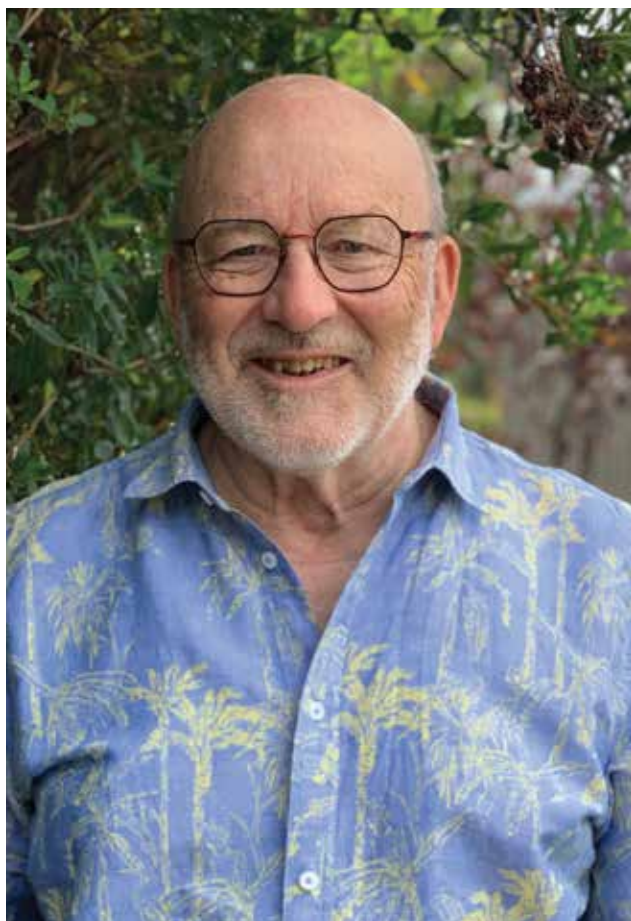




RICHARD RAFFAN:

2025 AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER

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 Anglo Australian turner Richard Raffan in recognition of his long record of support of the AAW and ambassadorship for woodturning in general.

A budding career

Timing is everything. Richard Raffan inadvertently timed his woodturning career just right, managing to find himself in the right places at the right time and with the requisite talents. Any sort of fame or notoriety, even within the woodturning community (which didn't exist in 1970), was never part of his plan.

Woodturning was never a hobby for Richard. He went straight at being a professional, and his first time at the lathe was on January 5, 1970. He was 26 and looking for a sea change, unaware that a craft revival was under way and that he would become part of it. He notes, "All I ever wanted to be known for was delivering orders on time—and

making stuff that sold well enough that retailers would reorder on a regular basis."

He learned the basics watching Rendall "Bill" Crang, who did all the turning in the professional shop where Richard spent the first four months of his budding career. He notes that at that time, "facework was held using screw chucks, faceplates, and jam chucks; endgrain projects were held using cup chucks or three-jaw engineer's chucks.

Turning tools, and particularly bowl gouges, weren't generally available. Specialist turning supply companies were a decade away."

Richard admits that when he set up shop on his own, he was "barely competent." He effectively made his own

Walnut, 1970, 4" x 8"
(10cm x 20cm)

"My first major piece that still looks good. Made for my mother's birthday, after ten weeks of concentrated turning, and I think it shows I had potential as a turner."



apprenticeship turning runs of simple bowls, scoops, light pulls, lamp bases, and platters. He aimed for repetition, offered in a catalogue, but early ineptitude meant he ended up with boxes full of one-offs. He gradually refined his turning skills but found that making enough items to generate the cash needed to pay his bills involved long hours and reams of abrasive.

By the end of May of his first year in business, he had turned several dozen bowls, boxes, scoops, and lamp bases, which in June he loaded into his car and drove east, cold-calling at small gift shops (later called galleries). Within

100 miles, he sold everything and took a few new orders. Three weeks later, Richard took a similar trip westward with the same result. By August 1970, he could barely keep up with the repeat orders and abandoned his catalogue since galleries preferred the novelty of one-off bowls.

Richard notes, “Selling what I made was never a problem: my shapes, finish, and strikingly different timbers stood out from the morass of teak tableware then in vogue. After my two selling trips, people came to *me*. My problem was fulfilling orders quickly but fortunately, because woodturning had virtually died as a handcraft,

there was no competition from other turners until the mid-1970s, and by then I was ahead of the pack.”

