

Turning in the less Wild West

Guest editor Kurt Hertzog introduces teacher and turner Keith Gotshall

I've known Keith for many years. He and I met years ago when we shared a demo room at the Utah Woodturning Symposium. After making acquaintance, we always had a chance to meet up at the UWS in Provo UT each year and at the AAW Symposium. On a visit to Colorado, my wife and I had the pleasure to be hosted by Keith and his wife Catherine in Salida. I had the chance to include him and his shop in a video on professional woodturners. Keith is not only an accomplished turner, he also excels at teaching. His methodical teaching and demonstration methods are easily understood by audiences, from newbie to advanced. He also weaves in interesting and humorous points, making the learning experience entertaining and enjoyable. Let me introduce you to Keith Gotshall.

Tell us about your background and training.

I have always been a woodworker. Even in high school, I worked my class schedule so that I could have two back-to-back sessions of woodworking shop class per day. I worked at the local hardware store (best job ever) and bought some of the tools I still use to this day. I was making mirror frames and carving a moon face in the border, my 'shop' was the family garage. After high school, I moved on to Colorado and got a job in a furniture factory. Not glamorous, but I enjoyed it. I worked in several other shops making cabinetry and furniture, eventually for a furniture designer who was doing very avant garde work. I started as the new guy, and eventually worked my way up to foreman. Then I went out on my own – my own shop, my designs etc. It was in about 1989 that I opened my own business.

What led you to woodturning?

I am of the age that schools still had a woodshop as a class. I got my first taste of working on a lathe there, but never had any instruction. Then, in 1997, I was part of a 'studio tour' in my city and got to visit another participating artist who was a woodturner. That quick experience re-awoke a love of turning I had forgotten about. I soon had my own lathe and a set of tools. Within a year I had taken a couple of classes with professional turners, Mike Mahoney and Richard Raffan. Not long after the bulk of my work as a woodworker became turning. I still mostly turn for my income, but occasionally take a furniture commission, or some other part of woodworking.





1 'Indecision', 10 x 16in myrtle. This piece was shown at the BYU Museum for the Beneath the Bark exhibition. One of the more difficult pieces I've done. The trick was to figure out how to hold it. In the end, a special vacuum chuck was developed to take the tenons off the bottoms of the bowls
2 From the 'Inclusion' series 5in tall 9in long Russian olive burl, dyed box elder burl
3 Side view of 'Indecision'

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE HOLT

How do you like to work?

I do a lot of commission work. I like that because this is how I make my living, and it is necessary to know I will be paid at the end of a job. Of course, I still make things for the love of making, and they will sell in shows or gallery-type outlets, but that 'cheque in the mail' is unknown. I do prefer the commissioned work. I have some items that I sell to repeat customers, often in large batches, 50-200 items at a time. Those are great, and I earn well from them.

What are your favourite tools and why?

I am like every other tool junkie I know and have a vast collection of tools, but honestly, I could get by with six or seven turning items – spindle roughing gouge, parting tool, skew, spindle gouge and a bowl gouge or two. The bulk of my work is done with two or three tools out at one time. There are times when it seems like every tool I have is out, trying to solve some tricky part of what I am doing, but mostly I have as few tools at hand as needed.

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

I've been in this workshop since 2002. I moved to the very small mountain town of Salida where I bought my first property. It had a 900sq ft garage that had 220-volt power to it, where I could plug my machines in and get back to work... oh, and it had a house to live in too. Perfect! Over the years I have added some bigger machines, and last year added a significant extension to the front of my shop. It's now just over 1500sq ft. I have moved a larger lathe and a couple of smaller lathes to teach on into the new addition, as well as some of the metal working machines that I am always tinkering with. It frees up a lot of room in the original space to work more efficiently. I wonder how I could even move when I look at all I had packed in there over the years.

How does your design process work?

