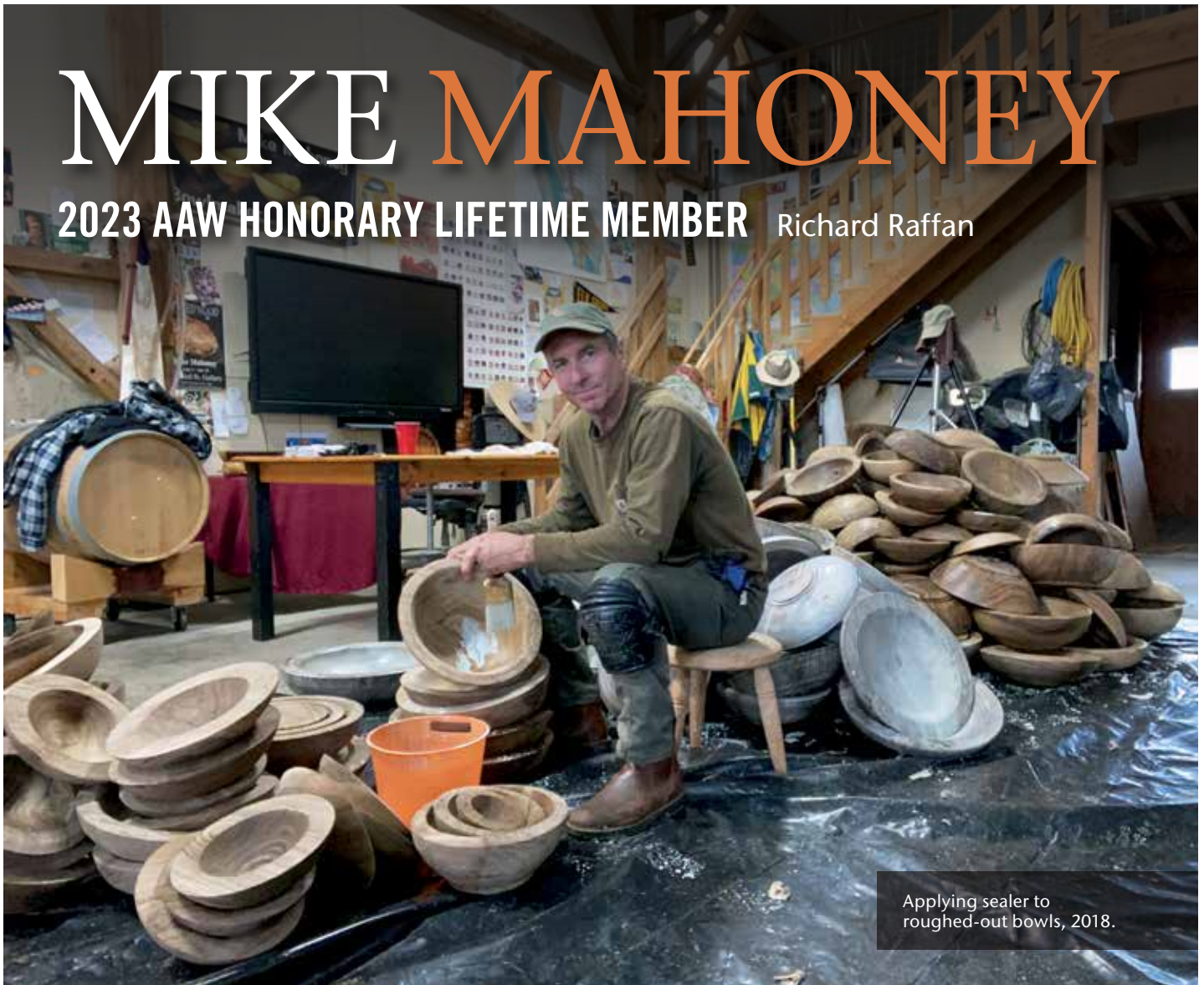


MIKE MAHONEY

2023 AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER Richard Raffan



Applying sealer to roughed-out bowls, 2018.

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. This year, the honor goes to Mike Mahoney, in recognition of his ongoing commitment and exceptional service to the AAW, as well as to the woodturning field in general.

