

Community in a Crowded Field

Lynne Yamaguchi

Seven hundred! A murmur went through the auditorium when Kip Christensen announced the number of participants attending this year's Utah Woodturning Symposium in Provo. Three hundred more than usual? How could they possibly accommodate so many? As excited as I was to be there, I dreaded the inevitable crowding. Would I get to see any demonstrations? Would I spend three days pressed against walls, craning my neck to see over people taller than I am?

I'm happy to say that my fears were not realized. There were 30 more demonstrations than usual—130 total—plus 19 other events to choose from. Unfortunately, this meant that deciding which demonstrations to attend was even harder, but once I made my choices, I had no problems getting to where I wanted to be and seeing what I wanted to see. And there was so much to see . . .

The demonstrations covered a full range of types of turnings, from basic bowls to natural-edge bowls, nested bowls, square-edge bowls, platters, boxes, goblets, vases, earring stands, hollow vessels, segmented vessels, multi-axis turning, and sculptural pieces. Also well covered were surface treatments: coloring, pyrography, texturing, carving, spiral work, inlay. Other demonstrations addressed such basics as cutting and turning green timber, sharpening, and marketing one's work. I was most glad to see, though, that beyond the demonstrations focused on specific projects or techniques were more-abstract presentations—looking at design, for example, or personalizing one's work—and presentations that put turning in a broader context—woodturning in other countries (Japan, New Zealand, South Africa), the history of turning, collaboration with other arts and crafts. This wider perspective seemed particularly fitting for the symposium's 25th anniversary. For me, thinking about turning as art, its development and its future, is an important part of the turning itself.

The one place where crowding was most conspicuous was the instant gallery, where Dave and Phyllis Bouwhuis and volunteers from the Utah Association of Woodturners somehow managed to aesthetically arrange 957 pieces in much too small a space. The amount of work was overwhelming. I visited the instant gallery five times during the symposium and each time discovered pieces I hadn't noticed in previous visits. The range of work and the quality were remarkable, and much of it rivaled the pieces being exhibited concurrently at Brigham Young University's Museum of Art in the Beneath the Bark exhibition, which featured work by 145 presenters from throughout the 25-year history of the symposium. Granted, one-third of the instant gallery work was by presenters, but participants held their own. There were miniatures and gigantic pieces, simple forms and elaborate creations, utilitarian vessels and works of pure imagination. There was craft and there was art and there was everything in between.

Did I mention there was a lot to see? I didn't sit down to a meal until the barbecue Friday night.

So from the 17 out of a possible 149 events that I managed to attend, what stuck with me most? As at last year's symposium (my first), I met some wonderful people. I was gratified to see more women in attendance, about 15 percent by my reckoning, and four women demonstrators. I came home with pages of notes full of useful tips from every demonstration, tips I've already begun to apply. I'm still inspired by the diversity of work I saw in both the instant gallery and the Beneath the Bark exhibition, and my mind is still processing the ideas raised in discussions of design and conceptualizing pieces.

But as I reflect back on the symposium, I mostly find myself thinking about another kind of crowding.

I'm yet a newcomer to turning, having first stepped up to a wood lathe just 18 months ago. But I know already that this is what I want to do; I'm committed to making this my work. Many times, though, over the last 18 months, I've wondered if there was room for me in this field. With so much wonderful work being done by so many already, why should I be able to make a living at it?

The reality may be that 700 is too many people for two classroom buildings and that the field of turning is crowded with talented people producing beautiful work. But my experience at the symposium, both literally and metaphorically, was not of crowding but of community, of a sense of belonging and of ample space to move in my own direction and find my way to where I want to be. In the end, I felt not overwhelmed, as I feared, but buoyed, lifted forward, set asail.

Lynne Yamaguchi turns in Tucson, Arizona. A travel grant from the Tucson Pima Arts Council helped her attend this year's symposium.