BETTY SCARPINO

2020 AAW Honorary Lifetime Member

Malcolm Zander

The AAW Board of Directors at its discretion confers honorary lifetime membership to persons who, in its judgement, have made extraordinary contributions to the American Association of Woodturners and the advancement of woodturning. This year, the honor goes to Betty Scarpino, in recognition of her significant work with the AAW and her influence on the wood art field as an artist, demonstrator, speaker, juror, teacher, writer, and editor. The award will be conveyed to Betty during the 2021 AAW Symposium in Omaha, Nebraska.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

A curious mind

Betty was born in Washington State, one of four sisters, and attended high school in Kalispell, Montana, where her father had a sporting goods store. A fifth-grade English teacher encouraged her to write, and another favorite subject was math. In 1975, early in her marriage, Betty took part-time courses in math at the University of Missouri. This grew into full-time enrollment because of her increasing interest in woodworking classes, and she entered the program in industrial arts.

Around 1979, nearing the completion of her degree, Betty took several sculpture classes in the art department. A lathe languished in a back room, and after she got to know her instructor, she suggested to him that art could be made from woodturnings. The instructor disagreed emphatically, but this only reinforced Betty's view, and ever since, she has endeavored to prove her conviction.

That early interaction illustrates a key facet of Betty's character—a strong sense of curiosity and a willingness to question established norms. As she wrote in her April 2017 *AW* article, "Embellishing Turned Objects," "[Curiosity] is essential—not knowing can be fun, and in the process of figuring things out, discovery will happen. ... Accepting that it is okay not to know is liberating, especially when you are the one person in the room brave enough to ask, *what if*?"

Early turning experiences

Betty graduated with her degree in industrial arts in 1981. Towards the end of this college period, she took numerous courses in English literature for pleasure, plus courses in drawing and in clay and wood sculpture. By this time, she had made many pieces of furniture and had also learned how to use a lathe.

Betty with sons Sam (left) and Dan (right), 2019.

In 1984, her first son, Sam, was born (now an assistant professor at Northeastern University, with a research background in infectious diseases and epidemiology). In 1987, in Indianapolis, her second son, Dan (now a senior automotive test engineer in Michigan), was born. Betty had already joined the AAW in 1986 and connected locally with Dick Gerard as founding members of AAW's Indianapolis chapter. With the help of a former brother-in-law, Betty turned her one-car garage into a woodshop, which includes a large side window, front and back doors, and a skylight. She painted the floor in swirls of leftover pink paint. In the early 1990s, she began reading biographies of women artists (Hepworth, Nevelson, O'Keeffe), trying to figure out how, as a 40-year-old mother with two young children, she could be an artist (without having earned an MFA).

In 1994, Betty received an EOG grant from the AAW to take a class at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and selected Michael Hosaluk's class to learn his methods and techniques. Michael remembers the occasion well:

I think it was her first woodturning class and the two Bobs made a female figure with very exaggerated proportions. Betty and Susan reciprocated with a male figure titled Golden Boy that put them in their place. That was an unforgettable session, where we all learned so much from each other. She is always giving and fun to be with.

In Hosaluk's class, Betty had a *what if* moment and cut apart her first turning, making a puzzle bowl and fulfilling a desire to deconstruct a turned object, which was to become an important aspect of her future work.

Betty returned to Arrowmont a few years later to attend two design classes taught by Steve Loar. These classes had a major influence on Betty, and she and Steve have often worked together since. Steve views Betty as the natural heir to Stephen Hogbin and his groundbreaking deconstruction of turned forms. He states, "Betty has become a powerhouse of influence, creating consistently engaging and increasingly large work."

Artistic development

The years 1994 to 2000 were highly productive for Betty, and there was time to experiment. Executive Director Emeritus and co-founder of The Center for Art in Wood Albert LeCoff became familiar with Betty's evolving work and invited her to participate on an artists' panel at the 1997 World Turning Conference, organized by the Wood Turning Center (now The Center for Art in Wood). Albert recalls:

Betty and Michelle Holzapfel were balanced by seasoned veteran artists—Connie Mississippi and Merryll Saylan. The panel raised and discussed issues that would become integral to Betty's future work, which became more narrative.... A second invitation to the Center's 1999 and 2001 Turned Multiples exhibitions followed, and in 1999 Betty participated as an artist in the Center's residency program, the Windgate International Turning Exchange (ITE), where she explored large-scale sculpture and collaborative work. Her seminal sculpture, Bittersweet, *was added to the Center's museum collection.*

