



John stands amidst part of his collection.

John Hill *AAW's 2011 Honorary Lifetime*



Member Denise DeRose

“John Hill has more good ideas in his little finger than most people have in their whole lives. If you could clone him, we could all just go home,” says Phil Brennon, past president of the American Association of Woodturners. The Board of Directors selected John Hill as AAW’s 2011 Honorary Lifetime Member. Since John embraced woodturning in 1992, he has singlehandedly built, developed, and enriched the professional structures that benefit all woodturners, and in doing so, has elevated woodturning itself. John, a force of nature, is well deserving of this honor.

The organizational skills, business savvy, and drive that characterize John spring from his early life. Born in Dallas, Texas, to an artist and a shoe salesman, John set goals for himself and planned from an early age, setting aside money for college while still in junior high school. Alongside migrant workers, John worked his way through college, graduating from the University of Texas at Arlington with a degree in business and marketing. Shell Oil hired John in New Orleans to train new service station owners. Drafted by the Army in 1966, John rejected an offer to become an officer, joining personnel management instead. There, one day, he made a good suggestion to a General. The General pronounced John an efficiency expert, had him review the entire base for efficiency, and rewarded his good work with a desk job in Alaska, rather than a rifle in Vietnam.

After completing his tour of duty, John returned to Shell Oil, but soon quit to buy a service station and educate himself as a commercial real estate salesman. When the 1972 recession hit, John used his savings to enter the real estate business, becoming a certified investment member, his

profession for fourteen years. In his style, John did well, lived conservatively, and invested his money. “I had enough to be comfortable. My friends were working hard and dying young. What’s the point? I decided I would rather have more fun and less money.” He retired when he was 44, moved to the mountains of North Carolina and bought a farm.

John and his wife, Patti Quinn Hill, a basket maker, set out to follow their interests. John reflects, “Everything, from that moment forward, has been constant volunteer and charity work.”

One weekend, while following Patti around the Southern Highland Craft Fair, John saw turner Fred Metzger rough turning bowls. “There were shavings everywhere,” John remembers, “and I spent a couple of hours standing there watching. When I left, I knew which lathe to buy, where to buy it, and where the woodturning clubs were.” The nearest club was 90 miles away in Hickory. John joined and was soon on their board.

In 1999, John and seven other turners started a new chapter in Asheville. John, the founding president, quickly grew the Carolina Mountain Woodturners to more than 300 members. He set up the club as a nonprofit organization and traded the Southern Highland Craft Guild free woodturning demonstrations for use of the Folk Art Center. John served as club president for four years and has been on its board ever since. Today the club is the largest AAW chapter in the world and hosts eleven professional demonstrators every year, free to all turners and the public. The club’s demonstrator program is funded by generous donations, with the additional monthly hands-on classes primarily funded by the endowment John set up. Angelo Iafrate recalls that John pronounced ▶



Getting things moving at Carolina Mountain Woodturners chapter meeting, January 2011.



John Hill and Jacques Vesery at the POP's Sphere exhibit auction.
Photo: Andi Wolfe

Asheville the “navel of the woodturning universe.”

Describing himself as “not an artist but a solidly proficient turner,” John demonstrated at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and many AAW chapters. He helped Arrowmont secure equipment and recruit professional instructors, personally assisting more than twenty-five of them. David Willard, former Executive Director of Arrowmont says, “John gave his time and resources in numerous areas of the School, like no other individual. His generosity



John's off-center candlestick and pierced candle, a gift for Jean-François Escoulen.

is quiet and unassuming, and he never seeks the recognition he deserves.”

John also taught woodturning at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, and the Appalachian Center for Crafts in Smithville, Tennessee.

He entered the national woodturning scene when he demonstrated at the AAW symposium in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2000. Volunteering as an auction spotter, John assisted Willard Baxter in 2001 and 2002, and Willard subsequently asked John to take over as auctioneer. “How to follow Willard Baxter's energy at the auction was a real concern,” said Phil Brennion. “But the first year that John came in, he set an all-time record.” John has chaired the auction committee and conducted the auction every year since.

