

Anniversary Profiles S. Gary Roberts Member #16



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

In 1986 I saw a notice in *Fine Woodworking* magazine that an association of woodturners was being formed and that those turners interested should contact Bob Rubel at his phone number in San Marcos, Texas. I live in Austin and had business interests in near-by San Marcos, holding a staff meeting there weekly. I contacted Bob and arranged a meeting to discuss the association formation. I offered to help with the business part of bringing the organization to life.

Rubel said that there had been a meeting at Arrowmont and a few turners had decided to try to form an association. He'd agreed to act as an administrator to get things started. I drafted a set of bylaws and a basic organizational constitution, and had my attorney prepare an application for a Texas corporate charter. I took it myself to the Secretary of State's office here in Austin to be registered. The registration fee was \$25.00, and because we had not as yet collected any membership monies, I paid the fee myself. (I never did get the \$25.00 back!)

So, the first corporate charter for "The American Association of Woodturners" was issued in Texas in 1986 with Bob Rubel as Administrator.



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 S. Gary Roberts

Gary Roberts has been working with wood since the tender age of five, when his grandfather gave him an old pocket knife. Not unreasonably, his mother and grandmother worried that he would cut himself. According to Gary, this was not a concern to his grandfather, who said, "Yes, he will, and each time he'll learn to be better at woodcarving." Some years later, his brother Larry helped him set up a Shopsmith and gave him his first lesson. He also introduced him to Rude Osolnik, who became both mentor and friend to the brothers. "I'm not sure whether I owe all of the praise or all of the fault of my woodturning obsession to my brother," Gary observes.

During his a career as a commercial Realtor and business consultant, Gary served as president of both

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

I had been turning for a few years when the organization was formed. Mostly bowls and boxes. Some pretty nice, and some so-so.

If you could give your 30-years-younger self some advice about being a turner what would you say?

As to advice for 30 years ago, I would say that the more you turn, the better you will get, so practice—a lot!

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

My greatest teacher and for whom I still hold in the greatest respect was Rude Osolnik.



What was your funniest turning moment?

I don't remember a funniest moment. I guess I always took turning too seriously.

What was your happiest turning moment?

My happiest moment was when I was surprised at the 1998 Symposium by being selected as an "Honorary Lifetime Member" and presented a plaque by Charles Alvis, AAW President.

What is your favorite wood and why?

My favorite wood, by far, is Texas mesquite because of its graining and stability.



Gary at the lathe

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

The biggest change in turning is that the organization had gotten away from basic teaching, ie, teaching basics and is more for the gallery turners.

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

the Austin Commercial Real Estate Society and the Austin Board of Realtors, experience that was invaluable in his early role helping to organize the essential legal and business beginnings of the budding AAW.

Along with carving and turning, Gary has other passions: travel and service. He brought all of four together as a volunteer for the U.S. State Department and the International Executive Service Corps, teaching woodworking in developing countries in connection with the USAID program. He and his wife, Imogene (Gene) traveled to Russia, Egypt, Ecuador, Africa, Malawi, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Barbados, Australia and many other countries to help people make a better living for their families.

Once the AAW was formed, Gary and others realized that people needed resources close to home, and he was instrumental in founding the [Central Texas Woodturners Association](#), one of the earliest AAW local chapters. "I promoted the forming of chapters around Texas and the Southwest by offering to come do a free demonstration and furnishing them with copies of organizational documents," he says. "I made many enjoyable trips and assisted in forming any number of Chapters in this area and others."

Gary has published articles for many wood-related publications, including *Fine Woodworking*, *American Woodworker*, *Chip-Chats* and *American Woodturner*. He is the author of two books on advanced turning techniques, [Masterful Woodturning](#) and [The Art of Fine Woodturning](#), both published through Sterling.

I was a woodcarver before I took up the lathe. They are both still my favorite pastimes.

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

Yes, I still have quite a few of the earlier journals. I keep them in my shop and would love to send them to someone who could use them. I could use the space.

A MASHRABEYA VESSEL

Incorporating traditional Egyptian turning

S. GARY ROBERTS

THE TRADITIONAL EGYPTIAN wood-turned punch, called *mashrabeya*, caught my eye when we recently visited the Middle East. I had agreed with the International Executive Service Corps to do my fifth project overseas in Cairo, Egypt. The other projects had been to warm climates during our winter months. That worked out great! I've enjoyed the travel as well as teaching other woodworkers in developing countries some of our techniques. This time it was the Egyptian desert in July and August.