Next steps

In 1973, Richard was the only woodturner represented in *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, which displayed the *crème-de-la-crème* of British crafts for the newly established Crafts Advisory Committee. He displayed a yew bowl and a rippled ash salad set, just two of the 470 objects chosen from about 28,000 submitted. This led to an invitation to go on the new CAC slide index, ►

(Left) Labeling bowls on order at Bodgers Hole, Topsham, Devon, 1973.

(Right) “During a 1984 demo in Canberra, where I met Vic Wood. He'd come from Melbourne and we hit it off. Over the next few years, we did several joint workshops, alternating demos and often commenting on each other's approach. We had rigorous postmortems in order to improve our presentations.”



(Left) Bowls in various woods from 1976 to 1983.

(Right) Demonstrating at the 2017 AAW International Symposium, Kansas City, Missouri.

Photo: Andi Wolfe



Exhibition salt bowls (rather than run-of-the-mill, which were yew), 1978.



Eucalypt burl, 1985, 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (17cm) diameter

"I love making these, but they are difficult to sell, and suitable burl is scarce. You have to be in the right place at the right time."



"Throughout the 1970s, I sold at least fifty scoops a week, and they paid for all my basic living expenses. I could make sixty to seventy in a day."



Boxwood boxes, 2008, approx. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (4cm) diameter

"One of dozens of similar groupings. When I decided to turn for a living, I intended to turn groups of boxes, but sculptural groups didn't interest Australian galleries other than exhibition pieces. Most boxes in sets eventually sold individually."

exhibit in *Domestic Objects* at the new CAC Gallery in London, and then join the CAC slide index selection panel. He notes, "Throughout the 1970s, there was rarely a time when I didn't have work in a major crafts exhibition in Britain or Europe. Often, I was the only turner and still something of a novelty within the British crafts environment."

Richard moved to Australia in 1982, when woodturning was



Cocobolo and tulip boxes, 2005, 2" (5cm) diameter

"Boxes like these have been a production item from 1977. Since 1985, most sold at American woodturning symposiums."

beginning to take off as a hobby. Thousands of hobby turners were looking for instruction, and Richard was adept with the tools after a decade of production turning. Added to that, in 1980 a British publisher approached him about writing a woodturning manual. He submitted a manuscript that he also showed to John Kelsey at the Taunton Press, figuring an American publisher would reach a wider audience. Taunton made a vastly superior offer and in 1985 published *Turning Wood with Richard Raffan* with a complementary video. Video was a new medium at that time, so again Richard was in the right place at the right time.



"I've made hundreds of verdigris and rust pots. I regard them as exhibition rather than production items because they are difficult to wholesale."

Beginning in 1983, Richard demonstrated at most of the annual Utah Symposiums, which led to hands-on workshops all over North America. Conducting workshops on his way to Britain to visit family suited him well and became part of his annual schedule, despite making it difficult to keep on top of regular orders at home. He

explains, "Teaching got me out of the workshop for a few weeks each year—a working holiday with most workshops in North America and Europe and a chance to meet a lot of interesting people I wouldn't have met otherwise."

Giving critiques were an important part of Richard's presence at the 1983-87 Utah Symposiums ►



"In 1978, John Makepeace commissioned 'a piece to wow them' for his Parnham Collection. I came up with a set of spillikins, the first of around 200 sets. They became a production item, with many going to public collections."



Tubes in elm, 2005

"These generally sold in small groups through exhibitions and at American turning symposiums."

and Buxton, U.K. symposiums. His preferred approach was, and still is, to assess three similar pieces made by one person. He explains, “Make one a benchmark, then assess why one is better, why the other not so good. The quality is immaterial, as there is always room for improvement and nobody gets hurt. It was gratifying to watch work in symposium instant galleries moving on from what had been near universal clunky ‘round and brown.’ I know *Turned Bowl Design*, later revamped as *The Art of Turned Bowls*, helped many turners reassess their approach to bowl turning.”

