

# AL STIRT

*A turner who's learned life's lessons well*

**KEN KEOUGHAN**

**I**F I HAD TO CHARACTERIZE AL STIRT, I couldn't. On the surface is a bearded, cheerful, gnome-like fellow with a twinkle in his eye, a quick smile, a lively step or two, and ... poof he's off bubbling on down the stream of his life as lively and cheerful as ever. But this nagging voice keeps saying, "Wait! There's more here. Much more."

Stirt seems to me to be a man who has learned life's lessons well and thoroughly through the long laborious path of observation, trial, error, trial, improvement, practice, practice, trial, more practice, polish and ... then go forward a little bit. His values, his goals, his strivings, indeed his persona bear the same sturdy texture and polish as stone worn and tumbled in a Vermont stream.

As we watch Al demonstrate, cut wood on a lathe, it isn't effortless yet it is never hard. There'll be vibration and chatter, if that's what the wood brings to it, but it is under control and quietly, quickly takes shape. In fact the process as he practices it, is just right! And that's true whether he is turning, carving or painting. Stirt is a Master. And he's earned it... a bowl and a platter at a time.

What better place for Al Stirt to start than in Brooklyn where he was born in 1946. In time the family moved to New Jersey. Al was going to school, getting along with the other kids and just plain growing up. But life wasn't necessarily easy. His father was a union organizer. A life of passion and pitfalls at a time of frequent



Al Stirt, away from the lathe, reveling in one of his non-turning passions -- whitewater canoeing. Photo by Dave Brown. All photos of finished pieces are by Al Stirt. Some color photos of his work are on Page 31.

labor/management turmoil.

By the time Al Stirt got to Harpur College he had absorbed the idea of "fairness." "It was an essential part of my upbringing." But he was also aware of "the system" and the fact that it was not particularly "just." He had decided that he wanted a life that was not part of that "unjust system." We're talking the latter part of the 60's, tie dye, free love and hair tangled in the fabric of life. He studied psychology and earned a bachelor's degree. On graduation he chucked the idea of graduate school and took off in the car of the times, a VW beetle, to Mexico with three friends.

On his return to the United States three things happened in short order: 1) he bought a paperback edition of Geoff Peters' book on basic woodturning; 2) he bought a Toolcraft lathe; 3) he moved in with his brother in New Hampshire and started turning wood.

"I made candlesticks and small bowls and started selling them in craft shows in the Boston area", he says with a reflective smile. In 1976 he participated in the ACC Regional Show in Rhinebeck, New York. At that show Paul Roman, the founder of Fine Woodworking, and eventually of the entire Taunton Press empire, asked Stirt to write an article about woodturning. Roman himself took the photos and the article ran in *Fine Woodworking* in the Summer 1976 issue.

Enter Albert LeCoff. LeCoff saw the article and invited Stirt to come to Philadelphia and "teach or do a demo." By 1976 LeCoff and several others had already begun to attract annual gatherings of woodturners. (See *American Woodturner* Spring 2000 pp 16-18). So Stirt appeared at the George School gathering and was immediately seized with misgivings. "There were people there that really knew what they were doing: Dale Nish, Palmer Sharpless, Steven Hogbin and Frank Cummings just to name a few."

"And here I am, this little guy from Vermont who is making bowls and candlesticks and platters. I was so intimidated that I set up my demonstration to be in the evening after dinner.

