

# Giles Gilson

## *The AAW Recognizes an Innovative Genius*

Terry Martin

**G**iles Gilson has always taken particular delight in doing the unexpected, a habit that began early when he was born in 1942 in the front seat of a 1933 Ford. He has been surprising people ever since with his robust and irreverent attitude. This year, the tables were turned when Giles was chosen as the 2009 AAW Honorary Lifetime Member. Giles was taken aback when he was told and said, "I wondered why I was chosen, but then I wonder about a lot of things."

I believe he was chosen because it is time to acknowledge that for the last

forty years he has been right to challenge the way things are done, to break rules, and to ignore the naysayers. There are very few people in our field who should be credited with changing the way we see things, but Giles is certainly one of them.

Giles' career has been improbably rich. He has been an actor, a pilot, a designer, a musician—the list goes on and on. He has always thrown himself into any experience or field of study that has intrigued him, and they are numerous. It began early when his father convinced him that if you worked hard at it, anything was possible. "My father started teaching me to fly airplanes and drive cars when I was about nine years old, and I spent lots of time helping him fix things," Giles recalls. In this way he learned about how machines work and ever since he has built much of what he needs himself because, as he explains, "I didn't have the money to buy things."

In a time when such classes were still valued, Giles took wood and metal shop courses in junior high



Giles Gilson, 2008



*Stratus* (mobile), 1978,  
Baltic birch, walnut,  
mahogany, stainless steel  
hardware, 72" × 27" × 52"  
(Yale University Art Gallery)

Photo: Rick Scigliano

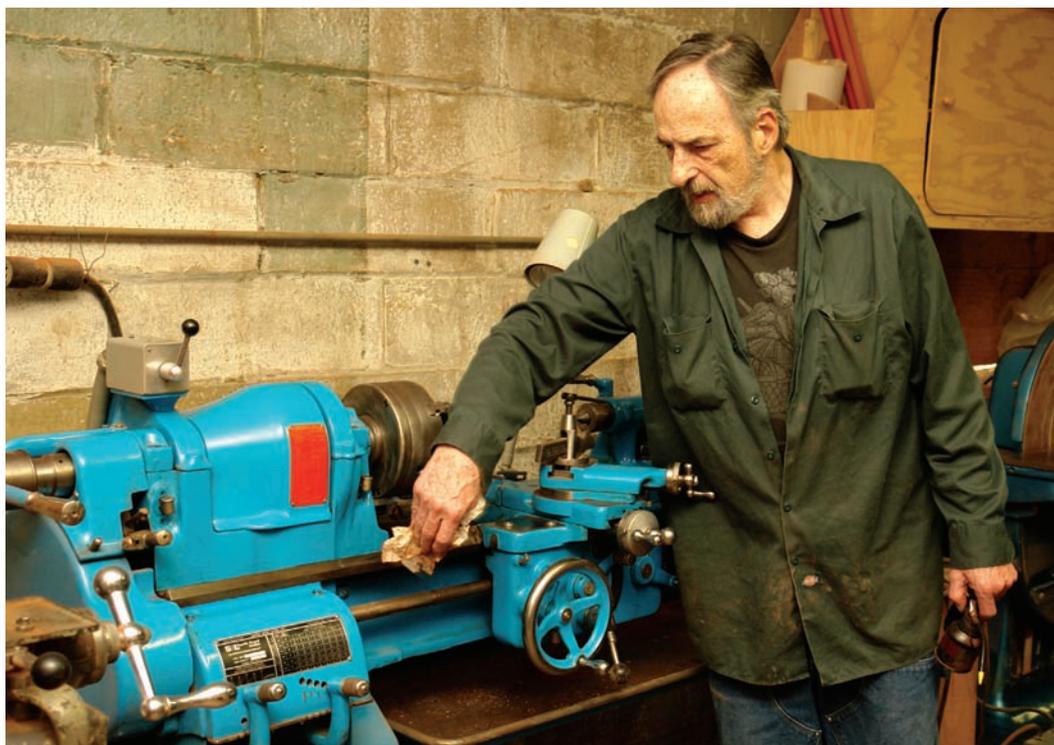
school and high school, where he learned to spin metal and turn wood. Giles says he was lucky enough to have teachers who allowed promising students to work on their own projects. That was fortunate because Giles probably would have done just what he wanted anyway. During this period, he also continued to read everything he could find about auto design, hotrod technology, aircraft design, and aerodynamic principles.

Giles was also influenced by his mother who painted and wrote poetry and his sister who painted and studied sculpture. He says that when he was a teenager, art classes taught him about the techniques of the great masters,

about color, composition, the importance of motion, and how to add depth and feelings of distance. Music has also been an important part of Giles' life and he has played the saxophone since he was twelve. He later studied music theory and arranging, and devoted many years to composing and performing jazz.

In the 1970s, Giles moved to upstate New York and set up shop in a barn with the intention of "making stuff to sell." Never one to confuse the need for modesty with the need to state the obvious, Giles explains, "I went to the best craft fair I could find near there and I realized that I could make anything I saw there at least as well, if not better. So I did."