In 2016, Betty returned as the ITE's resident photojournalist, only the second person in the history of the residency to participate in this prestigious event twice. She recorded the group's activities with photos, a blog, and sculptural interpretations. Her new work included woodcut prints as well as sculpture. ▸

A professional video of Betty Scarpino, Judy Ditmer, and Michelle Holzapfel, recorded in 1993, has been made available on AAW's YouTube channel. *Signatures in Wood* shows three remarkably self-assured and focused young women, who later came to build serious careers in the wood art field. View the video at tiny.cc/SignaturesinWood (URL is case sensitive) or by scanning the QR code.

Bittersweet, 1999 ITE, Walnut, 19¼" × 16" × 3½" (49cm × 41cm × 9cm)

The Center for Art in Wood Museum Collection, Donated by the Artist

Photos: John Carlano

IMPRESSIONS: Michaela Crie Stone: Blue Flow, 2016, Woodcut print on handmade paper, 15" × 19½" (38cm × 50cm)

Photo: John Carlano

Betty at the ITE in 1999 (left) and 2016 (right).

Photos courtesy of The Center for Art in Wood

Betty at the Chicago SOFA exhibition, 2017.

During the seventeen years between her two ITE residencies, Betty's work had evolved from primarily front/back turned-and-carved objects to more in-the-round 3D sculptures, viewable from all angles with each viewpoint integrated to the whole. In moving from woodturning to non-turned sculpture, Betty has taken a similar path as others such as Michael Peterson and Benoît Averly, for whom the final form is always paramount, and the techniques used to attain it are simply assumed. Betty's work has become increasingly large and distinctive; she has become the modern-day successor to her avatar, the British sculptress Barbara Hepworth. Betty currently has work in more than twenty major museums as well as in many major private collections, has been included in scores of important exhibitions, has been featured in numerous publications, has written extensively, and has taught and demonstrated widely—from Arrowmont to Anderson Ranch and from SOFA to the Smithsonian. Albert LeCoff describes her as "a role model of turning, sculpture, and a thinking artist."

Betty standing next to *Dialogue of Desire*, 2006, Butternut, 7' (2m) tall, during the awards ceremony at Indiana Artists Club's Annual Members Exhibit, 2019, Saks Art Gallery, Indianapolis. Her sculpture won third place. Permanent collection of Indiana State Museum.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

Editor

Few will know that Betty Scarpino has been editor of *American Woodturner* twice—first in 1990 to 1993, when *AW* was a simple volunteer newsletter. Betty had been working as a part-time editorial assistant at a history journal, where she had learned some editing skills. She applied for the *AW* editorship but insisted on it being a paid position and also that the editor attend the AAW Board meetings (this has been the case ever since). She saw *AW* then as being a vehicle for recording the history of the growth of the AAW and of the woodturning field. As such, it would differ from other woodturning publications in being the Journal of the AAW.

Betty left this first editorship in 1993 to focus on her turning and sculpture. Sixteen years later, in 2009, she returned to *AW* after having been a contributing editor on woodturning for *Woodworker's Journal* for three years. She immediately engaged a professional proofreader along with Albarella Design for design and print management. Next, she implemented a policy of inclusiveness, deliberately widening the authorship and scope of the Journal. She ran articles by a 15-year-old and a 90-year-old member. She included articles on basic topics like spindle turning and finishes, as well as more advanced and far-reaching subjects like Derek Weidman's amazing lathe-sculpted animals and Terry Martin's fascinating article on woodturning in China. The *AW* was infused with more artwork yet balanced with solid coverage of woodturning fundamentals.

During Betty's second tenure at *AW*, she worked closely with Board member and publications committee chair Jean LeGwin, who recalls:

> *When she assumed the role as editor, Betty was tasked with taking the Journal from being a quarterly publication to a bi-monthly. She was able to do that without missing a beat! She solicited content on a wide range of topics from a large number of authors, while maintaining very high standards of substance and style.*

Steve Loar adds:

> *What was considered to be appropriate content, and its balance within each issue, had been fought over for years, and under Betty's firm presence and dedication to fairness, many of those brush fires and antagonisms were extinguished.*

Working from a simple MacBook laptop and cluttered desk (often in pajamas and wearing bunny slippers), Betty edited hundreds of articles over the six years from 2009 to 2014. Shortly after she stepped down, she wrote:

