

Anniversary Profiles
Albert LeCoff
Member #6



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

As one of the founders of the AAW I recognized the need for a national organization to galvanize and promote the woodturning field like other craft organizations already had for ceramics, glass, etc...

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

I stopped full-time making in 1986 to establish the Wood Turning Center (now [The Center for Art in Wood](#)) with my brother Alan. As a maker, I used the lathe to create functional sculpture, inspired by Stephen Hogbin's techniques of splitting and reassembling elements.



In the thirty weeks leading up to AAW's 30th Anniversary Symposium in Atlanta (and for a few weeks after!) 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 Albert LeCoff

In 1986, David Ellsworth's President's Message declared, "Happy 10th Anniversary!" It would be months yet before the AAW celebrated even its **first** anniversary - what he was referring to was the 10th anniversary of the first woodturning symposium, led by Albert LeCoff.

The sons of an engineer and the grandsons of a flower vendor, Albert and his twin, Alan, were born in Philadelphia in 1950. Albert started woodworking in shop class in junior high, and took to it immediately: as an eighth-grader he created a French Provincial side table to match his grandmother's furniture at home. He continued woodworking in high school, where he was also a standout on the gymnastics team. Awarded



Case with split turnings by Albert LeCoff, c 1979-1980

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

Continue to study other artist's techniques and designs to inspire my own ideas.

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

My high school wood shop teacher instructed and encouraged me and my fellow students to study and develop ideas for work from the art books located in the middle of the shop and to change at least one element so you are never copying.

What was your funniest turning moment?

Giles Gilson responded to a design challenge I staged for our 10th Woodturning Symposium. He responded by burning the pieces of wood.

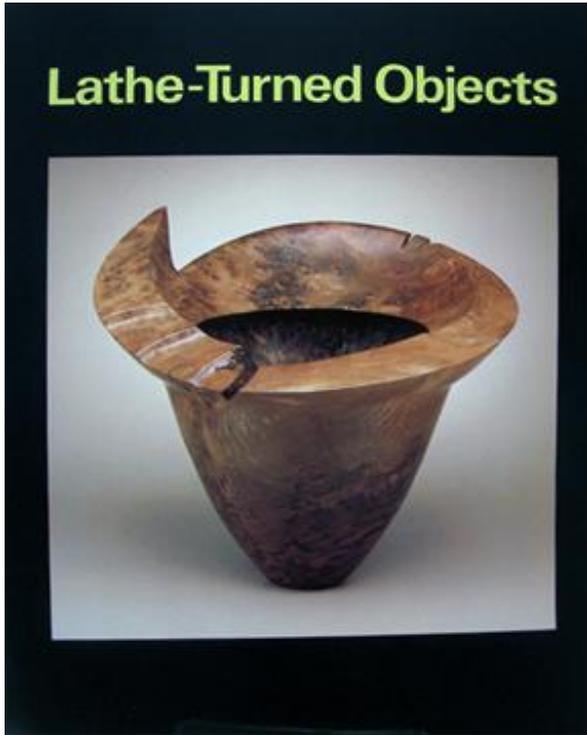


Giles Gilson (1942-2015). Burned wood, plastic, tape, ink, 1981

an athletic scholarship to Temple University, he left after a few years for Antioch, where he could design his own program, combining visual arts courses and an apprenticeship. He earned a degree in Arts and Crafts, with a minor in mathematics. Through a family friend, Albert was offered the required apprenticeship by Manny Erez, a production turner from Israel who ran his own shop in Philadelphia as well as working full-time for a furniture company. Albert wasn't originally taken with the prospect of production turning, but after watching Erez fluidly reproduce a newel post by eye, Albert comprehended, as he later put it, "the art in the craft of woodturning." He was hooked. In a year, Erez said, Albert could take over the business. It took two years, but in 1974 the Amaranth Gallery and Workshop opened. Not one to tolerate much down time, Albert also taught woodworking at a school for emotionally-challenged youth, a local YMCA, and a private day school; his students ranged from kindergartners to senior citizens.

Considering graduate school, he took a tour of the wood studio at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Students learned that Albert was a turner and peppered him with questions about the lathe; that encounter led to a three-day workshop, the success of which in turn led him to think how he could reach more people. Another former student of Manny Erez's, Palmer Sharpless, taught industrial arts at the George School, a private Quaker school with a well-equipped shop in Newtown, Pennsylvania, and together with Alan LeCoff, the three organized what would become a twice-yearly event held from 1976-1981. Grad school fell by the wayside, but as David Ellsworth noted, the original George School symposium marked the birth of what would become an expansive woodturning community built

What was your happiest turning moment?
Seeing the public's response to the first museum exhibition of international lathe-turned objects, presented in 1987 by me and the Wood Turning Center. This project was the [International Turned Object Show](#) (ITOS), held at the Port of History Museum, Philadelphia with an accompanying publication entitled *Lathe-Turned Objects*.



What is your favorite tool/wood and why?

Computers, email and the Internet - what fast ways to work and stay in touch!

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

More curators including wood and woodturned objects in museum exhibits and collections.

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

Teach junior and high school industrial arts.

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

Yes, at The Center for Art in Wood, in the Fleur and Charles Bresler Research Library.

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

Of course ... from the organization's beginnings, to the important ongoing role of the *American Woodturner* journal, to the annual "reunion" of people at the AAW symposiums !

What's your favorite project/piece?