Giles started out by making furniture that reflected his aeronautical and automotive background, but he also created amazing mobiles—enormous soaring, dipping creations that were almost certainly influenced by his love of flying and classic airplanes. During this period, a chance encounter with Mel and Mark Lindquist drew Giles into the growing woodturning field. He enjoyed the fact that they were breaking with tradition and, in the process, upsetting many people. In a later homage to Mel Lindquist, Giles produced *The Maker*. He explains, "There are six panels around the piece showing the idea, thinking it out, then the study/research, drawing/design, and finally the making. It's about Mel, but it's also about human accomplishment. It's about all of us, what we do, and who we are."



Giles with one of the lathes he lovingly restored, a 13" South Bend.

The 1980s was a period when turners were particularly celebrating the natural beauty of wood grain, but at that time Giles started covering turned wood with the kind of automotive finishes that were normally associated with hotrods. In the eyes of many, Giles had committed an ►

*THE MAKER* (picture piece), 1995,  
Aqua pearl flip, brass ring, cocobolo foot, corian base,  
16½" × 6¼" (The Lipton Collection)

*Fiber Vase II*, 1987, Walnut, four fiberglass panels  
formed over a turned, basswood hollow vessel, paint,  
14" × 7½" (Private collection)



Photos: Rick Siciliano



Photo: John McEvedian

unpardonable sin and, much to his delight, the indignant response was immediate. Giles was even dropped by some galleries and criticized by some collectors, but his reaction was typically contrarian. He started submitting pieces to turned wood exhibitions that were neither turned, nor made of wood. His *Fiber Vases* from the late 1980s used pearlescent colors to highlight the weave of fiberglass, and the turning community hardly knew what to think. It must give him some satisfaction now to be spoken of as the great innovator.

Typically, Giles is unconcerned about such criticism, "Some days I have a reverent attitude to wood and some days it's just material. When I first painted over the wood, I had good reasons. I believe in treating people gentle, but first you have to get their attention. There are a lot of pleasant clichés about using wood for art, but I don't buy any of them."

During this same period, Giles started developing his Feather series. Each of these delicately made cabinets was made up of multiple segments, meticulously shaped and assembled into complex containers. His early versions were made entirely of unpainted wood, but over the next twenty years they evolved as Giles incorporated lacquer, assorted metals, and acrylic, sometimes building these extraordinary sculptures up with hundreds of parts. They embody all of his influences and skills—feathers for flight, overlapping scales that recall musical arpeggios, shimmering

*Cammy-Oh 9—Highlights from the Muse*, 2002, Enriched walnut, blue interior, brass ring, figured birch foot, 65" × 16"

Photos: Rick Scillano



Interior of  
*Bonnet Piece*

*Bonnet Piece* (feathered wall cabinet sculpture), 1981, Curly maple, walnut, holly, ebony, stainless steel, 16" × 8" × 6" (Private collection)

color, and painstaking technical virtuosity. They are, like Giles, unique.

It is often difficult to separate the serious Giles from his tongue-in-cheek side. On one hand, he claims to have "independently studied practi-

cal and emotional dynamics, and the art of existence," while on the other hand he once named a piece *The Sledge Hammer Bowlophone*, which he said is played by striking it with a sledgehammer. Giles explains, "Because I've had so many experiences in the past that can best be described as bizarre, I have long felt that it is important to include a sense of the ridiculous. Yet, when I'm doing a piece, I must be careful not

to clutter a work with this. I use the absurd elements when they bring something to the final work."

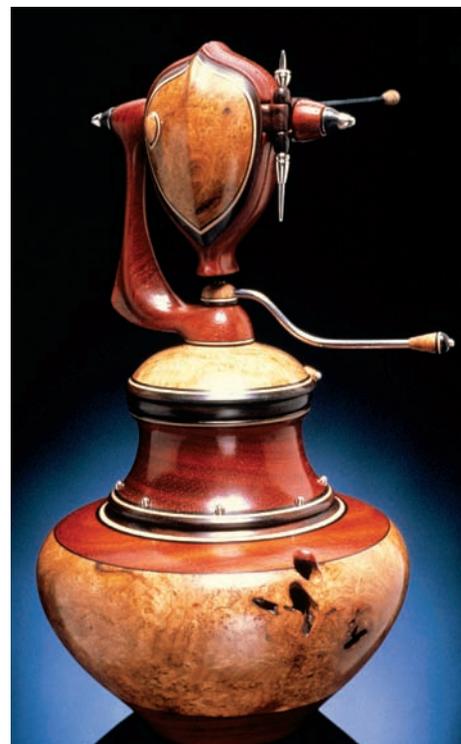
Giles' ideas are often triggered by his relationships with other people. It might be said that he converts personalities into sculptural ideas, or vice versa, and these ideas can be quite specific. His Cammy-Oh series, for example, was inspired by a woman who waited tables at his favorite diner. *Cammy-Oh 9—Highlights from the Muse* is a human-sized figure that grows from Giles' trademark square base, spiraling into an elegantly poised torso with wide shoulders

and a rolled collar. It's tempting to imagine that the in-your-face personality of this piece reflects his relationship with the original Cammy.

We shouldn't forget that Giles was a founding member of the AAW, so this award also reminds us of the heady days when turning was taking off and everything was possible. Back then, and now, there were very few people in the turning field who have been as inventive and as original as Giles. Even though most of us can never aspire to such creativity, we are all his beneficiaries because he gave us permission to see things differently. Thank you Giles. ■

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*Cabinet on a Jar Answering the Phone*, 1981, Cherry burl, padauk, holly, East Indian rosewood, stainless steel, 12" × 6" (John Reich Collection)

Photo: Rick Scillano