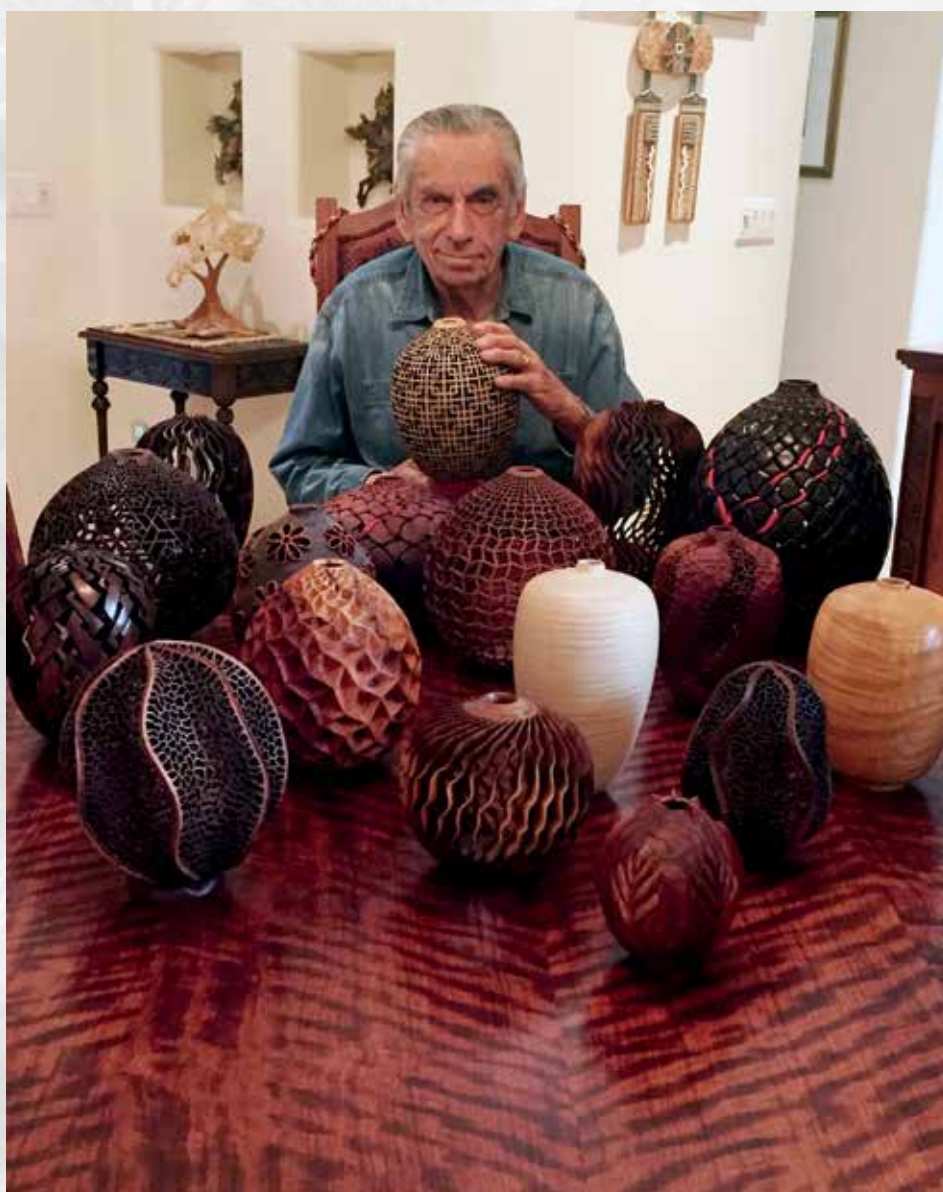


J. Paul Fennell

2023 POP Merit Award Recipient

Terry Martin

The AAW's Professional Outreach Program (POP) grants the Merit Award to individuals who have shown exceptional development in their careers as artists and whose artworks have directly influenced or had a significant impact on other artists within the field of woodturning. This year, this prestigious award goes to J. Paul Fennell. To learn more about the POP, the Merit Award, and past recipients, visit tiny.cc/AAWPOP.



