



# One of a kind

**Guest editor Kurt Hertzog introduces us to the inspirational work of Bruce Trojan**

I've known Bruce for many years through one of our local AAW chapters. He and I have had a chance to exchange ideas over that period and, of late, spend time together at the Chattanooga AAW Annual Symposium. Not really your typical round-and-brown woodturner, Bruce has created many unique pieces over the years that are often assemblies of musical ideas. I think you'll find his background and creations educational and inspiring.

**How would you describe yourself up as a turner?**

I am a maker and a creator. I'm a woodturner and one of my strengths is inventing and making work that is unique to me. Each of us has personal preferences, goals, and abilities. We all have an obligation to our craft and should work to perform it well and promote it. If our work is done well, it has value. What matters most is the journey.

**Tell us about your background and training. What led you to woodturning?**

My love of working with wood was rooted by working with my father, even when I was a child. Dad wasn't an artistic craftsman nor was he a woodturner. He was a do-it-yourself person who did everything, including building his own house, a house for my sister, and a business building for his parents. When I say building these things, I mean



1 Bruce, his lathe and (picture of) Miles Davis  
2 Bruce's very first turning is on the left, his next on the right, improved

he pounded the nails. So as I was growing up, I was always with him, learning from him. I learned all about cutting and shaping wood, how to do it safely, and not be afraid of the woodworking tools. Interestingly, my higher education was in music performance and education. I didn't pursue working with wood until later in life.

In the late 1990s my wife bought a Woodfast lathe for my birthday. I didn't know anything about woodturning and the machine intimidated me. I did some reading and watched some videos, practised coves and beads, but really didn't make much of anything. It wasn't until a year later that I took a trip to Utah to take a week-long class at Craft Supplies with Kip Christensen. Being immersed in a week-long class really got me going on the lathe and Kip was an outstanding instructor. His teaching really gave me understanding and direction on tool use and cutting technique. The very first object I turned was a bud vase. It wasn't very good and to this day it looks like a poorly shaped bowling pin to me. But I learned quickly and my second bud vase that week turned out much better. I learned to carefully cut curves into that piece and from that day forward I realised one of the very important aspects, maybe the most important, was that most turnings need well-done curves.

At the same time, I was also taking a class at the School for American Crafts at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) from the outstanding wood artist John Dodd. The style of woodworking at RIT was greatly influenced by the famous master craftsman, artist in residence, Wendell Castle. Castle is well known throughout the world for inventing large, laminated furniture and exceptional carvings. Both his and Dodd's style of woodworking and philosophy of creativity really appealed to me. I learned flat work there and made boxes, mirrors, cabinets, and furniture.

**How do you like to work, what are your favourite tools and why?**

My studio is in the basement of my house, which is both convenient and, at times, inconvenient. The good side of it is I can work in it any time, day or night. The bad side is it can be easy to get distracted from woodturning by other things. Many times, I'll work in the studio for a while and then do something in or around the house and then return to the studio.

My favourite tools are the ones in my hands at the moment. I recently purchased a few Carter & Son negative rake scrapers and really like them. I don't know why I didn't get those sooner; negative rake scrapers are so easy to use. I also find myself using the Ellsworth bowl gouge a lot and I own a couple smaller Glaser bowl gouges which I use frequently. I like the rigidity and grind of the Ellsworth tool, and the steel (M2), handles, and weight on the Glaser tools. I have a Sorby 1/2in spindle gouge and Craft Supplies Artisan 1/2in skew chisel I use for spindle turning.

**Describe your workshop – what is the set-up and how long have you been there?**

I live in a large house so I'm fortunate to have enough space in the basement for a sizeable workshop and I have many woodworking tools. I began building my workshop around 1995. Since then, it has progressed through many changes. I turn on a Oneway 2436 lathe which I upgraded to (from my original Woodfast) about eight years ago. I really enjoy the smoothness of the Oneway but am not enamoured with the weight of the banjo. Unless I keep it lubricated, it can become difficult to adjust. I use Axminster chucks, which I really like, especially the older, four-jaw precision chuck. I won't get into brands, but I have a tablesaw, bandsaw, drill press, combination disc and belt sander, sharpening station, home-built router table, multi-router, floor-standing spindle sander, 4in drum sander, and drafting table. There is also a plethora of hand tools and power carving tools. I have been able to set it up in a manner that I never have to walk very far to get to the next tool. Finally, I have an area that is specifically used for painting and finishing, including air brushing and piercing set-ups.



