

# CLAY FOSTER

## AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER

John Jordan with Betty Scarpino

*The AAW Board of Directors at its discretion confers honorary lifetime membership to persons who, in its judgement, have made extraordinary contributions to the American Association of Woodturners and the advancement of woodturning.*



(Above) Clay Foster with wife and fellow woodturning artist Jennifer Shirley and their dogs Duesy, Brie, and Jackie-Lynn.

Like many pioneers in the woodturning field, Clay Foster arrived on the scene simply because he enjoyed turning objects out of wood. There was no tucked-away-in-his-pocket plan for becoming involved in various organizations that promoted and supported woodturning—those organizations did not yet exist. Yet throughout the years, Clay quietly helped move things along, continually helping to advance woodturning to where it is today.

And today, many of the field’s long-time teachers and

demonstrators prefer to work with students who are inclined to experiment and work outside “traditional” woodturning. Indeed, Clay enjoys encouraging students to look for and use outside inspiration such as exploring the use of color, carving, and incorporating alternative materials with woodturned objects.

### In Clay’s own words

Clay is a powerfully quiet presence in any room, and he is fully present. He is a man of few words,

but when he shares his thoughts, what he says (and writes) is worthy of remembering. Perhaps because his words are usually sparse, his advice for newcomers to the field makes perfect sense: “Focus on one or two things to start. Avoid the understandable urge to try everything—focus on learning how to master one.” Expanding on this advice, Clay writes:



Worthwhile art deserves to be made in a respectable environment; eliminate clutter in your workshop.



Clay working with a student on a green-wood blank, Marc Adams School of Woodworking, 2011.

**The Journey of an Idea:**

*Ideas burn through some people's minds like lightning-spawned fire flashing across dry prairie grass. They come out as real as glinting steel, refined in the crucible of white hot thinking, forged in a moment on the anvil of clarity amid a shower of sparks.*

*For the rest of us, ideas move through the mind like driftwood down the muddy waters of a shallow canyon. They circle slowly in the eddies of fear. They run aground on shifting shoals of assumptions, and hang up on snags of misconceptions. They tumble over the cataracts of ignorance, to be pulled into the undertow of prejudice. They get caught on islands of contradiction, which split the flow of thought. It's a long and tough journey through our mind for an idea, and the ones that survive often come out with the finer points missing and details abraded away by the sands of time.*

*Be not discouraged; things are not always as they seem. When Michael Hosaluk pulls one of those brilliant, fully developed, seemingly spur-of-the-moment ideas out of his pocket, it's not as spontaneous as it may seem. The idea may have come quickly, but a lifetime of experience went into filling the pocket. Those apparently impromptu ideas are based on years of life experiences, many as a woodturner and woodworker. They come from a select bank of successful experiments culled from all the things that didn't work.*

*Don't get frustrated or depressed, and don't settle for the safety of mediocrity. With patience and fortitude, you can call upon the total range of your life experiences to expand the boundaries of your skill. The journey is just begun.*

**List of laurels**

A laundry list of Clay's participation in the woodturning field easily shows why Clay is one of this year's selections for AAW's Honorary Lifetime Membership:



**Clay Foster**, Untitled pet urn, 2017, Bois d'arc fence post, African blackwood, 3½" × 3" × 3" (9cm × 8cm × 8cm)

Needing an urn for a friend's cat, Clay taught himself to hand-chase threads using thread cutters made by Ernie Newman for Clay's daddy. This exercise is an example of how Clay focuses on one thing.

- AAW Member No. 50.
- Demonstrated at AAW's first Symposium in Lexington, Kentucky, 1987.
- Served on AAW's Board of Directors from 1997-1999, serving as vice-president 1998-1999, and on the AAW Board of Advisors 2000-2001.
- President of the Woodturners of North Texas in the early 1990s, one of the woodturning clubs that started "A Texas Turn or Two," which was to become SWAT (Southwest Association of Turners), with Clay serving as its first president.
- Frequent teacher at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, beginning in 1994.
- Taught numerous classes at Appalachian Center for Crafts, Marc Adams School, Center for Furniture Craftmanship, and Anderson Ranch Arts Center, and conducted demonstrations and classes for chapters, groups, ▶



**Clay Foster**, Bear Paw, 2007, Wood, paint, ink, 14" × 5" (36cm × 13cm)



Address post. Concrete, wood.



**Clay Foster,**  
Untitled, 2016,  
Wood, pigment,  
wire, tile grout,  
11" x 8" (28cm  
x 20cm)

and schools all over the U.S. and abroad.

- Attended several Emma Lake Collaborative conferences and Collaboration New Zealand twice.
- Participated in many major exhibitions over the last thirty years, including a solo museum exhibit, "Works in Wood: Clay Foster," at the Arkansas Art Museum.
- Work represented in public and significant private collections, including the Yale Museum of Art, Detroit Institute of Art, Arkansas Art Center, and others.
- Became a chicken farmer four years ago.

Of course, there is much more to knowing Clay Foster than reading about his accomplishments. Clay is my friend and colleague. The woodturning field fosters friendships, offering opportunities to build a network of like-minded woodturners. Last year, Clay and I co-taught a week-long class at Appalachian Center for Crafts and will do so again this year. Our shared history and friendship helps create a supportive, fun environment not only for us, but for our students.

### Connection to Arrowmont

Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts has a long and supportive connection with the woodturning field. The AAW was conceived at Arrowmont

during the conference/exhibition "Woodturning: Vision and Concept" in 1985 by a group of turners that included David Ellsworth and Dick Gerard, both AAW Honorary Lifetime Members.

Clay served as a director for Arrowmont 2013-2016. This was during a difficult time when the problematic relationship between the school and Pi Beta Phi sorority was finally resolved, resulting in Arrowmont now owning the property where the school is located. The directors subsequently started a capital campaign to address years of deferred maintenance caused by uncertainty about the school's future.

Clay's connection to Arrowmont and the AAW represents how the various organizations, as well as individuals, all play a role.

### Family matters

The AAW, local turning clubs, and the woodturning field itself are often referred to as "family." As is true of all families, along with support and friendships, there can be strife. Although Clay sometimes feels "at odds with the direction of the AAW, it has been a mutually beneficial relationship. My own support of the AAW, the many demonstrations I have done, donations made, and my Board service have added to the growth of the organization. In turn, I have benefitted from membership in the AAW." ■

“ Equally skilled with a table saw and router as well as with a lathe, Clay Foster is one of those Renaissance men who is willing to pass along his knowledge and expertise with grace and patience. I have learned much from him as have many others. I also respect the time he gave to Arrowmont School while he was on their board, a service that is valuable to us all. —Robyn Horn