The Fennell "Family"

An inspirational career

There are several reasons a woodturner might be given the POP Merit Award. It could be because of a lifetime dedicated to teaching, or because the awardee has created an influential body of work that has inspired a generation of turners. That element of longevity is significant because the kind of knowledge and credibility required can take a lifetime to build, so most awardees are elders of our community. J. Paul Fennell's turning career spans fifty-two years, and he has been a constant at symposia in the U.S. and around the world, both as a presenter and a demonstrator. He attended his first woodturning symposium in Philadelphia in 1980, became AAW member #297 in 1986, and has missed only one AAW symposium since then.

Equally significant for the selection of Merit Award recipients can be the kind of work that sometimes goes unrecognized, such as working on committees that benefit the turning community. Paul served on the POP committee for fifteen years and even served as chair for some of those years. He is particularly proud of originating the Artist Showcase, a POP-sponsored program that offers an opportunity for lesser-known woodturners who are creating important work to be given appropriate recognition. He cites Helga Winter as a significant example.

Because of his many years on the POP committee, Paul has a deep understanding of the Merit Award selection process. He explains that in addition to giving appropriate recognition to



Service to the AAW

(Left) J. Paul Fennell offers feedback for Donna Zils Banfield during an intimate critique session at the 2011 AAW Symposium, Saint Paul, Minnesota. At this year's Symposium in Louisville, Paul will be a juror for the instant gallery awards and for the critique session that follows.

(Right) Representing the POP Committee, Paul presents the POP Merit Award to Jacques Vesery, 2015, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Photos: Andi Wolfe

certain individuals, the award also “enhances the perception of the aesthetic of wood as a legitimate art form.” It must be a source of great satisfaction to Paul that he has now been recognized by another group of committee members for the very same reasons.

But there is another reason Paul has been selected—his integrity and modesty. Paul is the AAW's champion for these qualities. He never speaks without pausing to reflect on what impact his words will have, and he is only ever spoken of with respect among the many whose life he has influenced. He can best be described by that word that is not much spoken these days—a gentleman. This is evident in his response to this year's award: “The past awardees are very prominent people, and it's such a wonderful group that I feel honored to be included.” To be listed among the company of artists such as Mark Lindquist, David Ellsworth, Michelle Holzappel, and Richard Raffan is about as good as it gets.

Background

Paul's selection could be justified only on the basis of his remarkably cohesive body of work. In the opening photo, he sits in his home with seventeen pieces that embody years of creativity. The first piece of turned woodwork Paul ever made, in 1970, is the small table in the background. He also made the large table his pieces are sitting on from what he calls “spectacular

bubinga.” The turned works are similar in that they tend to have the most common ovoid shape of hollow vessels in contemporary turning, courtesy of David Ellsworth's pioneering work. But the collective impact of Paul's work is that, despite this connection between all of the pieces, they are each unique. His turning is as skilled as it gets, but it is the astonishing variety of post-turning work that distinguishes his work as that of a creative and engineering genius.

I wrote about Paul in 2015, and that article says much about his amazing professional background

and development as an artist. Reading that story now also highlights just how much his work has evolved in the eight years since then, both creatively and technically. The timing of Paul's 2023 POP Merit Award coincides nicely with his recently published process article in the February 2023 issue of *American Woodturner*. I don't need to describe just how technically brilliant he is, as you can hear about it from Paul himself. The word *master* is often misused, but I am in no doubt Paul should be acknowledged as an undisputed master. See *Explore!* sidebar for article references. ►

Creativity with technical expertise



Taking inspiration from patterns, Paul also has the technical expertise to pull off his creative visions.

