

# Ray Key

AAW Lifetime Award Recipient for 2001

GARY C. DICKEY



*It was just before lunchtime as Ray Key was finishing a demonstration. The vessel was virtually flawless as he turned to his audience and said, "When we come back, it'll just take a bit of 220 grit sandpaper to finish it up."*

*As he spoke, his hands played over the newly cut surface and he frowned as he detected a small imperfection.*

*"It needs a bit of straightening right on this edge," he said, "I can't leave it like that." Restarting the lathe, he proceeded to smooth the trouble spot, when suddenly there was a catch. Stopping the lathe revealed a jagged tear in the formerly smooth surface. It's not something that happens often when Ray Key demonstrates, but it did prove that he was human and that it happens to the best of turners.*

*Looking at the class and smiling, Ray said simply, "You can't teach the touch,*

*you can only teach the technique. Let's go to lunch."*

*An hour later, returning from lunch, Ray found a gift from his longtime friend Willie Stedmond. Lying on the bed of the lathe along with a note were two stones glued to a piece of paper. The note said simply, "Try two grit."*

It has been almost two decades since British turner Ray Key adopted

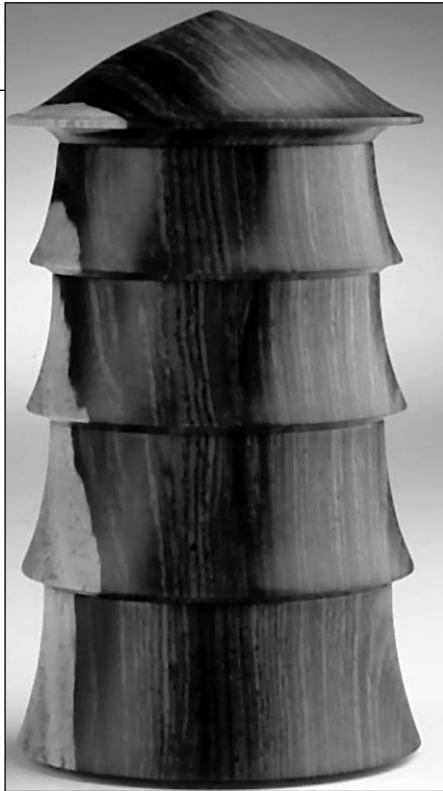


American woodturning and American woodturning adopted him. And throughout that period both have been all the better for it.

Through his seminar demonstrations and woodturning classes, those who have benefited from his teaching are legion. His quick wit, keen sense of humor, and unique insights and approaches to turning problems have earned him international respect. Many of his students have dubbed him "Mr. Design," for his attention to detail during critique sessions.

Modestly he shuns accolades — and there have been many — saying, "Good turners simply know how to get out of the holes they dig for themselves."

Recognizing his contributions to the craft of woodturning not only in



Above left, Key's African ebony pagoda box; right, Ray prepares for a critique session with students at Arrowmont by sorting vessels according to common characteristics.

this country and his native Britain, and throughout the world at large, the AAW Board of Directors recently named him this year's Honorary Life Member.

David Ellsworth recalls meeting Ray in 1980, at Parnham House in Dorset, at the first truly International woodturning conference.

"Ray and Richard Raffan then came to Philadelphia in 1981 to participate in Albert LeCoff's Tenth Woodturning Symposium, and it was clearly an eye-opener to them both. Over the next few years, woodturning events seemed to spring up everywhere around the western world, and Ray was part of it all.

"It's not surprising then, that when national woodturning organizations were formed in Ireland

and America, Britain would surely be next. It's also not surprising that Ray would become the driving force behind the formation of the Association of Woodturners of Great Britain. He is a natural leader, a good organizer and a great turner. So, along with the tireless efforts of Margaret Lester and the support of Ray's many friends within the world-wide woodturning community, turners in



During a break in class at Arrowmont, Ray discusses the design of lidded boxes with two students last Spring.

Britain now had access to a voice for their work that extended far beyond their own borders.

"Without a doubt, Ray Key has become the most important emissary to the growth and education of contemporary woodturning in Britain. He has helped bring British woodturning into the mainstream of the Modern Movement of woodturning, all the while maintaining his own rigorous work schedule as a full-time studio woodturner. To know Ray Key is to understand the true meaning of dedication and compassion," Ellsworth said.

We caught up with Ray recently at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, TN where he has taught two week-long spring courses for the past 12 years. For me it was a gratifying reunion. Several years earlier, his was the first formal woodturning course I had ever taken.

For me and for the



Above, two bowls illustrate Key's clean and simple design philosophy. Below are examples of his well-known lidded boxes and platters. His demonstration of almost a dozen rim designs on platters is a favorite with students.

many others who have studied with Ray, the experience opened our eyes to a philosophy of design and craftsmanship that was simplicity itself. Having scraped away at wood on the lathe for almost 20 years, I just took whatever the lathe gave me in the way of turned objects.

There was no such thing as a pre-

conceived design for a vessel. Until I met Ray.

To understand the man and his philosophy, one must understand his origins.