## The Quest for Pure Form: Work by Al Stirt



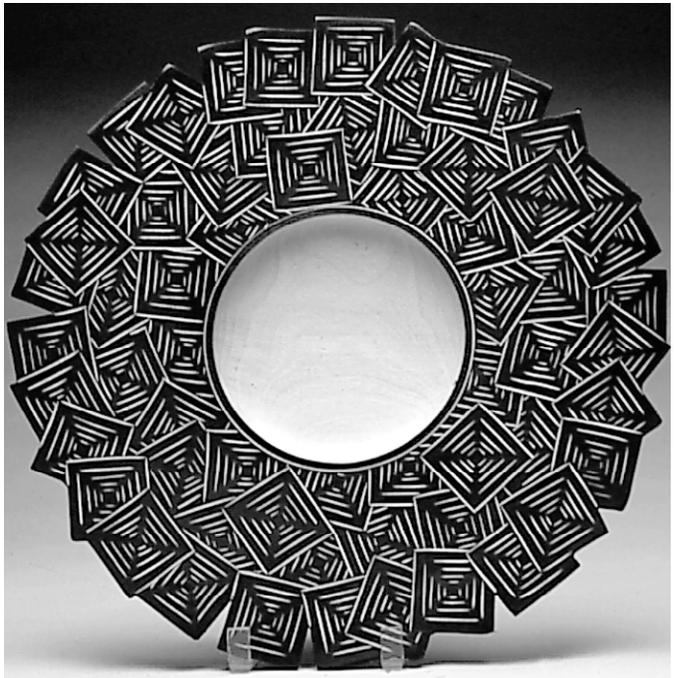
Pine Needle bowl, 9-in.-dia., Maple; 2001.



African Series, 9-in.-dia., Maple burl; 1997.



Maple bowl, 16-in.-dia.; 1999.



“Crowded Square” bowl, 16-in.-dia., Maple; 1996.

**Stirt is the finest designer of "pure forms" in woodturning today. "The beauty of Al's treatment of the geometric forms and patterns in his bowls and platters is a reflection of a man who has found his 'voice' and is in total unity with his work." — David Ellsworth**

I thought that would minimize the attendance and thus minimize my embarrassment. But it didn't work. They seemed to like me and said nice things about my work despite my insecurities."

"Albert LeCoff had an incredible effect on woodturning. At a time when turners were few and we were all isolated, he brought us all together. That really helped the field. And he doesn't seem to get as much credit for it as it warrants. The synergy and energy that these gatherings released was very wonderful and very important."

### Vision and Concept

Subsequently Sandy Blain invited him to Arrowmont in 1978 to participate and teach in an event called "Woodturning Vision and Concept". Again all or most of the "known" woodturners were there. It was a genuine success as attested to by the fact that it was out of this gathering that the American Association of Woodturners took shape and was formed.

Stirt was on the first board of directors and later was named AAW's "person of the year" and was given an Honorary Lifetime Membership. This title was awarded in 1997.

Through all the years from then until now Al has kept on keeping on.



Al and Wendy Stirt relaxing in Labrador. Photo by Dave Brown.

He has worked earnestly and steadily and accumulated countless awards. His work is in the White House, the Smithsonian, the American Craft Museum, the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, The Detroit Institute of Arts, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and, of course, the Wood Turning Center. In addition Stirt has work at the Arizona State University Museum

of Art, the High Museum of Art, the Mobile Museum of Art and the Arkansas Art Center. Stirt's work is also in virtually every serious private collection.

What do Alan's peers say? David Ellsworth says, "Stirt is the finest designer

of 'pure forms' in woodturning today. The beauty of Al's treatment of the geometric forms and patterns in his bowls and platters is a reflection of a man who has found his 'voice' and is in total unity with his work."

Iona Elliott, writing in the British magazine *Woodturning*, says, Alan Stirt (is) one of the greatest Masters of pure form working today."