Quieter endeavors

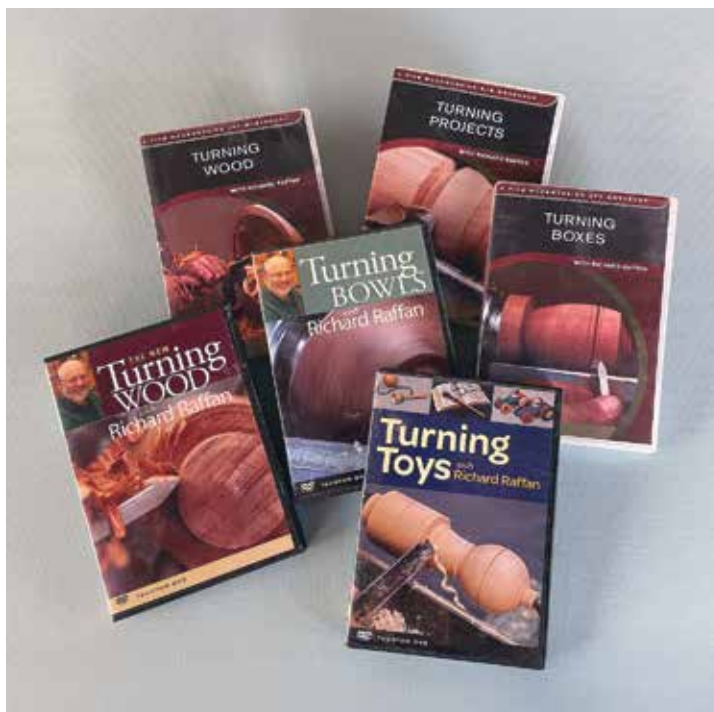
Over the past forty years, Richard has written dozens of magazine articles, published several more books and videos with Taunton Press, demonstrated at symposia, and led hands-on workshops, all with the intention of helping people get more out of the craft. However, he emphasizes that

teaching and writing were always ancillary to supplying his regular customers with bowls.

Sales of all craftworks dwindled after 9/11, and when his main outlet in Sydney closed in 2008, Richard ceased full-time production. Aged 65, he was ready for cleaner and quieter endeavors but continued writing magazine articles and conducting demos and workshops.

In December 2021, appalled by the number of turners displaying their lack of skill on YouTube, Richard published the first of now over 300 videos, aiming to show competent turning. He says that the videos are mostly like his symposium demos in that, while turning, he conducts a running commentary on what he’s doing and why. He tries to answer questions as they might form in the mind of the viewer. Richard’s YouTube channel, @RichardRaffanwoodturning, has more than 45,000 subscribers.

Richard was in the right place at the right time, and he made several videos for the Taunton Press. Plus, there are French, German, Chinese, and Korean editions of some of his books—all helping to establish him as a foundational name in woodturning.



With such a distinguished career and having taught so many turners worldwide via his books, videos, and in-person instruction, Richard Raffan is highly deserving of Honorary Lifetime Membership in the AAW.

—AAW Contributing Staff

For more, visit Richard’s website, richardraffan.com.au.

FOR FURTHER READING

EXPLORE!

Two profiles on Richard Raffan have been published in *American Woodturner*, and he has contributed several articles chronicling other turners, tools, and projects. Following is a partial list; log in at woodturner.org and use the Explore! search tool to find more.

- “Richard Raffan: I Don’t Feel the Need to Be Different, but I Would Like to Be Good,” by Terry Martin, June 2012 (vol 27, no 3)
- “Richard Raffan: A Gentleman with Strong Opinions,” by Ken Keoughan, Winter 2002 (vol 17, no 4)
- “Scrapers: A Eulogy,” by Richard Raffan, April 2012 (vol 27, no 2)
- “It’s All in the Jaws,” by Richard Raffan, December 2010 (vol 25, no 6)
- “On Demonstrating,” by Richard Raffan, April 2019 (vol 34, no 2)



DAVID ELLSWORTH, NORTH CAROLINA, AAW MEMBER #1 AND HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER

I first met Richard Raffan at Parnham House in England over four decades ago. We were both demonstrating at a conference run by furniture maker John Makepeace. Parnham was actually a 14th-century castle that housed John's wood-working school. I was exposed not only to a professional working craft school, but also to a sense of royalty due to the commissions being made by the students that ultimately

found their way into upper class homes.

Richard and I maintained a consistent level of communication over the years, including after he moved to Australia. Richard became a prolific writer of how-to books and was certainly an inspiration for me to write my own book. In fact, when I told Richard I was in the process of writing a book, he asked me to send him a list of my chapter headings, which I did. His

response was very positive, with one exception: "Don't include anything about the 'body' in your chapter descriptions, or the Australian turners won't buy it." I remain amused to this day.

Clearly, Richard has inspired a mountain of woodturners not only to take up the craft of woodturning but, through his example, to increase their technical and design skills exponentially. He is most deserved of this prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

BETTY SCARPINO, INDIANA, AAW HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBER

In the early 1990s at a symposium in Provo, Utah, I attended one of Richard Raffan's sessions. Its title, "Fixings," intrigued me. Not sure what to expect, I joined the handful of woodturners seating themselves at desks in the designated room—a typical university classroom, but with no lathe, no tools or wood, just a chalkboard. We began to ponder what Richard would be presenting. With no savory smells of mashed potatoes or green bean

casserole evident, maybe Richard would be discussing how to salvage broken turnings? Or perhaps methods of solving woodturning problems? You know, how to fix things.