I work out almost every detail on paper. Being able to draw out what I want is so important to my being efficient once the chips start to fly. On complicated pieces I will draw various views full scale. Often a quick gestural drawing will suffice. Of course, I still retain control of what I am making and if a change needs to happen I will make it on the fly, but often the end product looks exactly like that I drew. It's important to my kind of work to be able to produce to exact dimensions or shapes. I often get CAD drawings from customers, and it's necessary to hit those pretty close.

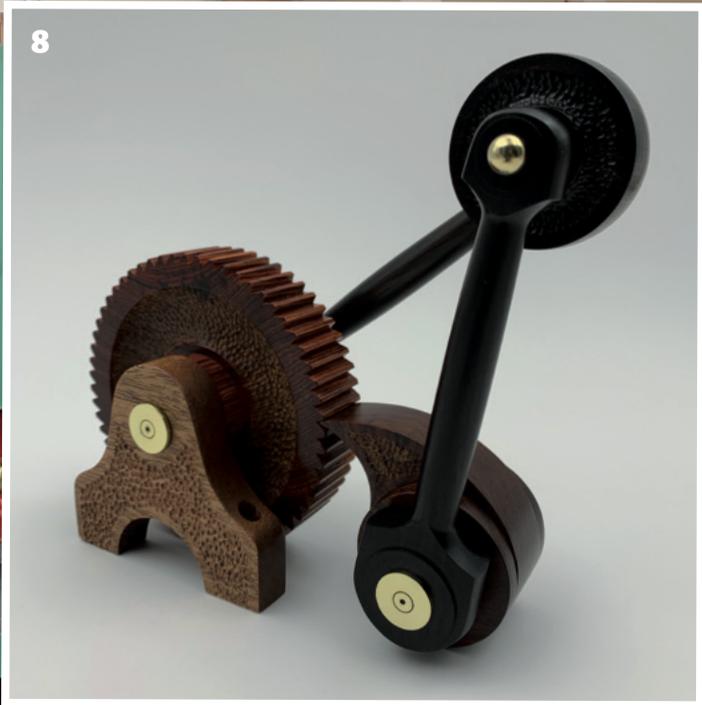
Which woods do you most like working with and why?

I use a lot of poplar, as a lot of my architectural work is to be painted and poplar is available in a variety of sizes and is still reasonably priced. Other than that, I like most woods. They all have their own character and peculiarities and I enjoy getting to use a lot of different species. I do very much enjoy ash for its hardness and ease of working. The strong grain makes for beautiful objects. The exotic woods are all alluring, of course, with their wild figure and colours; but so often that colour is elusive, and those expensive woods lose their lustre. I've done a lot of work with holly and African blackwood, and really enjoy the stark contrast they have. I am also sensitive to the deforestation issues and try not to use too much exotic wood. If I can use a domestic wood and dye it or treat it in some way to get the same look, I will try to do that. Oddly, none of the native trees that grow in my area are of any interest to me. Aspen is too plain and punky; pine and fir aren't very good for utility work. I must look to the larger cities to get wood from the urban forest for my bowls.

4 Favourite type of work, newels and posts for a remodel in Salida **5** Cherry bowl with nubs. 8in diameter, 5in tall. Cherry with poplar dyed 'nubs', pyrography on the top



6 Production work. These 'thermed' spindles were made for a local brewery as tap handles. They were dyed black and labels affixed. The brew master told me of a conversation he heard at the bar, two patrons arguing over just how something like that can be made, one guy insisting that it was impossible to make on a lathe **7** My first long lathe, constructed out of a Vicmark long bed with an extension added, made by a local machinist firm. It allowed me to turn 12ft. As soon as I had installed this lathe I got a phone call for 15 12ft posts to be made. Divine intervention? **8** 'Cog and Pawl', cocobolo, African blackwood, mahogany, brass. 6 x 6.5 x 2.5in **9** (Main picture) I work on an old Oliver tablesaw, an 88, with sliding side table and 4in depth of cut. It's a real workhorse, but wouldn't pass any sort of European safety standards! **10** Box elder burl and holly, ring box **11** Madrone ring box **12** Walnut ring box **13** European pear ring box