> *It's a huge responsibility, and the repetitive, relentless deadlines eventually take their toll. The skills required to be a successful editor of the Journal are multiple and varied—there are only a very small number of truly qualified woodturning-journal editors.*
>
> *The Journal is unique in many ways. For instance, many articles are written by amateurs—amateur authors, photographers, woodturners. Training these people is time-consuming. But, it's highly rewarding. One of my greatest pleasures as editor was cultivating new authors, people who had never written before. I remember the excitement of a turner who saw his or her article in print for the first time. They were always so willing to send a draft and numerous photos, and expressed enthusiasm when I requested re-photographing to achieve visual clarity.*
>
> American Woodturner *is an amazing jewel of which the AAW can be proud. It not only is a record of the woodturning field and movement, it is a vehicle for nurturing many individuals within the woodturning field, providing a platform for showcasing new work and for expressing ideas about artwork. It continues to help the entire field grow and mature.*

Positive communication

When Betty began her second editorship in 2009, she was invited to join a discussion group, formed to practice the communication methods developed by Marshall Rosenburg, author of *Nonviolent Communication*. She attended discussion sessions for ▸

Egg on Toast, 2016, walnut, maple, paint. 6" × 4" × 2" (15cm × 10cm × 5cm)

two years. This was a turning point in Betty's life. She learned how to communicate with others in a supportive, non-confrontational, and inclusive way. As a new editor, a woman editor, and an artist editor, she initially received angry emails from members who believed they were being left out and ignored. With her philosophy of inclusion and newfound nonviolent communication skills, Betty was able to respond in a way that often resulted in new authors. She joined several Internet forums as part of her editorial research and outreach, encountering sometimes negative postings. Betty made no assumptions about the author's intentions, responding with wisdom and always a positive tone, and in most cases ended up turning the negative poster into a supporter. She tamed a number of trolls.

Parallel Conversations, 2018, Metalwork by Julie Ball, Sycamore, acrylic paint, 54" (137cm) tall

These communication skills were on display in a seminar Betty gave to the Ottawa Valley Woodturners in 2014, in the course of which she showed a series of fascinating slides of what a "bowl" could be. Several were pretty unusual, and when she asked the audience for comment, some responses were rather far out. Betty did not impose her opinion, but just asked more questions, and in short order a very good discussion was under way which got many people thinking. This happened because Betty made a point of including everyone and listened to points of view with which she may not have agreed.

Women in Turning

Merryll Saylan summarizes:

> *Betty's two most important roles in my mind have been, firstly, to rescue the Journal and make it into a first-class magazine; and secondly, in her support and encouragement of women, she has helped the field immensely. I was one of them.*

In her spirit of inclusiveness, Betty gave women a platform and attention in the Journal that highlighted their contributions. She was instrumental in getting the Women in Turning (WIT) committee started and became a spokeswoman. WIT has made significant progress in providing women a voice within the AAW and the wider woodturning community. AAW president Greg Schramek comments:

> *Betty is an extremely bright and talented artist whose communication skills took the* American Woodturner *to a new level, who after passing that baton immediately accepted the mantle of Women in Turning, promoting the contributions of women without constraint or apology. I remember our heated discourse at my home over the directions and timing of WIT and its impact on the AAW. That discussion took me from admiration to respect. Betty has opinions worth listening to.*

What next?

In her long and diverse career, Betty Scarpino has contributed hugely to the woodturning and wood art fields. She has clearly won the debate with her first woodturning instructor: woodturned objects can indeed be art. What lies ahead? Betty is a voracious reader, an avid book club member, cycles regularly, and walks and hikes. In these difficult current times, she is grateful for the network of friends that is a feature of the AAW, and from which we all benefit. And like many of us, Betty is planning to spend more time in her workshop at her first love: making. Her goal is to be turning, carving, and creating long into the future. The curious mind is still percolating.

Special thanks to Albert LeCoff for his gracious provision of content relating to the Center for Art in Wood and the ITE, as well as associated photographs.

Dixie Biggs, Sharon Doughtie, Katie Hudnall, Jean LeGwin, Betty Scarpino, Andi Wolfe, and Lynne Yamaguchi, *ITO (It Takes Ovaries) Brewers Six-Pack*, 2019

Women in Turning's contribution to AAW's 2019 EOG auction.

Malcolm Zander is a New Zealand-born wood artist living in Ottawa, Canada. His website is malcolmzander.com.