Incidental renown

Many hobbyists dream of turning wood for a living, some desperately wanting to be internationally famous woodturning artists. Mike Mahoney attained this dream, but it was not a goal he intentionally set out to pursue.

Mike has never really been a hobby turner. Since attending his first craft market as a university student and novice turner, he's been able to make a living selling his turned work. He could have been just another successful small manufacturer making a good living, completely unknown in

woodturning circles. But fate, circumstance, and Mike's ability to capitalize on opportunities led to international renown as a bowl turner, and an interesting, creative, lucrative, and fulfilling life for him and his wife Jenni, who has been a major part of his success.

Mike first turned wood in 1978 at the age of 14, playing around on a Yates-American lathe with his father. They turned everything between centers and made only one bowl from a three-piece poplar glue-up. They hollowed it with a spade bit, chisel, and belt sander.

While at San Diego State University (SDSU), from which he graduated as a teacher, Mike discovered the school had a woodshop. Wandering through, he came across Jim Young hollowing a bowl. For Mike, this was a revelation, a eureka moment. First, there was no tailstock and, second, Jim did it all with a gouge. Mike hadn't realized SDSU offered a degree in woodworking. Totally seduced by the shavings, he signed up and got some formal instruction on using traditional gouges, skew chisels, and scrapers. This was 1982, when turning tools were still carbon steel and bowls were turned using a range of long-and-strong shallow gouges, now largely regarded as strictly for spindle turning. In North America, gouges milled from high-speed steel (HSS) round bars were still something of a novelty.

When SDSU decided to get rid of its old Oliver lathes, Mike was able to buy one for a dollar. He set up his new lathe on his back porch alongside a small bandsaw. Mike was soon spending all the hours he could turning plates, bowls, and boxes, accumulating cartons full of finished items. All of his work was smaller than 12" (30cm) in diameter (limited by the swing of his lathe) and sold each weekend at craft markets at a time when the handcrafts revival was well under way. What sold one weekend had to be replaced for the next. Making a range of items repetitively meant Mike became very familiar with all the traditional turning tools. Mike figured he was doing okay and getting pretty skillful until he went to the Utah Woodturning Symposium in 1987.

At the 1987 Utah Symposium, Mike saw professional turners for the first time. Watching Ray Key, Vic Wood, Allan Batty, and me, he reckoned he learned more in three hours than he'd taught himself in three years. Mike returned home, knowing what was possible, and set about achieving the same efficiency as the pros he'd just seen.



An early attempt at a vase in 1985 stands in stark contrast with the refined results achieved in 2007, when Mike made hollow forms for a Park City (Utah) craft show.



About the same time, Mike watched David Ellsworth turn, then cut in half, a hollow form. Blown away by the thin and even wall thickness, Mike knew he had to give *that* a go. His first attempt, using only gouges, was rather clunky, resulting in a form more like an enclosed bowl than a hollow form. Mike invested in a Stewart System Hollower and was soon creating more elegant and lighter-in-weight forms with small openings and drastically undercut rims.

For many years, one of Mike's regular demos has been turning a full-sized urn complete with a threaded lid. He has no problem completing an urn within the typical ninety minutes of a demonstration session. By now, Mike has made so many urns, he doesn't need calipers to measure wall thickness.

Mike graduated from SDSU in 1986, then for eighteen months taught science and physical education classes, despite making more money on the weekends doing craft markets. When he sold an olive burl vase to an interior decorator for \$200, a very good price at the time, Mike began thinking seriously about turning wood full time.

Establishing the business

In 1990, having decided Mike should go pro, the Mahoneys moved to Provo, Utah, attracted by the lower cost of living and much cheaper property.



One of Mike's early market stalls, Cherry Creek Arts Festival (Denver, Colorado), 1995. From left: Mike Mahoney, Jenni Mahoney, and Stuart Batty.

They rented a workshop in which Mike set up his lathe and bandsaw and got turning. And they bought a dilapidated 1870s brick house and set about restoring it, "doing all the sweaty equity" themselves. Their intent was to become debt free within a few years, eventually living on a few acres where they could grow things. So began a decade of long days at the lathe, with many evenings and weekends spent restoring houses. In between were a few craft shows. As if they didn't have enough to do, the Mahoneys purchased two more run-down houses and restored them. Mike reckons they've always been lucky with property, but that belies the astuteness and hard work that in 2001 got them into another fixer-upper, this time on 2½ acres in Orem, Utah, with superb views. They created a gem of a property, ▶



Redwood Burial Urn, 2010, Redwood, 10" x 10" (25cm x 25cm)



Madrone Burl Canister, 1995, Madrone burl, 10" x 8" (25cm x 20cm)

which they sold in 2010 to buy a farm in California just east of Sacramento—and another house to restore.