3 Bruce's shop. 'It's messy as I'm in the middle of a project'



4 Sometimes Bruce draws a piece he's going to make on a drafting table 5 He frequently sketches an idea on an iPad 6 Heat guns set up for bending plastics. Heating from the top and bottom provides an even distribution on the plastic 7 (Below) The 3D pen he uses including some different filaments (below the pen)

### How does your design process work?

I have several approaches to design my works. I used to draw everything on a drafting table with dimensions and specific plans. For the most part that technique has gone by the wayside, although I do still use my drafting table, especially if I want to see my plan dimensioned and full size.

A second approach is to draw my ideas on an iPad. I frequently draw what I want to create. Drawing on a tablet doesn't allow for dimensions (like a drafting table) as it's all sketching, at which I'm not good. A nice advantage to the tablet is I can draw in 'layers', which means I can sketch different ideas on different layers and switch back and forth between them to evaluate and determine what I like best. If I would want to do that on paper, I would have to do transparent overlays or make multiple copies of the first layer and draw on top of those. I can also add colour to the sketches on different layers and use them as a guide for what combinations I will ultimately choose.

A third design process is to improvise. I believe many, if not all, woodturners improvise. It's a great part of the fun of woodturning and there are times when we have no choice other than to change a plan due to the figure or defects in the wood. My improvisation techniques show up before, during, and even after the turning is complete and though I may have sketched my idea on my tablet, it never comes out exactly as I had planned. My work morphs into different ideas as I work on it. I believe that's because there is a big difference between sketching it and seeing it as it develops.

I recently began carving on turnings and I'm truly enjoying the experience. One of the beauties of carving is that it's very freeing, especially if what I carve is more contemporary in appearance as opposed to a specific subject. Carving is opening a whole new avenue for my desire to be creative. The piece shown below is unfinished, and I am working with an excellent artist who will paint it in her style.

### What inspires you and where do you get your ideas from?

I have many places to find images and work to tickle my inspiration. Books, magazines, galleries, symposiums, art museums, the internet, and other people provide unlimited resources for this purpose. I really don't believe those things truly inspire, and maybe a better way to define them would be as 'influencers'. It all depends on how one thinks of inspiration. Is being inspired by a work you see and then duplicate, inspired? In my mind, inspiration is something unique to me, something which can only come from inside of me, not someone else. Inspiration is a plethora of things experienced which span over a lifetime. Personal inspiration is what allows true creativity. True creativity is very difficult and only has a chance of showing up if one desires to find it.

An example of my work that came from within is the piece I call Still Life: The Old Barn Window. Several years back, I would often ride about an hour to visit family. I would travel the country roads on two wheels in good weather. One of the routes I drove had a barn with a broken window. I wondered how long it would take the owner to fix the window. The last time I drove by it, and I had been passing it for



8 An unfinished example of a carving idea. An outstanding local artist is to paint it and isn't finished yet 9 Still Life: The Old Barn Window

years, he still hadn't repaired it. That image stuck in my mind, but it went farther. Many times, I imagined what was on the inside of that window. My thoughts went to other barns I had seen over the years and, since the window had been broken for so long, I knew everything on the sill would have to be rusted and dirty, so I researched how to make wood look rusty and dirty. I could have turned some objects and separately displayed them, but the broken window had to be included in the work, and that's when the idea came to me to make it a still life. I had, and still have, never seen a still life made in 3D in wood, so it was natural for me to see if I could make it possible. Everything in this piece is made of wood, including the keys, lock, nails, and bolts. The only aspect that isn't wood is the polycarbonate windows. These are the reasons I would call this piece inspired.

I get inspired by what I 'see' in my head. As we go through life many, many images pass our eyes and get embedded in our brains. I've found that when I manifest what is in my head, it usually isn't a perfect replica of what I imagine, or even draw. Rather, it's a combination of many images I can meld together into my own 'picture'. When that happens, I begin to sketch. To quote the great Pablo Picasso: 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.' The message I hear is, think like a child.

### Which woods do you most like working with and why?

I really like working with maple. To me it turns easily, and the closed grain, along with its natural colour, work well for many of the pieces I create. If I'm making a piece that won't be painted, I like most of the exotic timbers, even though they can sometimes be a challenge

to turn. I usually don't stain wood for my work. Rather, I prefer to choose species for their natural colour. If I'm going to carve, I usually prefer a soft hardwood, such as bass, or even poplar.

### Do you work with other materials as well, and how do they compare?

Yes. I work with plastics, metal, and acrylics. I wanted to make a piece with curved, painted streamers. I have bent a lot of wood, but for this project, I knew I would have problems airbrushing wood if it was already bent. I also knew I couldn't paint it before I bent it. To solve the problem, I thought of plastic. I surmised I could paint it, then bend it with heat. I didn't know much about plastics, so I began experimenting with different types of the material. I delved into three, Corian, polycarbonate, and compressed polystyrene. Each type of plastic had its unique pluses and minuses. Corian was too brittle and was difficult to mill, but its melting point was near perfect. The second plastic I tried was polycarbonate. I could find this material in 1.6mm thick pieces, no milling was required. Its melting point was fairly high so I had to be very careful to not burn the paint. The third material was compressed polystyrene and it was near perfect. I could find it in many thicknesses, beginning around 0.8mm and up. Its melting point is low and burning the paint isn't an issue. The drawback is if I apply too much heat, the polystyrene will sag, wither, or curl up. I bend by hand and use a set-up with two high-power temperature adjustable heat guns.