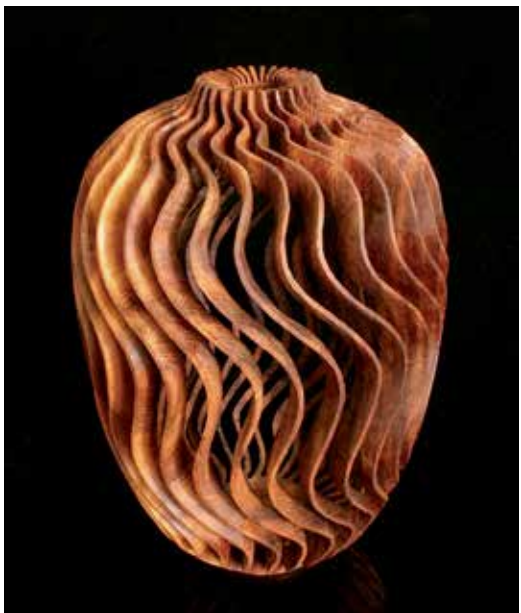
MORE ON J. PAUL FENNEL

EXPLORE!

Log on at woodturner.org and use the Explore! search tool to find these and other articles by and about J. Paul Fennell.

- “Engineering the Craftsmanship of Risk: The Creative Life of J. Paul Fennell,” by Terry Martin, *AW* February 2015 (vol 30, no 1, page 46)
- “*Les Sept Mers (The Seven Seas)*: An Expressive Approach to Hollowing,” by J. Paul Fennell, *AW* February 2023 (vol 38, no 1, page 40)
- “Make an Index Wheel for Precision Division,” by J. Paul Fennell, *AW* Spring 2004 (vol 19, no 1, page 18)





(Left) *Acacia Waves*
(*La Mer series*), 2021,
Acacia, 10" x 7"
(25cm x 18cm)



(Right) *Coral Sea*,
2021, Indian
rosewood,
6½" x 8½"
(17cm x 22cm)



Canoodling, 2014, Mesquite, each: 5¾" x 4½" (15cm x 11cm)

Paul's recent article is an example of how generous he is in sharing his methods. He also offers demonstrations, PowerPoint presentations, and one-on-one tutelage for anyone who asks. Even if he is copied, he doesn't mind because by that time, he will have moved on to new ideas: "I get bored really quickly unless a piece is challenging," he says. "Also, I like the idea of mystery and intrigue, and a lot of work involves

new techniques, so when people look at some of these pieces, they can't understand how it's done. The market for this kind of work has significantly declined, so now I am more interested in the creative and technical challenge of doing unique pieces every time."

A remarkable body of work

Paul's creative thinking is just as fascinating as his technical expertise,

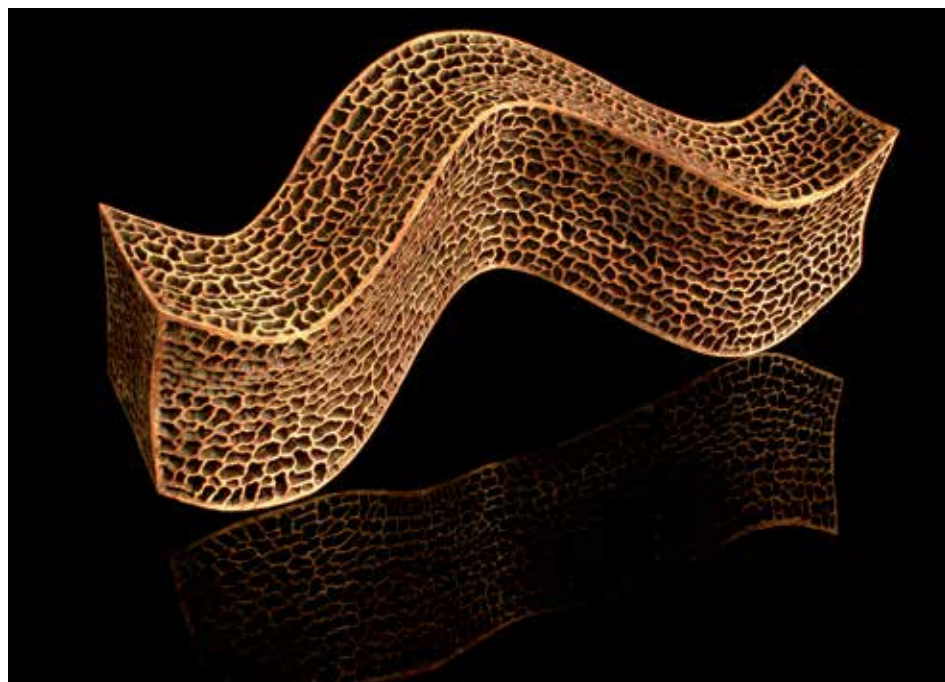
and it always reflects his breadth of knowledge, thoughtfulness, and deep appreciation of aesthetics. As only one indicator of how his work is valued outside the woodturning community, he has the rare distinction of having five of his pieces in the permanent collection of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.