In the early 1990s, Mike did a few juried craft shows in Washington and Philadelphia, alongside well-established turners such as David Ellsworth, Alan Stirt, and John Jordan. There was lots of money around and he was successfully selling pieces for around \$1,000. The shows did Mike well, not least because he's easy and engaging to talk with, which is essential when selling your own work. However, craft shows are a lot of work and expensive

to attend. You need excellent photos for the jury (professional photos are expensive, so Mike learned to take his own), and your stand costs a small fortune, as does the fit-out. Then there's travel, accommodation, and shipping costs. Up-front expenses soon run well into four figures. The main benefit is that you get to meet potential buyers and sell to them directly. There's no commission. The downside is that you need to accumulate pieces you might otherwise sell immediately, and sales are not guaranteed. There are times when little or

nothing sells, so these shows are something of a gamble.

The wholesale route

When you go into business, it pays to have a business plan, but after a couple of years, Mike was still dithering over whether to concentrate on artsy stuff and being a famous "collectible" artist or sticking with the utilitarian bowls and giftware he had been turning. He was advised to take the utilitarian and wholesale route.

Dale Nish was a regular visitor to Mike's workshop and a mentor. "Dale was always telling me things I never wanted to hear but were true," Mike explains. "He told me all the green-turned bowls were never going to be marketable, that I needed to start roughing them out [and twice-turning them]." It was good advice that Mike took, although later he found a ready market in other woodturners who wanted to buy rough-turned bowls.

Initially, Mike found wholesaling a tough pill to swallow. He was used to selling direct at craft markets, so selling at half the price seemed counterintuitive. But he soon learned he could make more money because he didn't have to go out and deal with customers. As a wholesale manufacturer, you turn what's been ordered, you deliver the order on or before the requested date, and you're paid within 30 days. You don't accumulate much in the way of inventory.

To establish connections with retailers, Mike attended a few wholesale shows, offering only bowls 11" to 16" (28cm to 41cm) in diameter and hollow forms. Each show yielded months of work. I recall Mike being somewhat amused by the abuse from rival exhibitors who thought his bowls too cheap and that he should raise his prices. His response: "I'm making \$100 an hour. Few pro turners make that today." The rivals thought he was lying, that nobody could turn



Kitchen Set, 2001, Mormon poplar

a 12"-diameter bowl in an hour, let alone faster.

To calculate a wholesale price for a bowl or urn, indeed any job, Mike has an hourly rate to which he adds the cost of timber (currently \$10 per board foot) plus a small amount for overhead expenses. If Mike sells retail, he roughly doubles the wholesale price, but this varies based on what the market will pay. Mike sees no reason he shouldn't earn the same as a lawyer, especially as he's making objects that should outlast the lot of us.

To cope with the volume of orders, Mike employed someone to do the sanding. He'd turn a bowl and hand it to Tiz, who sanded and finished it on an adjacent lathe before handing it back to Mike to complete the foot. They averaged forty bowls a day. All bowls are now sanded to 400 grit, whereas it used to be 180 grit. The finish was always Mike's own Mahoney's Oil Wax Finish.

By the mid-1990s, Mike had narrowed and honed his bowl designs to a few basic forms, like his Mormon Poplar and Heirloom bowls, each with detailing that identified them as Mahoney bowls. For Mike, the most important aspect of any bowl or hollow form is its proportions. Trusting his eye rather than working slavishly to any universal rule, he finds his most satisfying forms are usually very close to the golden ratio.

The constant stream of orders from around sixty retailers meant Mike had no need to do any craft shows, and the business was going nicely. New customers paid up-front on a pro forma invoice, then got the standard 30 days in which to pay on subsequent orders. As a wholesaler, Mike avoided the uncertainty of consignment typically demanded by galleries.