Ray grew up in the English town of Kenilworth not far from Birmingham--often called "the city of a thousand trades." Steeped in history and

mentioned in the Domesday Book, records show that the area craftsmen produced knives and tools as early as 1538. It's little wonder that this setting fostered Ray's interest in tools and working with his hands.

"My early influence may have come from my father. He was a cobbler and shoemaker, but aside from that he was always making



things by hand--fences, sheds and things to use around the house.

"Another influence was a German prisoner of war who was in our town when I was about four or five years old, a toymaker who made me a small pull-along dog on wheels as well as a three-legged stool which he made with a spokeshave" he recalls.

Around age 10, a teacher told Ray's mother that he would "never be an academic," but instead would always make a living with his hands.

"It was about this same age when I saw my first woodturner and I was immediately mesmerized. I knew from an early age that I always wanted to work with wood and I always had an area set aside in a shed as my workshop."

When he grew older, a friend advised his father that the best place for Ray's talents would be in patternmaking. At 15 he began his apprenticeship in Leamington Spa. At 21 he qualified as a patternmaker working in a shop where "we made patterns for anyone who needed them."

A turning point in his life came when the craft was hit with labor disputes and during an ensuing strike, Ray returned home and began working for a firm that made swimming pool molds in fiberglass. His departure from the Leamington area coincided with a tremendous decline in the patternmaker's trade in general. Within a seven-year period the patternmaker ranks in the area dropped from some 900 to about 300. It marked the beginning of near extinction of a proud and skilled trade.

The year 1965 marked a milestone as Ray bought his first lathe, his first new car, began a new job and met his wife to be, Liz. He had followed his father to Chrysler where he took up a position in the Chrysler Styling Studios.

Ray spent seven years as a Clay Modeling Project Leader, working



with stylists who were trained artists. It was here that he began to develop his instincts for design, form and curvature.

Meanwhile, at home in the evenings he developed his woodturning techniques.

Instead of buying furniture, Key had convinced his bride that they should buy the tools and he would make their furniture. Of course, a wood lathe was among the first tools he bought.

Liz recalls "It all started one month into married life, when Ray kept disappearing down to the shed at the bottom of the garden, straight after the evening meal. He would go down there several evenings a week.

"I was beginning to suspect he had a woman in there. But he was always found with a cup of coffee in one hand and a woodturning book written by Fred Pain (*The Practical Woodturner*) in the other, with a piece of wood on the lathe.

"So it only took a short time to realize I had competition: **THE LATHE!**

"With much thought and deliberation I decided it could be worse; at least he was at home and not out drinking. So instead of complaining I bought him a sizable pile of wood, from a bonus I received from work, and encouraged him to pursue and develop his woodturning," Liz said.

Ray is quick to give credit to his wife for the support she has shown throughout his career.

"If it wasn't for Liz I wouldn't be turning wood fulltime. I would probably be in industry still," he said.

Ray recalls that when he first approached Liz with the idea of full-time woodturning, she said, "I'll back you if you'll still want to do it in seven years' time."

"I would not have gone to the LeCoff seminar if she had not insisted that I go, saying it would be good for my career," he said

## from... Design Thoughts

by Ray Key

The mention of the word Design to many who turn wood seem to fill them with fear and suspicion and feelings that this is an area that is not for them. Yet it is the design of the piece that is the most critical element if the item is to be successful.

There is no doubt that craftsmanship of quality is reasonably easily recognized, but what makes a good design is less tangible.

The words of the late David Pye (former professor of Furniture Design, Royal College of Art, London), put things very much into context when he spoke of making.

"If you take enough trouble, that part turns out reasonably well--not every time admittedly, but fairly often. It is not the workmanship that is so difficult, but the design. That part never gets easier. In design very small differences make all the difference. The difference between the thing which sings and the thing which is forever silent is often very slight indeed."

This is a wonderful statement and sums up the difficulties involved when making things of successful design.

My own views on design, put simply, are these. Purity of form,

"She has hosted numerous AWGB meetings over the past 14 years and continues to do so. She cooks lunch for 10 to 12 committee members, usually twice a year," he noted.

In 1973, Ray and Liz had their

life and lift is what I like to see in most objects. I do not like heavy ornamentation or the imposition of craftsmanship for its own sake.

Good fluid elegant design does not need the interjection of elements that interrupt the visual enjoyment of pure form.

This statement is not aimed at the total removal of



embellishment and refined detail, for they have a very important place to play in any design process. It is the over use of these elements that add clutter and break up continuity that I object to.

I have always believed that there has to be a good reason for adding embellishment and detail. My own usage is normally reserved to link a change of surface direction, to give a focal point in a boring material, to balance a proportion or finish a rim or base. I am a great believer in the object as a whole; all elements must be in sympathetic harmony with one another, not a disjointed assemblage of different ones.

I have a couple of adages that I bear in mind as I work:

Keep it simple, stupid.

If in doubt, leave it out.

only child, son Darren, and moved to Evesham, Worcestershire where he began fulltime woodturning.

Shortly after their move, Liz opened a shop where she sold Ray's turnings along with crafts from other

local artisans.

