

BINH PHO

AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER Kevin Wallace

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.



Binh Pho at work on a vessel of cast glass.



Binh Pho, *Roots of Heaven*, 2012, Box elder, cast glass, acrylic paints, 17" x 10" (43cm x 25cm)

Combining glass and wood, *Roots of Heaven* was part of a body of work illustrating the narrative *Shadow of the Turning*, by Binh Pho and Kevin Wallace. To create a glass piece like this, Binh turns and carves the wood vessel, then makes a mold to cast the glass.

Two careers

Binh is not the first to decide to maintain a professional career in one field, as well as a second career as an artist. Although it is unusual, he is not the first to have a mind that is equally at home in the realm of the arts and business—or to understand how to apply creativity to the concerns of a corporate executive. One thing that does set him apart is that he has exceptional energy—or Qi, to use the Chinese term—that allows him to maintain both careers with the same commitment of time, while maintaining a generosity of spirit to assist his countless friends in their endeavors. ▶

Early in his career as a woodturner, Binh Pho made a decision to keep his day job. It was in part a pragmatic decision—he had a wife and children to provide for, and the life of an artist is usually filled with financial challenges. Perhaps more importantly, it was an artistic decision. Binh had worked his way up as an exhibiting woodturner, from church bazaars to craft fairs, and was aware that a professional artist needed to create work for the marketplace. His voice as an artist was still emerging, yet being attracted to the artistic realm, he sought to heed that voice and create what he wanted, whether it sold or not.

Ultimately, this unique combination of artistic vision and business acumen allowed him to contribute greatly to the field of woodturning and to the AAW.

Transcending perceived limitations

Binh Pho is best known as an artist who has expanded the potential of woodturning,

shattering accepted boundaries and transcending perceived limitations along the way. His works utilize wood yet are not limited by the material or preconceptions regarding its use. In a field dominated by an embrace of the natural material and traditional forms, he has placed the idea or story front and center, using whatever techniques and media are necessary to realize his vision. He draws upon traditions of craft and fine art, while combining and reinventing them.

Today, one is likely to encounter a work by Binh Pho made of glass, yet woodturning remains central to the process of exploring form and utilizing the material. His artistic explorations have not only expanded his own work, they have redefined the field and created a market made up of those who previously collected glass or painting. If for no other reason, Binh Pho deserves to be awarded Honorary Lifetime Membership in the AAW for his work as an artist on behalf of all woodturners. Yet, this is only part of the story.

Binh's ability to work on considerably less sleep than the average person is well known in the woodturning field. John Hill learned this first hand: "When he visits us, I tell him that I am going to bed and he goes down to my shop until the wee hours of the morning, making art and talking to his employees and



Binh with mentors and friends, from left: Fletcher Hartline, Binh Pho, Michael Hosaluk, and Randy Glasco, 1997, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts.



From left: Randy Glasco, Binh Pho, Fletcher Hartline, and Frank Sudol, 1998, Binh's studio.

Binh Pho collaboration with Frank Sudol, *Heart in Heaven*, 2015, White birch, acrylic paints, 14" x 7" (36cm x 18cm)

In 2007, Frank Sudol's widow, Lois, gave Binh one of Frank's blank vessels. Binh finished the piece and titled it, *The World of Frank Sudol*. The piece sold in the AAW auction that year during the Symposium in Portland, Oregon, for a record \$30,000. The bidding between Frank's doctor, Michael Kowbel, and Dr. Jim York was highly competitive, but the Yorks ended up with the piece. Dr. Kowbel approached Binh after the auction and said he would like to have a similar collaboration piece, offering to donate an undisclosed amount to Lois. So Binh worked on another blank vessel from Frank, pictured here. *Heart in Heaven* was made in Frank's memory, and the hearts between the negative spaces are reminders that "we are sending our love to heaven."

customers around the world on his ever present mobile phone."

"Knowing Binh and his life story, I asked him several times to agree to serve on the AAW Board, believing that he would do a great job," Hill continues. "He finally agreed to be nominated and was elected and served the organization for six years with the same enthusiasm, vision, and drive that has made him a war survivor, top engineer with a worldwide company, a successful family man, a world-class artist, and generous teacher. He has done as much for the AAW and the wood art field as any other top leader that we have had."

Former AAW President David Wahl, who met Binh in the early 1990s in St. Louis, when they both started turning, credits Binh's wife Vi for understanding and supporting his woodturning pursuits. It was a career that called for him to spend almost every night working in the studio, not to mention countless weekends away from home. She was also central to handling the business of marketing DVDs and the tools he endorsed.



A friend to all

It is not just that Binh Pho has the energy to devote himself full-time to a career in business and that of an artist, but he somehow finds the time to be a true friend to a large number of individuals internationally. Despite the many demands on his time, Binh manages to speak regularly to friends and students, to offer advice to emerging artists, and is truly a life-long friend to those who are fortunate enough to be part of his life.