I have also used a 3D pen to make thin parts of a design in plastics. The stamens in the flower [10] are extruded from the pen in black plastic at 0.8mm diameter with the ends painted in yellow. Wood with that diameter can easily break, plastic won't. I use a 3Doodler Pro+ 3D



10 The stamens on Forget Me Never are made with a 3D printing pen 11 Eye Candy II, bending polycarbonate and applying moulding paste 12 The finished piece, American Spirit Rising, from the iPad sketch (5) 13 Polyrhythm was a local turning club collaborative project 14 Twisted, bowl in a bowl in a bowl with multi-axis stem and base



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If Pablo Knew Jimi was Bruce's first art guitar using cubist ideas



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All Ears, his third art guitar, has many stylised ear shapes throughout the piece. The strings are bent brass which is gilded in 24ct gold leaf



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Badda Bubinga was his second art guitar and one of the most challenging pieces. It was featured on the back cover of American Woodturner (October 2016)



printing pen. I recommend the Pro+ because it allows for more options, such as speed and temperature controls. With the Pro+, different types of plastic filaments can be used, of which the Create+ (the next model down) isn't capable. The one drawback to the 3Doodler pens is that pens need 3mm-thick filaments, which forces you to buy only that brand. There are also other brands out there which will use a more standard diameter filament, and some are most likely just as good.

The only metal I have used is brass. I used it for the strings of a couple of art guitars. Brass is relatively soft, and it has enough rigidity to span over a good distance without sagging. I wish I could have used copper as it would have been much easier to bend, but I couldn't find copper rod in various diameters. I also used 24ct gold leaf on these brass strings.

**What sort of finishes do you prefer and why?**

My choice of finishes depends on what species I am finishing and what the piece requires. The maple bowl [23] has an oil finish on the inside and no finish on the outside. Oil finishes can turn maple yellow over time, which I don't like. If I want to preserve the colour of light woods like maple or holly, I will either use a hand-rubbed polyurethane, spray lacquer or no finish at all. Other, darker species, look better to me with an oil finish, which the wood absorbs and brings the grain and figure out more than a finish that sits on top of the wood.

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18 Bowl in a bowl practice piece, poplar 19 Hollowed out off-centre platter. Walnut, pyrography, black paint 20 Oak hollow form 21 Bird of Passage, off-centre platter with inlays. Bubinga, ebony, 24ct gold leaf

**What is your favourite piece you have worked on and why?**

That's a very difficult question – it's like asking a parent which of the kids they love most. I've always loved the art guitars I've made. There are three (so far): If Pablo Knew Jimi, Badda Bubinga, and All Ears. I think it's my musical connection to them because they all came from 'within'. The fact making them involved face, spindle and off-centre turning on different scales, some flat work, and wood shaping (with both machines and by hand), contribute to my partiality to them. Plus, they all involved many turnings and putting all that together was fun. I think Badda Bubinga is my favourite of the three.

I am also partial to Eye Candy [27], because not only do I like the piece, but it represents my foray into working with bending plastics, air brushing, and painting with a material known as moulding paste.

Finally, I can't leave out the piece called Still Life: The Old Barn Window (page 12). That work has a 'nostalgic' feel to it, at least for us older people who have been in barns. Couple that with a theme that came from 'within' and learning about reactive paints and how far I could 'stretch' their use, it has easily become one of my favourites.

**What is the most challenging piece you've made, and why?**

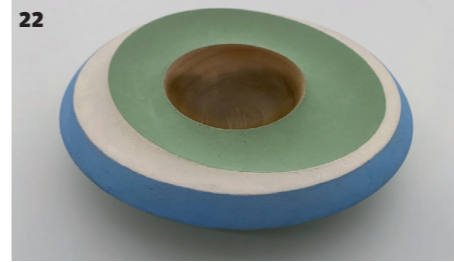
To me, every one of my pieces has had challenges. Badda Bubinga had a multitude of them. Most people look at it and don't see it has 65 turned aspects. I even turned the two body parts and one of

**Stick Dancers – inspired by a walk in London**

'While visiting London, UK, I went on a walking tour to view the graffiti/street art and I saw superb art by many talented painters. One that stuck in my mind was an artist called Stik. He paints stick people on buildings and they are magnificent and creative. "Stick Dancers: A Tribute to STIK" is my 3D take on his work. The human body is arguably the most beautiful form that exists. Dancers perform their art in such a wonderful way with unbelievable control of their bodies. I could think of no other way to express great form within this context. Londoners, if you want to treat yourself and see great street art, I highly recommend a walk (or even a walking tour) in the Shoreditch area of East London.'