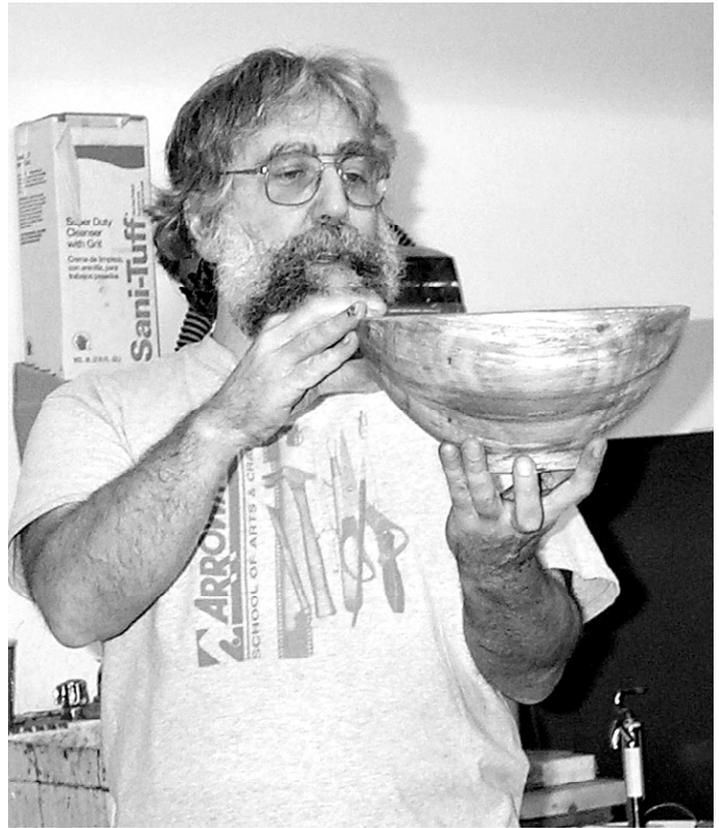
Sandra Blain, former Director of Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts says, "Alan has had a major impact on the rise of woodturning internationally."

Ray Leier, co-owner of del Mano Gallery, arguably the most influential marketer of wood as art today says, "Alan's approach to texture and balance set him distinctly apart." The Collectors of Wood Art recently presented Leier and his partner Jan Peters a Lifetime Achievement Award for their contribution to the wood art field at del Mano during the last 28 years.

No article about Alan Stirt would



Fluted bowl, 13-in.-dia., Butternut; 1990.



Stirt in a familiar role: teaching, above, to a group at a workshop sponsored by the Maine Woodturners and right, critiquing a vessel. Photos this page by Malcolm Ray.

be complete without a few words about his techniques. He works on a Oneway 24/36 lathe with a three horsepower motor. Occasionally he uses the lower outboard extension for large diameter pieces. He can go to 44 inches with this extension.

For carving fluted bowls he uses a homemade amalgam of reciprocating stone cutting tools into which he inserts wood carving gouges. The stone cutting tools have a very short "throw" and thus yield a very controllable cut. For smaller carving cuts such as his geometric pattern pieces he uses electric carving tools both rotary and reciprocating. When painting pieces black in order to carve a "reveal" into the wood he uses flat black acrylic paint. The patterns are then traced onto the pieces using watercolor pencils. After the carving the pieces are given a protective coat of

water-based satin luster polyurethane sprayed on. He usually uses two to three coats. A final fun tip, he uses "fun foam" bought at craft or discount stores such as Ames, for gaskets on his drum chucks for the vacuum system. This material is inexpensive and adheres well with waterproof contact cement.

### **Again, the nagging voice**

But what about that nagging voice that keeps saying, "Wait. There's more here. Much more!"

He and Wendy, his wife of 14 years, love to take canoe trips. But this is not "up the lazy river by the old mill run..." This is three to seven weeks in the wilderness of Labrador. All provisions, all camping gear, all medical supplies are transported by canoe. It is easy enough to get to their jumping off place. You drive 11½

days out of northern Vermont and, take a 12-hour train ride, then get someone to drive you to a ghost town that used to be mining camp. After that... well you get the picture.

Want to know how far off the beaten trail they go?

The last time they had a serious medical problem, a badly dislocated shoulder in another member of the party, the help parachuted in out of the Hercules, stabilized the injured person, and then called in the helicopter to evacuate.

Who paddled his load on the way back, I wonder?

So ... we're back where we started. If I had to characterize Al Stirt I couldn't.

*Ken Keoughan is a turner and writer in Friendship, ME, and a contributing editor at American Woodturner.*