There are many directions from which we can analyze Paul's work, and what I write here can only skim the surface of his prodigiously innovative work. For example, anyone who has ever tried to stretch the limits of hollowing will recognize immediately that *Acacia Waves*, which is part of Paul's *La Mer series*, is full-risk work, cut through from top to bottom to allow full exposure to the interior. Even knowing that it was not fully pierced when it was being hollowed, the removal of strips of wood leaving only two binding circles at the top and bottom is a testament to how well Paul understands his medium. Unlike more conventional hollow forms, there is no guesswork about what is going on inside because

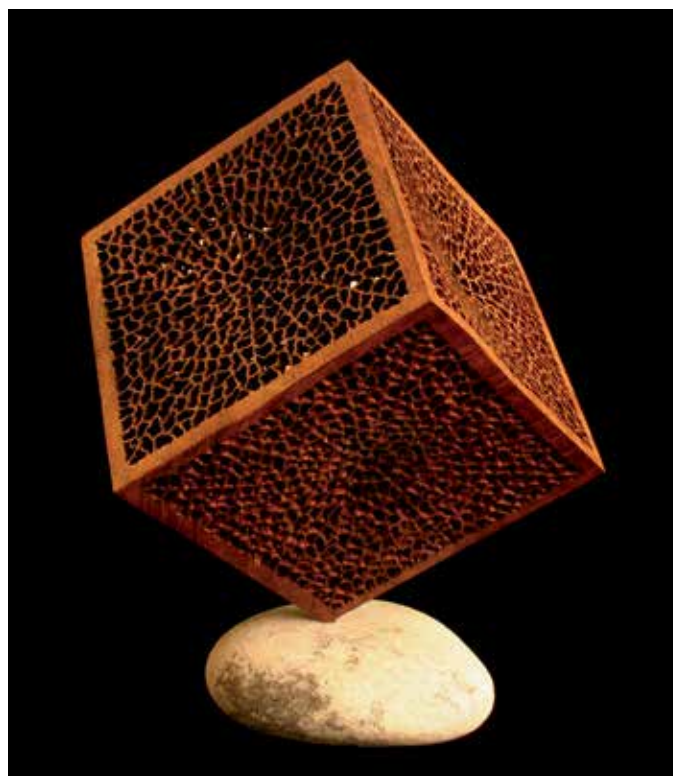
we see the whole interior with its uniform thickness. This is the work of a hollowing master who has invited us inside to see what he has done. Paul explains, “Stretching the limits is a great way to energize your work because if you stay in your comfort zone long enough, it can become boring and frustrating.”

Apart from the technicalities, there is a charming romanticism to much of Paul’s work. For example, with *Canoodling* he has taken the technical mastery of *Acacia Waves* to a new conceptual level by taking two of these vessels, one right-twisted and one left-twisted, then brought them together in an intimate embrace. The guidelines Paul gave for the piece made his intention very clear: “Any intended display should show that the two pieces are ‘intimate.’” As a measure of how this resonated with many who saw it, Paul told me the piece was acquired by married couple Allen Miller and Andi Sullivan: “Allen was once the team physician for the New York Yankees, and Andi is a blind woodturner who *teaches* pen making to other sight-impaired individuals.” Who wouldn’t be proud to have touched the lives of such amazing people?