Reminiscing about his early turning days, Ray recalled that he turned everything from candlesticks to "mice with little leather tails and ears."

"There's a lot of stuff out there that I've turned; a lot of it, I wish now didn't have my name on it," he quipped.

Although his studio and gallery pieces are recognized worldwide, Ray has always combined artistic turning and production turning with a fine line of domestic tableware designs for shops throughout the United Kingdom.

"When Richard Raffan and I returned from the LeCoff Seminar in 1981, I decided that the future was in turning one-of-a-kind studio pieces. I nearly starved before going back to the salad bowls, platters and cutting boards," he said. But his unique affinity for the clean design comes across in both his "art" and "craft."

As one author noted, "Ray has probably done more than anyone to put turning on the map and gain it the respect it deserves." Having served as the founding chairman of the AWGB, he continues to work hard for the woodturning world. He is now Honorary President and heads up the bi-annual seminar committee.

"I owe the craft," he said. "I wish to pass on information that may help somebody."

With that philosophy in mind, he has written three books, *Woodturning & Design* (1985); *The Woodturners*

*Workbook* (1992) and *Woodturning with Ray Key* (1998) in addition to a series of videotapes.

Quick to shift focus from himself, he said, "One of the things I admire about David Ellsworth is his willingness to give the same time and attention to those just starting out in woodturning, as he is to those who are accomplished."

He says teaching is tiring but it's also a stimulus; usually it only occupies about five weeks of his year.

He finds there is a transition period when he moves off production work and onto the personal more gallery type work, which needs a different mindset and focus.

Commenting on his demanding

wise the eye is distracted.

"In Japan they have a word for it, Wabi, a word that literally means 'voluntary poverty.' For a bowl or whatever object to have Wabi it must be pure--in form, material and execution. In Zen philosophy, if an object is deemed to have Wabi it represents the ultimate compliment because it has transcended mere beauty and attained spiritual quality."

Ray has won the respect and admiration of the woodturning world, but his two biggest fans remain those closest to him, his family.

"I have and always will envy dad for his love of his work. I don't think anybody could enjoy their job as much as dad does. He lives and

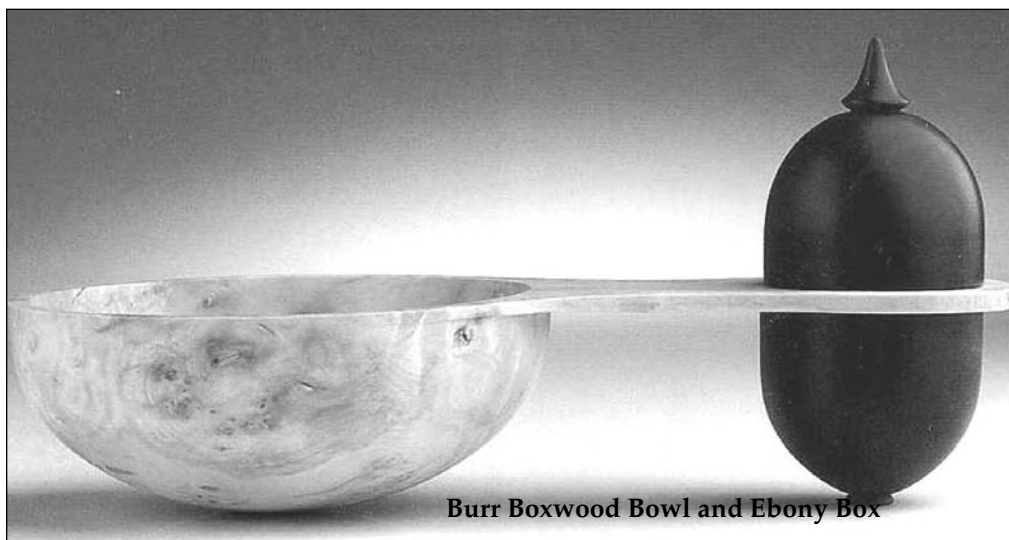
breathes wood and woodturning; it astounds me that someone can have the same enthusiasm for a job as they did nearly 30 years ago," Darren said.

In summary, Liz noted that, "He drives himself hard constantly, to achieve excel-

lence in his work, and in doing so has provided a comfortable living for his family. In return I take good care of Ray, and as much as I would like him to ease back a little, and take life a bit slower I accept that he will only do that when he is ready, and not before!"

Like many of those who have studied the art of turning under his watchful eye, I take pride in saying; I studied with Ray Key, a world-class woodturner.

Gary Dickey is Assistant Editor of *American Woodturner*.



Burr Boxwood Bowl and Ebony Box

schedule of seminars, lectures, and demonstrations that have taken him to virtually every continent, he noted, "I'm always involved totally or not at all. I'm in the heart of it or not at all."

In his book, *London Minimum*, author Herbert Ypma said, referring to Ray's work, "All the natural, inherent beauty that wood has to offer is magnified by the complete naked honesty of his work. Yet Key's is probably the most demanding of paths to choose because it is so unforgiving. There is no room for mistakes. The work must be precise and flawless, other-