Dave Hout asked John if he would consider being nominated to run for the AAW Board. John told him, “I would be happy to be considered, happy to be nominated, happy to serve if elected, and if not elected, I would just be happy.” John, at this time, was not closely associated with the AAW, yet he believed that the AAW could do more for individual members and chapters.

Elected to the AAW Board in 2003, John served until 2006. Phil Brennion recalls, “The first time I

met John, I could see right then and there, ‘now there was a handful.’ Having John on the Board was like having the best racehorse there is. If you just let him get out of the stable and run, he would probably break a world record.”

John worked hard to increase member and chapter benefits and communication. In fact, many of the benefits members now enjoy are the product of John's imagination. Among his many accomplishments, John envisioned and created the bulk email program to establish regular communications with the chapters, established the Chapters Best Practices subcommittee, and solicited suppliers to sell lathes at deep discount to chapters for teaching and demonstration purposes.

John brought professional turners to his home, collecting work from many of them. “Listening to them over wine, it became apparent to me that the AAW focused on hobbyists and offered little to professional turners,” he said. John set about solving two significant problems for professional turners: insurance and marketing.

John solicited insurance litigation attorneys as volunteers, and became somewhat of an insurance expert himself, writing articles for the Journal with the help of insurance attorney, John Buso. John visualized and created the AAW Insurance

Advisory Committee, the professional liability and property insurance program for professional members, and the AAW medical insurance program, personally negotiating all of the contracts. John has also been instrumental in establishing The Emergency Relief fund to help AAW members all over the world who are victims of a major disaster.

John worked with the Board to create the Professional Outreach Program (POP) to promote woodturning as a legitimate art medium and to recognize accomplished woodturning professionals. John advanced the AAW as a collector's forum by creating the Online Sales Gallery. He also created the Wood Objects on Display (WOOD) Committee and personally arranged numerous exhibitions of turned-wood art at galleries and museums around the country. As a result of John's efforts, most of the major collectors of wood art are now AAW members.

John not only improved the present, he had visions for the future of woodturning when he created AAW's Youth Program, giving young people free symposium admission and soliciting donated lathes, chucks, and tools. "I called Bonnie Klein and asked her if she could give me the name of someone who works with small lathes

I primarily collect work from people I know. When I turn the lights on every morning, it's like a giant party. I look and I see Binh and Graham. All my friends are there. Ultimately Patti and I want to donate the entire collection to a museum.

and likes to work with kids," he recalls. "She started laughing and swallowed the hook."

Again looking forward, John wrote the AAW investment policy and its gift policy. He established two AAW endowment funds and has served as trustee since their inception. John has also helped bring the AAW more fully to the Internet by encouraging the adoption of a membership category that reads the Journal online. Working with Jean LeGwin, John

helped make available to all AAW members back issues of *American Woodturner* online.

John envisions the AAW becoming an international association of woodturners that "highly endorses all of the directions we are going." John explains, "We are not all artists. We are not all pen turners, and not all 'round and brown' bowl turners. We are all things woodturning without any exclusionary factions. We are at the birth of modern woodturning, on the very front end of it. I see tremendous opportunity."

Summarizing his philosophy, John says, "If you are walking along and see a big rock in the road, you are going to come up with an idea. 'Somebody ought to move that rock.' Just coming up with new ideas is not quite the same as putting your shoulder to the rock and moving it." John Hill has observed many rocks in the road of woodturning. Because he has moved so many of them himself, his selection as the 2011 AAW Honorary Lifetime Member is richly deserved. ■

Denise DeRose turns and writes in Oakland, California.



John and Patti enjoy the three-mile trail loop they built on their property.



John and Patti's home in Weaverville, NC.