

# 'We don't collect woodturnings, We collect friends'

—Dale Nish



Dale and Norene on the front porch with their "Welcome" sign.

By Kip Christensen  
Photos: Don Dafoe and Kip Christensen



Every corner and every shelf in Dale and Norene's Provo home is filled with turned pieces collected over the years.

Dale and Norene Nish aren't typical collectors of woodturnings. Their collection of contemporary turning is extensive and one of the most comprehensive among both private and public collections. Yet it has never been cataloged, documented, or appraised. Dale estimates that it includes approximately 1,000 pieces from over 300 different artists. But currently, there is no list of who those artists are, what pieces they produced—or when.

This may sound like a very unorganized way to go about assembling a major collection of turnings, and Dale and Norene would probably not argue with that assessment. I have several times heard Dale remark, "We don't collect woodturnings, we collect friends."

The Nish collection has never been about the pieces. It has always been about the people who created them. In the AAW video *Dale Nish - The Woodturner's Mentor*, Dale noted, "What I do is I collect people who make woodturnings. With the exception of two or three probably, there's not a piece in this house that I do

not know the maker, or that I haven't met the maker or I haven't sat down and discussed things with them."

To travel with Dale is a memorable treat, as many pieces were acquired during his extensive travels. You won't find Dale spending his spare time hanging around the motel staring at the television. Rather, he is visiting galleries, gift shops, wood suppliers, or even more likely visiting a friend or seeking out new ones.

Dale is comfortable meeting new people and has received particular satisfaction in making opportunities for young people who are new to turning. When traveling, he seeks out young turners and visits them in their studio. Of these visits Dale said, "I never leave their shop until I buy a piece or two. That says I like their work and encourages them to do better."

As a result of this unorthodox method of collecting, Dale has acquired a significant collection of early work from people who were relatively unheard of at the time. Some of these pieces are

quite ordinary yet represent an important snapshot in the historical development of a particular turner or of turning in general. Other pieces are exceptional and rare because the artist later moved away from an early body of work which included only a few pieces. A particularly good example of this is an extraordinary claro walnut bowl turned by Del Stubbs.

In 1978, Dale started the Utah Woodturning Symposium, which grew into an annual event that he coordinated for its first 19 years. During that time, he invited scores of prominent woodturners to Utah as presenters. He also kept his ear to the ground for potential rising stars and extended them the same invitation.

For several newcomers, the Utah symposium was their first experience presenting at a major forum. Whether they were well known or not, Dale acquired at least one piece from nearly all of these presenters.

Today, a significant portion of Dale and Norene's collection consists of work produced by those who presented at the Utah symposium. Many of these presenters have been invited back from time to time and in many



**For years, Bill Giese's "Flower Bowl" has held an esteemed position on top of the Nish television.** "You can't imagine what it's like to have someone like Dale Nish praise your work in front of the Provo audience," Bill remembers of the day when Dale purchased this zircote and maple piece eight years ago when he was 72 years old. "I brought it to Provo, but never thought anyone would buy it. After Dale said he had to buy it, I had to tell him it was promised for a show in Eureka I entered. After the bowl won first place, I sent it back to Dale."

cases the collection shows an artist's progression through several stages. In some cases, Dale's favorite pieces are still from a woodturner's early eras.

Each year, Dale invites the presenters to autograph a designated page in a special copy of his book, *Creative Woodturning*. To consider these many signatures, collected on a few pages over two decades, gives a person the sense that this book itself contains an important piece of woodturning history. It is certainly a treasured

element of Dale and Norene's collection.

Dale and Norene acquired nearly all of the work directly from the people who produced it. Much of the collection has been purchased, but some pieces were traded. As Dale explains it, "I trade my \$4,000 bowl for their \$4,000 bowl. Otherwise neither one of us could afford the other's work."

If you asked Dale to pick out his favorite turnings, he is likely to answer in terms of people

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rather than pieces. Each piece has a story, and it is as much the story he values as the work itself. He speaks of woodturning friends from earlier days when almost all woodturners worked in relative isolation. He also speaks of former students he has mentored or others he has encouraged along in formative years.

Although Dale has been primarily responsible for filling their house with woodturnings, Norene has always been very supportive of the collection and welcomes turners into their home. She is a gracious hostess who

keeps their home spotless and inviting for the many guests who come, often on little or no notice. Norene has her own interest in woodturnings and other art and fine craft and regularly collects pieces for herself. Like Dale, she has her own display cabinet filled primarily with smaller pieces that are easy to incorporate into her decor.

The Nish collection represents a who's who in woodturning during the past three decades—many of whom Dale profoundly influenced along the way. For Dale and Norene, each piece they

have collected provides a link to memories past and recent, reminding them of places traveled, friends made, acquaintances renewed, and turnings acquired to help keep the memories fresh.

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**J. Paul Fennell remembers the evening well when Dale Nish and Rude Osolnik** got in a bidding war over his vessel at the 1991 AAW symposium benefit auction in Denton, TX. "I made this piece from bleached curly maple I obtained from a tree removal company's lot of discarded logs. The entire log had curl as tight as corduroy, and stands out as the best all-time find in my life as a woodturner."

"Before the auction, I marked down three pieces I wanted to buy," Dale remembers, "and Rude out-bid me on the first two. I wasn't going to let him get the third one. I think between what Rude and I donated and what we bought, we had a third of the auction proceeds that night."

"Dale eventually won out to the tune of \$850," Paul adds, "a high price at that time for a piece from a not-too-well-known turner."



**"This is the prettiest piece of carob I've ever seen," Mike Mahoney says of his nesting set now part of the Nish collection.** "They're one of three sets I made for a show in 1998. When Dale walked into my studio, he said, 'These have to come with me.' When I saw the set at Dale's house recently, I thought, 'Wow, how did I let those go?'"