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22 Multi-axis bowl. Poplar, milk paint 23 Nautilus. Maple, oil finish on the inside and no finish on the outside 24 Space Odyssey, box on a pedestal. Cherry, maple

them was an off-centre turning. Some of the challenges were things like (from top of the guitar down): How do I want the tuning pegs to look and will they relate to the head design?; If the neck is curvy, where will the fret alignment and fret dots be placed?; How will the gold-leafed aspect on the left side relate to the design of the body and what material should it be?; What material should the strings be and how should they be installed? Those are just some of the questions that needed to be answered for this work. There is one other aspect that I will address in this design. This piece was a commission and the initials of the man who asked me to make it were JA. Those initials appear in the piece. The J is the aspect made in ebony. The A appears on the head of the work. It's a stylised letter from the Japanese language called 'katakana'. The English letter A just wasn't working in that location. It seems I am always looking for a new material, or a new way of manipulating it, or a different way of arranging various elements. I believe the reason is I am constantly reaching inside my mind, striving to exceed past creative limitations, and that is a tall order. It isn't easy to be creative, and I believe one must want to go there. For me, being creative is essential, it's basic.

**How have the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns affected your work, and do you think any of the impact will be long term?**

If the pandemic has affected my work, it's only in the sense that it has given me more time to think and make objects that satisfy me. I am not as interested in making a living as I am in expressing myself in

the work that I do. I do know many artists who are struggling making a living due to fewer people coming to art/craft shows. My heart aches for those people, and there are many of them, who are world-class artisans who deserve more sales and are struggling to get by.

**What are your aspirations for the future?**

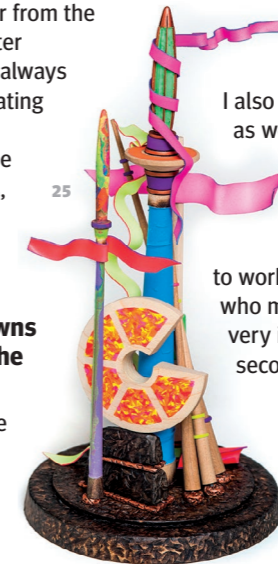
I have several future aspirations that I take seriously.

Important aspirations for me are: 1) To work hard and improve my skills as a woodturner. The possibilities are limitless; 2) To share my knowledge and experience. I volunteer to mentor disadvantaged, inner-city high school students at a wood shop in Rochester, NY. I can't think of a more rewarding experience than to teach others, especially young people.

I also enjoy teaching and demonstrating at my local turner's club as well as other clubs within driving distance, including regional and national symposiums; 3) To support, in any way I can, woodturning, woodworking, all crafts, all visual and performing arts, and all craftspeople and artists who are creative, contributing members of society; 4) To continue to work on being creative. Every creative person I know, even those who make it appear (to the rest of us) that it comes easily, has two very important main qualities. The first is a desire to create, and the second is a willingness to work at it.

**What do you do when you're not woodturning?**

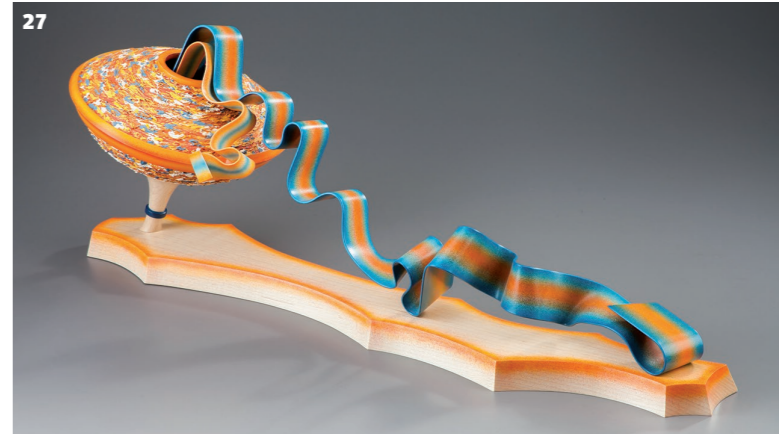
My favourite things to do are going to concerts and art museums.



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25 (Inset above) Torchiere with maple, acrylic moulding paste and paint, pyrography, compressed polystyrene, air brushing, titled Outrospective 26 Spinning tops. Maple, pyrography, oil paint 27 Eye Candy – a first foray into painting and bending plastic, and experimenting with acrylic moulding paste