Richard arrived, greeted us, and introduced the topic: various methods of attaching wood to a lathe. Oh, okay! Affixing. Someone laughed and spoke up about the American Thanksgiving tradition of "fixings" to accompany turkey. With

the ice broken and Richard in on the joke, he proceeded.

While I remember, in general, many of the woodturning sessions I've attended in my career, this one stands out as especially informative, fun, and interactive. Richard's fame preceded him, but not all famous people live up to their billing. Richard always did. Awarding Richard Raffan Honorary Lifetime Membership is long overdue.

MICHAEL (MICK) O'DONNELL, SCOTLAND

Meeting Richard Raffan in Scotland in 1981 changed my life. In the 1970s, I was a part-time woodturner working in the byre of my croft (small holding of four acres) on the north coast of Scotland; I kept warm by our milk cow in the next stall. I was making functional domestic items—lamps, bowls, spinning wheels—all from kiln-dried African hardwoods.

Hearing that a world-famous bowl turner was coming to Scotland was beyond my comprehension, but I thought it would be interesting to take a look. Richard Raffan was to demonstrate to a small group of woodturners. I met him the day before the event, and as I was going to look at some timber, Richard came along. The wood was slabbed, wet, and waney

edged and of absolutely no use to me. But Richard bought ten holly trees to be transported over 600 miles south to Devon. On the third day of his demo, I went back to the site and bought two trees to be transported 100 miles north to Caithness. The rest is history, and Richard remains a good friend and colleague some forty-four years on.

BENOÎT AVERLY, FRANCE

What I liked right away when I met Richard was that he would go straight to the point. He will pick the right tool and do the right move with the minimum steps in order to get

a simple and accurate shape. With wood as with people: no unnecessary moves and no unnecessary words, all that sprinkled with a great sense of humor, perfect ingredients for

becoming one of the best production turners and teachers. I have to say, I was waiting and hoping for the year Richard would become an AAW Honorary Lifetime Member. ►

ROGER BENNETT, IRELAND

When I discovered woodturning in the early 1990s, there was no internet and not many books on the subject. Exotic woods and spectacular figuring were prized over form; the writing was more about technique than design. Richard Raffan's *Turned Bowl Design* filled the void. It became my bible. In his clear elegant prose, he analysed the elements which together make a good bowl.

He compared open and closed forms, convex and concave curves, round and footed bases, flat and rolled rims. He compared successes and failures and showed how a small adjustment, for example to the tightness of a curve, could make all the difference.

Some fifteen years earlier, my wife and I were given a beautiful wooden bowl as a wedding present. It immediately became

our go-to salad bowl. It wasn't until I acquired Richard's book that the name incised on the base meant anything to us: "Richard Raffan, Brazilian Walnut." We have been using this bowl daily for almost fifty years. It embodies its maker's precepts for success, both visual and tactile. It is still in pristine condition, and my copy of the book is properly dog-eared and full of marginal notes.

GLENN LUCAS, IRELAND

Richard Raffan has been inspiring woodturners for over fifty years, and like so many, I count myself lucky to have learned from him. His books and videos set the standard, but it's when you see him in person that you truly understand his gift—not just for turning, but for teaching. He gives everything in a demo, never holding back, explaining every movement as if it's the most important thing in the world.

More than that, I've been fortunate to spend many happy hours with Richard as a friend. We've shared unforgettable times—hanging out on the Norwegian woodturning cruise, strolling in the mountains of County Carlow, waiting in boarding areas at international airports, exploring an Aussie lake in a boat. And, of course, "having the craic" playing snooker in an Irish kitchen.

When I started demonstrating, Richard gave me advice I've never

forgotten: "If you're looking for a pencil, describe the pencil—keep the audience with you." It seems so simple, but that's the kind of wisdom he shares—practical, thoughtful, and always spot-on. Richard hasn't just shaped wood, he's shaped the way woodturning is taught and shared. His generosity, clarity, and skill have left a mark on so many of us, and I know his influence will carry on for generations to come.