Most spindle orders were declined until, in 2003, Mike was offered a contract making high-end lamp



Silver Maple Pioneer Nested Set, 1994, Silver maple, largest: 9" x 24" (23cm x 61cm)



Mormon Poplar Nested Set, 2007, Mormon poplar, largest: 5" x 14" (13cm x 36cm)



Mormon Poplar Bowl, 2008, Mormon poplar, 8½" x 23" (22cm x 58cm)

parts and desktop items in buckeye burl. It was difficult to cut cleanly and demanded accurate repetition, but it was a lucrative and regular income for fifteen years. Mike preferred to concentrate on bowls, so eventually he handed the contract to another turner.

Wood

Mike has mostly sourced his wood locally, often through arborists, recycling trees removed from streets, parks, and gardens due to age, size, or disease, and all due to be dumped or become firewood. Such wood is never free, as it always involves either time or money and often both. The great advantage for Mike is that he has total control over how a log is cut. Mahoney bowls are defect free with a lifetime guarantee ▶



As part of his production career, Mike turned buckeye burl lamp parts for a New York City company for nearly ten years.



Mormon Poplar Platter, 2008, Mormon poplar, 2" x 24" (5cm x 61cm)

against splitting. As Mike breaks down logs to liftable lumps, he takes particular care to eliminate all defects. Mike doesn't embellish his bowls, preferring simple classic utilitarian forms, but he does cut for interesting grain patterns, preferably with impressive figure.

Ancillary products

It's always useful to have several sources of income, especially when

running a business based on the output of one person. These days, Mike has four other income streams connected to turning, each producing enough on which to survive: Mahoney's Finishes, his videos, some tool royalties, and teaching/demonstrating.

As a student in San Diego, Mike met some Italians crushing walnuts, extracting oil for gunstocks. He realized the oil would be good on bowls and then learned that the allergens within walnut oil are easily removed by heat, making it a food-safe oil—and making it dry faster. Mike's background in chemistry helped develop his finishes, which are now sold largely through Amazon, Woodcraft, Rockler, and Craft Supplies USA. Mike's finishes now comprise a stand-alone business.

Teaching/demonstrating

Mike's first turning demonstration was at the Utah Woodturning Symposium in the mid-1990s. Within minutes of completing his demo, Mike was asked if he would consider doing club demos and hands-on workshops. He would. Long ago, Mike lost count of both the clubs he's been to and the symposia at which he's been a lead presenter. Woodturning has taken him all over North America, to Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

The annual Utah Woodturning Symposium impacted Mike's life in

many ways, as did Dale Nish who initiated and ran the symposium at Brigham Young University. When he set up shop in Provo, Mike soon got involved with the symposium, first as a helper and then as a regular paid presenter until Dale persuaded him to run the event.

Mike was the Utah Symposium Director from 2007 to 2010, a time-consuming and *pro-bono* job that occupied several weeks each year. He still had to churn out bowls to meet orders, so he expanded the organizing board of the symposium. Together, the leadership selected presenters, while Mike handled the finances, paid the bills, and oversaw the move away from BYU to Utah Valley University. He remained on the board until 2017. For seven years, Mike was Master of Ceremonies at the symposia, and for several years the Mahoneys accommodated demonstrators and hosted the wind-up party in their garden in Orem.

The Mahoneys have never offered classes at home, citing the hassles of increased bookwork, preparing meals and blanks, and finding accommodation for students. Yet Mike was always ambivalent about travel, so he was not unhappy when the Covid pandemic put a stop to traditional club demos. Instead, he went online and offered several demos a week, sometimes two in a day. These demos have been so successful, he no longer travels to

Large-scale production



Mike produces bowls on a grand scale, working from logs delivered to his California property.



Giant Clam, 2007, Madrone burl, largest: 9" x 14" (23cm x 36cm)

Giant Clam was made for a Smithsonian themed show, *The Great Barrier Reef*, and was sold at the associated craft show.



Jarrah Burl Nested Set, 2004, Jarrah burl, largest: 7" x 11" (18cm x 28cm)

clubs, only to major symposia and to Craft Supplies for his annual hands-on workshop.

Mike is an ardent ambassador for utilitarian woodware: he wants his bowls to be used. In his demos, he'll often show exhibition-quality bowls (not all his) that have been well-used day to day, fervently hoping to persuade more turners to use the bowls they've made. Then at markets he educates the wider public.