As an artist - this lectern and *huppah*.

As co-founder: incorporating the nonprofit Wood Turning Center in 1986 in Philadelphia, now The Center for Art in Wood. 2016 is also the Center's 30th anniversary, and my 40th anniversary working in the wood field.

on sharing knowledge and resources.

"At a time when turners were few and we were all isolated, he brought us all together," remembers Al Stirt. "That really helped the field. And he doesn't seem to get as much credit for it as it warrants. The synergy and energy that these gatherings released was very wonderful and very important...Albert LeCoff had an incredible effect on woodturning."



Janet Eshelman, Albert LeCoff, Alan LeCoff, Paul Eshelman, and Palmer Sharpless at the first George School Symposium, March 1976

In 1981, in conjunction with the last symposium, Albert organized the *Turned Object Show* exhibition and catalog. It was followed by 1987's *International Turned Object Show*, created with the AAW, and, with Yale University, the 2001 survey exhibition *Wood Turning in North America Since 1930*.

More On The International Turned Objects Show (ITOS)

Well, when you stop and think about it, it makes sense — a truly unique and challenging idea. ITOS is your once-in-a-lifetime event. Our ITOS is no exception. Here we are, now, some 17 months away from our opening and you have the privilege of becoming one of the few who will see this work as it is being made. But let us get back to it and explain what this is all about. The International Turned Objects Show is a juried and international exhibition. Only lathe-turned objects will be accepted for the show. It will open on September 11, 1987 in Philadelphia at the Port of History Museum. It will close on November 15th. Not just you, we would love to see the show. It is co-organized by the AAW and by the Society of Philadelphia Woodturners and sponsored by the Port of History Museum, City of Philadelphia. Albert LeCoff is the exhibition's curator. There will be a number of categories: functional, decorative, utilitarian, turned objects, turned production objects, architectural works, small-scale turned, turned metal turning (e.g. turned open turners, metal turning, ring, etc.), ornamental lathe objects, and turned instruments.

Competition is open to all. Works must be original and not show undue inspiration. In the JURIED section, Blake Chisicki, Lionel Herman, and Jonathan Parkhake will make the selections. Finally, they will review slides; their final decisions will be based on the work's appearance. In the INVITED section, David Ellsworth, Albert LeCoff, and Bruce Anshel will choose. Invitations issued on an individual basis. Invitations to exhibit are based on the artist's reputation and their work has had some local or national exposure. The exhibitors will be notified by the Port of History Museum in Philadelphia. Slide copies are due by November 11 of THIS year. For details of entry fees and requirements, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to our main AAW address. NOTE: If you know of a museum that you think might be interested in exhibiting this show, please have them contact the International Turned Objects Show, 1000 Potomac St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

ITOS announcement in American Woodturner, 1986

Albert was one of the key founders of the AAW, and its first vice-president, but he stepped down not long after to co-found another institution in 1986: The Wood Turning Center. Originally conceived of as "a place full of lathes, with a library and an exhibition space," it quickly became a site for innovative and imaginative shows and programming. Again, he



Two of Albert's projects from the early 1980s: a lectern and a wedding huppah



paired with his brother Alan, whose skill at handling the details complemented Albert's talents in dream-spinning, relationship-building and leadership. Now known as The Center for Art in Wood, it has produced over 100 exhibitions, published 20 catalogs, and sponsors the annual Windgate ITE International Residency Program for competitively-selected wood artists, furniture makers, sculptors, scholars and photojournalists. The Center has worked with over 30 Philadelphia schools, and its library and permanent collection are a valued resource for artists and researchers.

Pursuing dreams as ambitious and evolving as the George School symposia and The Center for Art in Wood has required sacrifice: Albert dropped his gymnastics dreams in 1975, and stopped turning full-time in 1986. In 1990, he married Tina, an artist and landscape architect who worked for the National Park Service. "David Ellsworth tried to warn me, but I unknowingly married the Center when I married Albert," Tina wrote for a Center event honoring Albert and Alan. "The Center moved with Albert and me into our first house, and lived with us from 1990 to 2000...The assistants, the crates, the mail, the props—they came, they worked, and went their own ways, while Albert lived and breathed the next exhibit, the next book." Since her retirement from landscape architecture, Tina has assisted Albert over the years as a grant writer and buyer for the museum store.

Named an Honorary Lifetime Member of the AAW in 2008, Albert is also the recipient of the Collectors of Wood Art Lifetime Achievement Award (2003). That year, he was also named an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council. A 2011 tribute from Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter, recognized "Albert LeCoff and The Center for Art in Wood for more than three decades of



Albert's project from the mid-80s to today. The Center has an exhibition gallery, museum collection, research library, and a museum store to help support its programs. Below: the Center's earlier location, shown in 2008



collaborative and visionary work to create recognition for wood artists and to exhibit their contemporary works of fine art and craft at Philadelphia's newest center for art."

Now married for more than 25 years, Albert and Tina live in Philadelphia. Together, they enjoy traveling and looking for indigenous folk art.



Tina, Albert, and Alan

Learn more:

<https://centerforartinwood.org/>

[President's Message.](#)
American Woodturner, 1986

[Albert LeCoff, Ambassador of a Woodturning Passion.](#) by Jacques Vesery. *American Woodturner*, Spring 2008

[Celebrating Our Founders: Albert and Alan LeCoff](#) Center for Art in Wood, 2013

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