Collection



rotary-type texture can be applied under or over paint or scribbled onto the entire bowl. Most often, I only texture a small area of a bowl, such as a raised band on a rim—I like the contrast of smooth next to rough. If you struggle with texturing techniques, take a class or workshop from an expert. She will guide you to which tools and supplies you need for learning her techniques.

Carving is also a texture and can be accomplished with minimal tools. Buy one or two small carving gouges and make shavings until patterns emerge. Then make more shavings. Carving can be done under or over paint, and like any other techniques, practice and playfulness are key.

Curiosity, perspective, and discovery

Often when I am demonstrating embellishing techniques, I get questions that begin with, “What if?” This curiosity is essential—not knowing can be fun, and in the process of figuring things out, discovery will happen. After acquiring techniques from others, explore on your own to find out *what if?*

A change of perspective will help you see your work differently. By “seeing differently,” I mean truly seeing what you are looking at, without labeling, naming, or subjecting the object to quick evaluation and judgement. Labels and names suffice to define objects, but labels can limit how you view possibilities. A hollow vessel is much more than just a hollow vessel. Among other possibilities, it contains two or more forms when cut apart in a vertical spiral. *What if* you make a hole in the top and bottom and combine the result with another form or paint and carve the exterior and interior?

DONNA ZILS BANFIELD

New Hampshire

I do not have a single *ah ha* moment that delivered the idea for my *It Satisfied My Soul* series. The pattern evolved over many years, probably starting in 2006, with learning how to use woodburning tips for something other than signing my name. I began drawing patterns on scraps of wood and then experimented with what those patterns looked like on scrap bowls and other turnings. Eventually I drew a complete pattern, a leaf outline.

The first time I stippled the interior of a leaf pattern was after a hands-on workshop with Binh Pho in 2010. He introduced me to the NSK Presto and coloring with an airbrush. At that time, however, I single-mindedly focused on using the NSK to apply stipple patterns on leaves. It would be several more years before color became part of my work.

My Soul Series fully came into being in 2014, when I combined all the things I loved about being a maker: woodturning, drawing patterns, and pyro-engraving them using woodburning tips, creating negative space (for some vessels), applying precious-metal leaf, and using acrylic paint. Every step in the process is a journey of meditation as I become engrossed in each embellishment, methodically progressing to completion. I am never in a hurry, although my thoughts often wander to planning the next vessel.



It Satisfied My Soul No. 9, 2016, Birch, pearlescent acrylic and automotive interference paint, 2¾" × 9½" (7cm × 24cm)

Some of my most interesting work happened because my mind was open to discovery. Discovery is linked to curiosity and perspective. For instance, there were times when I took a break for lunch, left my workshop, came back, and saw the object I was working on differently. Perhaps I had inadvertently placed it next to an unrelated object or it was resting upside down. Wow! I could then *see* the original object as something entirely different. This kind of discovery happens when you learn to view objects from not-your-usual perspective, when you have ventured beyond incessant internal thinking to truly *see* your surroundings.

Uncertainty is part of the equation, and most of us block uncertainty. Well, I do anyway. Accepting that it is okay not to know, however, is liberating, especially when you are the one person in the room brave enough to ask, *what if?* While the answer to your question may be informative, the asking helps let loose curiosity—in yourself and in others.

Practice and play often

When first adopting a new technique, attempts are often amateurish, uneven, and unintentional-looking; however, I like to think of them as playful. Over time, and with practice, mastery will happen. ►

ANDI WOLFE

Ohio

The natural world offers many inspirations, especially when examined at high magnification. I am a botanist by day and a part-time woodturner in whatever spare time I can glean. My work has focused on the use of surface enhancements that employ botanical motifs. Some inspirations are obvious, such as a botanical print motif to illustrate various flowering stages of a particular plant. Other designs are less obviously botanical, unless one is used to seeing plants at the microscopic level. I sometimes enhance a turning by carving a textural motif inspired by cellular structures of plants. Most recently, I have been carving botanical designs into my turnings in 3D.



Biophilia, 2008, Ginkgo, 5" x 4½" (13cm x 11cm)

Turned, separated, and carved, *Biophilia* was inspired from ocean life and pollen grains.



Unstony Tafoni, 2015, Bigleaf maple, 2" x 6¾" (6cm x 17cm)

Tafoni is a geological weathering pattern where small cave-like structures are "carved" into granular rock, typically found along seashores where sandstone, limestone, or granite rock comes into contact with saltwater.



Lignum Essentiate, 2010, Bigleaf maple burl, 3¼" x 3½" (8cm x 9cm)

The title of this piece reflects the inspiration for its carved surface—tracheids, one of the cell types for wood. These elongated cells are pointed on each end, and the cell walls are dotted with pores to allow water to percolate from cell to cell.

Along the way, take delight in your first attempts, where discovery can be informative. Eventually, form and embellishment will meld together to create a cohesive whole.

The woodturning field is replete with possibilities to let yourself be influenced. From the work of early practitioners to current embellishers, color abounds, texture enhances, and carving showcases grain patterns. Research the work of woodturners whose techniques you admire and want to acquire. Techniques belong to everyone, but it is essential to understand that someone else's *personal style* belongs to him or to her. Copying another artist's work, other than for practice, robs you of the excitement of discovering your own vocabulary of expression. Jerry Bennett wrote an excellent article for *AW* on the topic of copying in the April 2013 issue.

If you haven't yet done so, figure out what you like, what inspires *you*, and then doggedly follow that attraction. Andi Wolfe is a biologist; her work microcosmically reflects that. Dixie Biggs' work is highly influenced by her interest in botany. As much as I love Dixie's work, however, I have zero desire to carve a leaf. Instead, I am attracted to abstract forms.

Spend time in your shop, hands-on, fully immersed in making shavings, carving, texturing, and painting. This is where you will discover your own particular interests and transfer them into designs for bowls and platters ... over time and with practice and playfulness. ■

Betty J. Scarpino lives, carves, embellishes, and writes in Indianapolis. More of her work can be seen on her website, bettyscarpino.com or on Instagram @bettyscarpino.com.