"Binh truly cares about helping people, and will put his plans and desires aside in order to help you do something," notes Wahl. "In the late 1990s, Binh was invited for the first time to go to the Emma Lake woodturning event in Canada, which also provided the opportunity to visit with one of his greatest mentors, Frank Sudol. He flew to Canada just before the event started, but when he got there he was told that his friend and woodturning mentor Fletcher Hartline had suddenly died in Southern Illinois. Binh left Canada and went to be with Fletcher's widow and help her with the funeral arrangements."

"The greatest benefit I received for volunteering to serve on the AAW Board was working closely with Binh Pho for six years and becoming his friend," says former AAW President Dale Larson. "Binh was a source of non-stop proliferation of ideas. He had many ideas every day and could explain why each of them was a good idea. In addition, he was able to explain to the Board how our decisions affected artists and the art world. This was critical to decision-making on the Board. I am honored to say Binh Pho is my friend."

Contributions

Binh Pho's contributions to the AAW and to the woodturning field include his merit as an artist, teacher, AAW Board member, and his generosity of spirit.

Binh has participated in both Educational Opportunity Grant (EOG) and Professional Outreach Program



Binh Pho, *To Be or Not To Be*, 2015, Bronze, silver, maple, acrylic paints, 5" x 8" (13cm x 20cm)

This piece combines wood and metal to express the meaning of Yin and Yang. Binh notes, "Life is filled with wonder. Some things happen for a reason, yet they're not always as they appear to be. A good thing may not be all good and a bad thing may not be all bad. Life and death, success and failure, love and loss, all present an endless cycle of all things in the balance of Yin and Yang."

(POP) exhibitions, bringing in more than twice as much as the next highest-selling artist. He was also central to creating the simultaneous online bidding process now used for both POP and EOG auctions, expanding the collector base and boosting the auction proceeds. "Binh personally knows all the major collectors and actively works with them to ensure their continuing support for the AAW," observes artist Malcolm Zander.

Binh's service to the AAW board alone is enough to earn him this honor, as those who worked with him gladly attest. "Binh was a force on the AAW Board," says Tom Wirsing, who served with Binh for five years. "He was immensely influential and so persuasive he became a powerful change agent. Many of the positive changes in the AAW that have benefited all of us had their genesis with Binh. The AAW underwent great change during Binh's time on the Board, and he was fundamentally involved in the changes. He is a visionary. He works very hard. He is very smart and perceptive. He understands the art world far better than most. We are all the beneficiaries of Binh's contributions."

"Binh Pho is one of the most relentlessly positive people I have ever met," says Jean LeGwin. "We worked together for four years on the AAW Board of Directors and during that very challenging time, Binh always sought solutions that were best for everyone—a win-win where all parties benefited. He never accepted the proposition that something couldn't be done or wouldn't work. Instead he chose to look for a way around (or even through) the troubling issue until a solution was found. The same drive that led him to escape Vietnam despite many failed attempts

drove him to continue finding solutions—he never gives up. His was never the loudest voice, but it was the most creative and persistent."

"Binh's support for the AAW is legendary," notes Kurt Hertzog. "He will donate his time, his work, his expertise, and go to bat for the organization whenever needed. He has always been there whenever I've asked anything. He is generous to a fault. When I think of someone I'd choose to have my back, I'd pick Binh as my first choice."

"Binh is a visionary beyond this world, and sees things in a very different light than the rest of us," notes Curt Theobald, who has worked with Binh in connection with the AAW's POP Committee, and as an artistic collaborator. "His ideas often work well; when they don't, the less than desirable outcome gives Binh alternate ideas to explore or be easily modified so the original vision becomes more and more elaborate and exciting." Binh's ability to multitask is legendary—something Theobald has experienced

repeatedly: "I have spent lots of time with Binh since I first met him, and he can be on a conference call that is muted, talk to me about something else, and airbrush his art simultaneously. He can quickly cancel the conference call mute to express his opinion and how he believes the problem needs to move forward, not missing a stroke with the airbrush. He is similarly a gifted coordinator/manager, and has the ability to keep multiple people on track to achieve a common goal in his day job as well as in his art studio."

"The wood art field is indebted to Binh, as he has pushed the boundaries beyond many people's comfort zone," Theobald adds. "He possesses a way of seeing things very acutely and differently intertwined inside his mind. We are all benefactors of his vision. With Binh's push, along with the founding turners of the modern woodturning movement, wood art is where it is today."

For more, visit binhpho.com.



Binh Pho takes the podium at the 2011 AAW International Symposium, Saint Paul, Minnesota.



Binh Pho served on the AAW Board of Directors for six years. Pictured here, the 2012 Board and staff, from left: Stan Wellborn, Kurt Hertzog, Binh Pho, Dale Larson, Jean LeGwin, Warren Carpenter, Cassandra Speier, Tom Wirsing, Linda Ferber (AAW Program Director), Phil McDonald (AAW Executive Director), and Botho von Hampeln.