

Anniversary Profiles Judy Dittmer, Member #281



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

I attended the "Vision and Concept" conference at Arrowmont in 1985; I was unfamiliar before then with the field of turning, and was quite blown away by what I saw and learned there. I sat with Dick Gerard during the picnic as he talked about his idea for an organization dedicated to promoting woodturning. It sounded like a great way to stay involved with the turning world, so I joined.

When you look at your pieces from 1986, what do you see?

I see the seeds of ideas that continue to interest me thirty years later. Turning is such an ostensibly simple process, but it offers so many possibilities that it is impossible to run out of ideas as long as you pay attention.

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

I can't bring it down to one, but I learned to use a bowl



In the thirty weeks leading up to AAW's 30th Anniversary Symposium in Atlanta, we will be sharing the stories of members who joined in 1986 and are still members today. We hope you enjoy their memories and insights!

Click [here](#) to read this and other profiles online.

About Judy Dittmer

An artist, turner, teacher, writer, observer and thinker, Judy Dittmer started building furniture as a hobby in the early 1980s after taking a weeklong course. Mostly self-taught, she bought a Shopsmith, and if she couldn't figure something out she attended 'sawdust sessions' or called the company for advice. Judy went from hobbyist to professional in the mid-80s, when she closed her wholesale natural foods delivery business, and started working in a cabinet shop.

When she attended the Arrowmont conference, she was drawn to the intuitive and improvisational aspects of turning. "As a child, I always liked to make things and to take things apart and figure out how they work. I never got much encouragement, though, even when I went to art school," Judy related in Tony Lydgate's book, *The Art of Making Small Boxes*. "I'd about given up on being able to do art for a living when I discovered woodturning...(I thought) this is what I've been

gouge from Liam O'Neill, and a certain way of looking unsentimentally at the work from Palmer Sharpless. They, and many others, taught me more than I can remember about the work. I learned so many ways of seeing the possibilities in turning.

But I'd say, leaving aside the specifics of technique, tools, and so on that I learned from the many generous teachers, it's ultimately the process of turning itself that has taught me the most. It's those hours at the lathe, and the breakthroughs in understanding such time brings, that have revealed the deepest things to me.

What was your funniest turning moment?

Wow, that's a hard one. There have been so many. But I'd say two of them took place in the same demo I was doing out in Utah many years ago: I managed to put a 30° bend in a bowl gouge. Shortly after that, I had a large scraper break off at the tang. I made a lot of guys really happy that day!

What was your happiest turning moment?

Never just one, but I do remember taking my first bowl off the lathe and feeling so amazed that I had made that. And so often there are times when everything is happening so smoothly that the piece seems to be turning itself, and those are always very happy times.

What is your favorite tool and why?

I have two favorite tools: the bowl gouge, ground with very long sides; and the medium-sized spindle gouge, the one made from a round bar of steel, also ground with very long sides. I often tell students that with those two tools, I can do 95% of everything I need to do at the lathe.

Your favorite wood?

If I had to choose one favorite wood, it'd be dogwood. It turns like a dream, and it is so exquisitely, subtly beautiful. And I've seen more variation in color and grain in it than in any other wood I've used.

What do you see as the biggest change in the field?

The huge increase in numbers of female turners, of course!

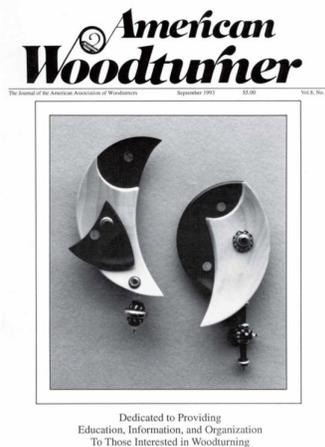
If you couldn't be a woodturner, what would you do instead?

Well, I used to always say I'd be a potter, but I'm learning to make lampwork glass beads now, so I suppose that is the answer.



looking for."

Not long after that, she quit the cabinet shop and went into the woodturning business for herself, taking on a variety of orders, selling her turned work wholesale and at craft fairs, and teaching. As a businesswoman, she studied the market, developing pieces, like her signature earrings. Collectors are a rare breed, and she wanted her work to appeal to buyers who may or may not have had an interest in turning.



Judy's cover story on earrings in the [Fall 1993](#) issue of AW.

In a 1997 feature in *Woodwork* magazine, Judy discussed the difficulties of being a self-supporting craftsperson with serious health issues, and described the difference between accepting and giving up, using her struggles to make a bowl from a piece of corky beech as an example. "Giving up is the end of everything. Acceptance is something different. Acceptance is where you say: 'No, this isn't what I thought it was going to be, and this isn't what I wanted it to be, but here is what it is.' And that's the same way that piece was: It wasn't what I thought it was going to be or what I wanted it to be. But I went ahead and worked with it, and it turned out to be incredible."

Judy has taught turning across the United States and Canada. In 2000 she received an Educational Opportunity Grant to teach and facilitate the start of a woodturning program in a Michigan high school, making sure before she left that the shop teacher was well on his own way as a turner. Judy says she loves

Do you still have *American Woodturner* back issues? Where do you keep them?

I'm sure I have most or all of them, though they are scattered everywhere.

Has being a part of AAW affected your life and work? How?

It changed my life completely. I became a full-time turner after that first gathering at Arrowmont. So AAW changed my life before it even existed!

What's your favorite project/piece?

Two of my favorite pieces: this wall sculpture, of sycamore and olive wood (below); and this little pear wood bowl (bottom).



Favorite piece turned by another artist?

I cannot even begin to narrow it down to one. But one of my very favorite turned items is a chess set made by my good friend, Mark Burhans.



Chess pieces by Mark Burhans of Athens, Ohio.

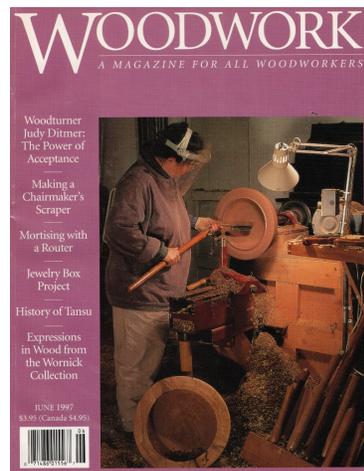
If you could give your 30-years-younger self some

to teach "wherever and whenever I can," and she is active on the Women in Turning site, where her hard-earned insights on process, life, design and technique show her to be a true educator.



Judy is the author of two books on turning, [Turning Wooden Jewelry](#) and [Basic Bowl Turning With Judy Ditmer](#), and has written articles for *Fine Woodworking*, *Popular Woodworking* and *American Woodturner*, among other publications.

She loves to read, and is interested in the natural world, science, art, animals and people. Along with five cats, Judy lives in the Piqua, Ohio house her grandparents moved into shortly after she was born.



Judy was featured in a 1997 article 'The Power of Acceptance' by Kerry Pierce in *Woodwork* magazine. Photographer uncredited.

-Tib Shaw

advice about being a turner what would you say?
Having recently endured two hand surgeries, I'd tell myself to see a specialist immediately upon the first signs of joint pain in the hand!



This small bleached box elder bowl was selected for an Instant Gallery critique in 2003. "This is a wonderful example of a bowl," Betty Scarpino praised. "If you want to learn how to make a bowl, take a class from her."



Assorted tops. The 'mini-spinnies' can be converted from earrings to tops.

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