Maiandros: A Journey is another example of just how brilliant his work can be. It was part of the 2018 *New Horizons* exhibition in Richland, Washington, that went on to be shown at the AAW Gallery of Wood Art in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Paul explains that the aim of the exhibit was to push established artists to explore new work: “I wanted to consider eliminating the use of the lathe, as well as raising the level of personal difficulty. I found myself *meandering* through many possibilities; then it dawned on me that the idea of meandering itself could be a metaphor for my experience of the process of



(Above) *Maiandros: A Journey*, 2018, Butternut, black acrylic (base), 5½" × 13" × 6" (14cm × 33cm × 15cm)



(Left) *Suspended Intimation*, 2018, Mesquite, granite cobble (base), 6" (15cm) cube, overall: 12" × 9" × 9" (30cm × 23cm × 23cm)

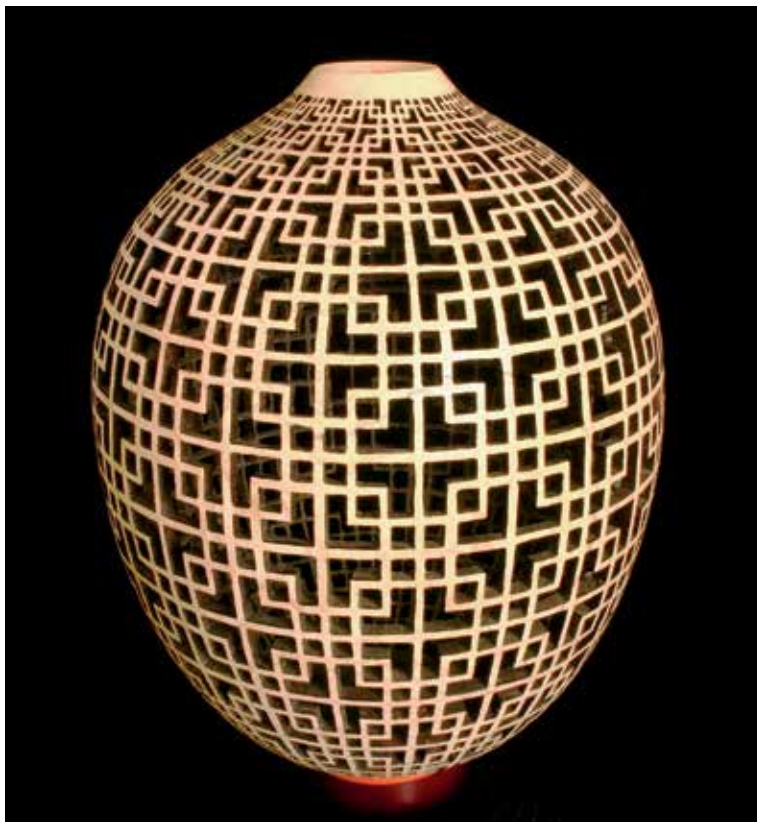
Suspended Intimation was partly turned on the lathe. Can you tell which parts?

creating. I believe this piece is a step towards the quest for idea fluency and creativity.” For those inclined to understand the process, Paul’s February 2023 article about *Les Sept Mers*, noted above, offers some hints to how he created *Maiandros*. Rather

like a cryptic crossword, the hints are all there, but you need to remove your own blinders to see them.