TOM WIRSING, COLORADO

Richard Raffan changed my life. I began turning wood as a teenager in my dad's workshop, but I only ever turned spindles, primarily furniture legs. When I was in my 50s, I attended a Richard Raffan demonstration at a Woodcraft store in Illinois. Richard turned a bowl from a piece of green American black cherry. It was the first time I had ever seen anyone do a facegrain

turning. And I was watching *Richard Raffan*, a world-class turner, prolific writer, and renowned teacher! I was fascinated, and I was hooked. I joined the AAW to learn more. I became a regular participant at two AAW chapters. I learned rapidly. I became a chapter president. Then I was elected to the AAW Board of Directors and, eventually, AAW president.

That chance encounter with Richard sent me in an entirely new direction and has profoundly changed my life. It was the first step in a journey which has brought a tremendous sense of accomplishment, has introduced me to woodturning friends from around the world, and has afforded me the opportunity to give back in wonderful and enjoyable ways. Those are rare privileges. I owe much to Richard.

MIKE MAHONEY, CALIFORNIA

I met Richard in 1988 at the Utah Woodturning Symposium. He did a rotation on production turning. Within the ninety minutes allotted, Richard made many items. These

were very complex turnings that should have taken more time to make. It was clear to me that he was the best craftsman I had ever witnessed. I quickly befriended Richard,

and we have stayed in touch ever since. He led me to become a professional production woodturner and was there to offer advice as I was in the process.

KEITH GOTSCHALL, COLORADO

Early in my career, I took a class with Richard, the first of my woodturning heroes whom I actually met. We became fast friends, and he has remained a longtime friend and mentor. Richard has been generous with his time and company. I am certainly not the only one who can say that Richard showed me how to turn. Thousands have learned from his videos, books, hands-on classes and now his YouTube channel.

Richard's elegant fluency with the skew was an attraction from the start.

The techniques he employs have always been rooted in traditional techniques he was shown, or just simple and obvious methods he found on his own.

One of the things I value most about Richard is his honesty. There is a bravery that allows him to say to you that your bowl could be better, the shape could be refined, or your artistic expression is frivolous. How refreshingly direct! And his eye for these things is never wrong. His books on design have helped so

many become better turners because he was willing to say, "This curve is good, this one is bad." So often our criticisms are couched in politeness, not wanting to hurt feelings, but Richard's seemingly impersonal critiques have always come from a belief that anyone with a talent and the tools should be striving to perfect their forms. That encouragement has done the field of woodturning immeasurable good, and he has lifted all of us with his own work.

KIRK DEHEER, UTAH

It is fitting that the AAW has chosen Richard Raffan for this honor. He has had an influence on so many of us. With his writing, videos, demos, and, of course, hands-on classes, I believe it would be hard to find a woodturner who was not inspired by him in some way.

One time, I was assisting in Richard's class and was preparing the turning stock by squaring rectangular spindle stock. I threw away some of the offcuts, but Richard pulled them out of the trash. He cut them up and gave them to a student, asking

him to practice his skew work. The student was upset at first, thinking he was being picked on, until he realized Richard was trying to teach him finesse. He has a knack for seeing what a student needs and offering just the right approach.

MIKE PEACE, GEORGIA

In my early days as an eager hobby woodturner, I accumulated most of Richard Raffan's books. His detailed step-by-step photos, paired with clear explanations, provided invaluable guidance—insights that could only come from a true production turner. I initially turned to his books to better understand tool use, refine my technique, and improve my design sense. Over time, as my skills grew and I began teaching

and demonstrating, I found myself returning to those same well-worn pages. They not only helped me refine my own turning, but also gave me a framework for explaining the *why* behind each tool and technique.

More recently, I've had the incredible honor of collaborating with Richard in the monthly *4-Ways Collaboration* alongside Sam Angelo and Tomislav Tomašić. For the past

two years, we've taken turns choosing projects, each creating and releasing a video simultaneously at the start of the month. Working alongside someone whose books shaped my early learning has been both surreal and deeply rewarding.

Richard's impact on the woodturning world is immeasurable, and this Honorary Lifetime Membership from the AAW is a well-deserved recognition of his contributions.

TOMISLAV TOMAŠIĆ, CROATIA

I am the woodturner I am today because of Richard Raffan, and words cannot express how much he has helped me and my family. I never got a chance to be a hobby turner, and this meant each minute at the lathe had to be efficient and

profitable to justify time away from my family. This was the reason I first contacted Richard, sending him email after email with different topics and questions to help me learn to be a professional woodturner. Richard always found

the time to respond and help me out, and over the years we became friends as well as mentor and mentee. Because of Richard, I have been able to make a living turning wood. If anyone deserves this award from the AAW, it is Richard Raffan. ■