And now...

For a dozen years, the Mahoneys have lived on that small farm they purchased 50 miles east of Sacramento, close to where both were raised. They restored yet another house, this time a 1904 Sears kit home that most people would have bulldozed, and built a couple of barns and a workshop. In addition to Mike turning a few hundred bowls each year, they now harvest around 2 tons of pistachios from trees they planted, press oil from their own olives, and grow flowers.

The farm keeps them busy and contented, but in March 2022 the Mahoneys did take a vacation, the first in five years. Then 58, Mike reckoned

age might be catching up with him, finding he can't roll logs like he used to. He claimed he could barely lift his arms—which wouldn't be so surprising when in the previous three months he'd converted 80,000 lbs. of curly English walnut into roughed-out bowls. The walnut comes from nearby ranches, where elderly trees are routinely up-rooted and burnt. Fortunately, some orchardists are happy to sell truckloads of logs and stumps for a few thousand dollars. Mike marks what he wants, negotiates a price, then transports the logs back to his wood lot for processing.

On YouTube, you can watch Mike shape a bowl profile in about two minutes, then core out the center in about the same time using a McNaughton Bowl Saver. Inside five minutes, he has at least three roughed bowls with highly figured grain. So each can be guaranteed flawless and devoid of splits, all the bowls are seasoned for nine months before being sold. Mike is ▶



Hollow Peppermills, 2009, Various woods

AAW demonstrator



Mike demonstrating bowl coring with the McNaughton system at the 2022 AAW Symposium, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

Battle of the Bowls



Over the years, a constant crowd-pleaser has been the Battle of the Bowls, where Mike has gone head-to-head in a playful “competition” with friend Stuart Batty.

Photos: Andi Wolfe

old-school in that a split is a split and in no way artistic. “Wood that has cracked over time is usually due to poor wood selection by the craftsperson,” he says. Mike’s bowls come with a lifetime guarantee that covers normal use. Some were featured in a movie for which Mike was a consultant: the script called for someone to hurl bowls against a wall in fury, shattering them. Problem was Mike’s bowls bounced off the wall and floor, barely damaged, so he had to break up and reassemble a few so they’d fall apart when they hit the wall.

Increasingly, Mike is selling rough-turned bowls, which means less time

turning. And it frees up time for working his land; he enjoys planting and grafting trees as he develops his nut groves—hopefully to provide wonderful timber for future woodworkers.

As they ease into what many regard as retirement years, Mike and Jenni still attend markets in the summer because they enjoy interacting with people as they sell their pistachios, olive oil, Jenni’s flowers, and quite a few bowls. An assistant now manages all online orders, packing up and shipping finishes and roughed bowls. And young muscle is employed part time to help with the heavier tasks and harvesting.

Life couldn’t be much better, and there’s time for pastimes like searching out huge trees, hiking, birding, and hobby turning in the form of pepper mills. Mike has always called himself a woodturner, quipping that he’s not starving, so he can’t be an artist. ■

For more on Mike Mahoney, visit bowlmakerinc.com.

Richard Raffan is a semi-retired professional turner living in Canberra, Australia, now best known as author of classic woodturning books and videos. For more, visit richardraffan.com.au and his YouTube channel, Richard Raffan Woodturning.

Serving the Woodturning Community

Mike’s experience running the Utah Woodturning Symposium helped him recognize the dedication that went into teaching woodturning. He explains: “Dale Nish, Albert LeCoff, David Ellsworth, Kip Christensen, and many others were dedicated to helping

American woodturners be safe and become better craftsmen. I saw that the AAW was committed to that mission and wanted to help the process along. I attended my first AAW Symposium in 1995, and I have only missed one since then. I have been a demonstrator many times. I have been involved

with the POP Committee for many years and also helped on the Demonstrator and Awards Committees. I would not trade my AAW service experiences for anything. In what art or craft can you mingle with and learn from the best makers in the world?”



Left: At the 2016 AAW Symposium in Atlanta, Georgia, Mike served as a panelist in the Instant Gallery Critique program, along with Jeffrey Bernstein, Kip Christensen, and Dale Couch.

Right: Mike offers an intimate critique for attendees during the 2022 AAW Symposium in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Photos: Andi Wolfe