When you have done that, you might want to consider *Suspended Intimation*. This piece was in a 2018 Collectors of Wood Art show ►

IN-OUT Lattice,
2021, Unknown
wood, 9" x 7"
(23cm x 18cm)



of international artists at SOFA Chicago, and there was only one condition—that part of it had to be turned. It's hollow, it's pierced, and yes, it's partly turned, but where? If you look carefully, the hints are there. Talking about this piece, Paul explains, "I wanted to avoid the cliché of what the resultant piece is 'supposed' to look like. I wanted to be sure that, as a maker of turned wood art of familiar iconic work for more than forty-five years, the piece for this special exhibit would not be just more of the same." Incidentally, Paul found the stone that forms the base in a dry creek behind his house—more lateral thinking.

When it comes to influences on his designs, Paul says that patterns are at the heart of much of what he creates. It can be patterns from nature, such as his ocean-inspired *La Mer* series, or even architectural patterns. A good

***Sissoo Cycles*: A Complex Process**

When I asked Paul which of the pieces on his table most represented his recent achievements, he immediately indicated *Sissoo Cycles*, a compellingly intricate piece. "Making this piece was challenging because it involved many techniques," says Paul. "I had to turn a fine hollow form out of beautiful rosewood, then I indexed a horizontal/vertical grid pattern around the surface. After that, I had to offset a new grid pattern so that the cyclic lines spiraled upwards. After I drilled depth holes between the cyclic lines, I carved away the depth holes to create a secondary surface, but then I had to drill a new set of depth holes in the secondary surface for establishing a specific wall thickness. Then I mounted the piece back on the lathe and hollowed it to the point where a light inside showed through the depth holes.

"After carving the cyclic lines sufficiently thin, I pierced the surface between them to create more open holes that also removed the depth holes, and finally I sanded and cleaned it up and applied an oil finish. If there is a *tour de force*, this is the one." It sounds amazingly complex, and it is, but by the time you read this, Paul will almost certainly be working on his next idea, which will make this piece look easy.



Sissoo Cycles, 2017,
Indian rosewood
(*Dalbergia sissoo*),
9" x 6½"
(23cm x 17cm)

example is *IN-OUT Lattice*, inspired by architectural decorations in the Chao Jo monastery, in Szechwan Province, China. Such work is only produced with painstaking preparation and buckets of patience. One reason Paul has been able to produce such amazing work is that he is a master draftsman. In this piece, Paul has adapted work that was flat, or two dimensional, into a three-dimensional piece that warps the pattern as it converges at the top and bottom. For those with a geographic inclination, this is the reverse of Mercator projections for maps of the earth's surface, and perhaps this comes easily to Paul, whose first career was as a rocket scientist.

Paul once told me that he volunteers as a tutor in physics and math at a local high school. Usually, he works one on one with students in the school library, but one day the physics teacher invited him to talk to the whole class. He said that when he started explaining various theories and laws of physics, he could read the look on the students' faces: "How does this old guy know all this?" One day they will realize it takes a lifetime to accumulate the kind of knowledge that Paul has, and it takes a generous spirit to selflessly share it with anyone who wants to learn. J. Paul Fennell embodies all that is good in the AAW. His POP Merit Award is exceptionally well deserved and comes as no surprise. ■

Terry Martin is a woodturner and writer working in Ipswich, Australia. Visit his website, terrymartinwoodartist.com, or contact him at tmartin111@bigpond.com.



Chengtu Offering Vessel, 2013, African sumac, 6" x 7½" (15cm x 19cm)

Architecturally elaborate "entrance" gates are common around ancient cities in China and in other cities that have prominent Chinese populations. These gates can be thought of as a portal through which transitions occur, such as rites of passage, or movement from one social, cultural, spiritual, or religious state to another.



Ghosts of the Rainforest, 2016, Mesquite, 9" x 6½" (23cm x 17cm)

Ghosts of the Rainforest focuses on the consequences of exploiting the rainforest without regard for any resultant deleterious effects.



SPECIAL SYMPOSIUM EXHIBITION

Don't miss the chance to meet J. Paul Fennell and view a special exhibition of his work at this year's AAW Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky, June 1-4, 2023. To learn more about the Symposium and to register, visit woodturner.org.