Since Cairo is also 31 degrees north latitude, I assumed that their climate would be similar to our Texas summer. It was that and then some. Daily temperatures were above 105 degrees, and on one occasion during a summer sand storm it passed 125 degrees. No rain fell during the eight weeks we were there—none. Average rainfall in that area is less than 1 inch annually.

In this climate, *mashrabeya* fits right in. William Lyster, in his article, "Mashrabeya," (published in the November, 1988 issue of *Places in Egypt*) notes that the term *mashrabeya* means, literally, "a drinking thing," referring to the use of *mashrabeya* to enclose unglazed earthenware water bottles placed in windows to cool the air that ventilates houses.

As Lyster aptly describes it, *mashrabeya* is "a series of balls connected to each other by cylindrical links, forming a gridlike pattern.... The arrangement of balls and links can become incredibly complex by increasing the number of elements added to the basic grill.... Particularly well made *mashrabeya* can have as many as 2,000 pieces within a square meter of grill work."

Mashrabeya was initially and primarily used to form window shut-

ters or screens so that medieval ladies of well-to-do houses could view the activity of the street without having to wear veils or reveal themselves, which was forbidden by their Islamic society. As already mentioned, they also provided ventila-

tion and a kind of air conditioning in the dry hot climate. Balconies and doorways as well as windows throughout the older sections of Cairo display this distinctly Egyptian craft. In addition to complex geometric designs, *mashrabeya* also



An authentic *mashrabeya* panel forms the backdrop for the author's first vessel incorporating the challenges of small-scale production spindle turning and assembly.

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Gary has written articles for *American Woodturners* on everything from *matryoshka* dolls to [mashrabeya](#) to [music boxes](#); from *baseballs* to *pie crimpers* to *geehaw whammy doodles*. An example of one of his *pie crimpers* is below.



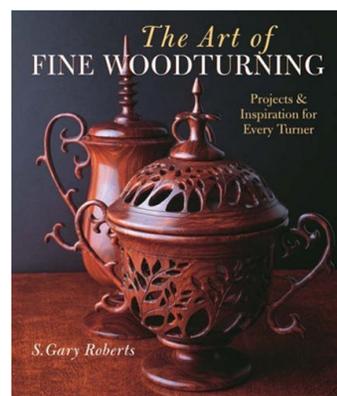
Has being a part of AAW affected your life and work? How?

The AAW and the local chapter have provided a wonderful source of friends and fellowship.

I have believed in the function and purpose of the AAW from the day I first heard the concept until today. I am proud beyond description to have been a small part of its growth and maturity. My morning cup is an AAW mug given to me years ago; it has my name on it and says "Founding Member."

What's your favorite project/piece? (and send us a picture!)

My favorite piece is "Cinderella's Carriage" that I made in 2002.



He has exhibited in several juried shows; his first was 1987's "Vessels and Forms" show in Houston, sponsored by Pete Hutchinson. One of Gary's pieces is used as a teaching aid at the University of Texas School of Architecture and Engineering, and another, representing the beauty of mesquite, on display in the Chancellor's Office of Texas A&M.

After he retired in 1985, Gary and Gene were able to pursue many shared interests. They are serious birdwatchers, and for ten years were volunteer bird guides with the National Parks Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife. They enjoy traveling, boating, fishing, butterflying and consider themselves privileged to have visited all 50 U.S. states, as well as all 10 Canadian provinces, and all 31 Mexican states. Often traveling in their motor home, they were able to stop to visit local chapter meetings along the way. Gary didn't have to miss out on any turning time: he mounted a lathe on the back bumper of their Jamboree.



Gary's traveling lathe set-up was featured in Scott Landis'



Favorite piece turned by another artist?
My favorite piece by another is Rude Osolnik's set of candlesticks.



An example of Rude Osolnik's candlesticks. AAW Permanent Collection, donated by the Osolnik family.

[The Workshop Book](#), in 1998.

The Robertses call Austin, Texas home. They have one daughter, four grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren, all of whom live nearby, and brother Larry lives only a few hours away.

Gary and Gene have recently celebrated their sixty-fifth wedding anniversary, enjoying a "fancy lunch" out at the Dairy Queen. They were high school sweethearts and "still fall in love everyday."



Gary and Gene, ready for bird-watching at Nogal Pass

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