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

I have been carving stone for a few decades. Mostly alabaster and marble, though I have tried other stone as well. It's something that I really enjoy, and the fineness of marble is quite remarkable. It's hard, but not too hard. Holds detail well. Can be worked up to a high gloss that shines like glass or left rougher, and it will glow from within. I have mostly done figurative work in my sculpture and feel it is a subject that can be gone over again and again. I haven't put stone and wood together in a piece yet, but never say never. I also have some metalworking capabilities in the shop now and enjoy working brass into some of my designs. Brass and copper look so good with the warmth of wood, I can see exploring that more in the future.

What sort of finishes do you prefer and why?

Depends on the use. For utility work I will often go with a walnut oil, and let it go at that. For more arty pieces I tend toward a shinier finish, but usually not a gloss. I have tried so many different types of finish and have come back around to a simple tung-type of oil that will penetrate, harden, and then build. I am also fond of using friction polish (shellac) and then use the tung oil over that, just on smaller pieces that won't really see any use. Lacquer can be wonderful, but I don't have a spray booth to deal with the explosive/poisonous aspects of that method of finishing, so I don't bother.

What inspires you? Where do you get your ideas from?

Inspiration comes from everywhere. Nature of course. Hard to beat old Mother Nature for texture and pattern. Since we humans are, in fact, part of nature, I think there is always a common connection there. However, more recently I have been exploring a much more man-made history for inspiration and ideas. That is, a more industrial or machine-oriented genre. I am fascinated by old foundry patterns, the wooden parts that were buried in sand and made into cast iron parts for the machinery that made the Industrial Revolution possible. I find these items to be so sculptural in themselves, apart from their intended use. Some of the beauty I find is clearly just good industrial design, some is fanciful, other items might have their shape formed by the robustness needed for its use. There is often a cleverness, even an elegance, in their design that intrigues me. I have been making pieces that are sometimes a little hard to understand, since they are not utilitarian and are meant as sculptural objects. Yet there is a recognisable sense of utility to them, as if they are parts to a machine that had never been made. I can see exploring this for some time.

What is your favourite piece and why?

I have many favourites – perfectly shaped bowls, urns out of spectacular wood – but a piece called 'Cog and Pawl' is a cherished one. It was made for an AAW POP show, where one of the directives is that it must fit inside an imaginary 6in cube. That alone is enough to excite me, as I firmly believe in the adage that creativity comes from constraint. It was one of the early 'industrial artefact' pieces I made, and it has a lot of interesting details to it. It is simple in its gesture, a toothed wheel, and a pawl to click along the teeth. There is an implied movement and connection of the pieces that I enjoy. I've always thought it was successful as a piece of sculpture.

15 Part of building that looked like an antique ice cream churn, this was the crank handle. I also made the bucket handle. Approx. 2 x 5ft

16 The front of my new shop addition. I get some stick for it looking like a Western movie set. Someone always cracks a joke about hitching up your horse, or asking if I'm going to put saloon doors on it. However, this is a historic style of architecture that fits the local vernacular. I do live in what was the Wild West



14 Working on a pattern maker's lathe, the faceplate is 83in. I am making a piece of moulding, which matches the profile on the front of a bar and provides the return for the rounded end of the bartop. It had to be turned both front and back to match the moulding as installed at an angle



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17 Pistachio, 6in diameter, 9in tall. This hollow form was turned into an urn for my father who passed during Covid **18** Pink ivory, A. blackwood and walnut. 4.5 x 4.75 x 3.75in. 'Inclusion' series **19** Macassar ebony, bubinga, mahogany bowl is 4.5in diameter. 'Inclusion' series **20** (Two photos) African blackwood, brass, copper 'Bowl with side pipes'. I had so much fun making this frivolous flying bowl. Side pipes, because... why not? The bowl is turned off-centre, adding to a feeling of speed. The bowl is not attached to the base, so it pivots to different angles

And the most challenging piece and why?

I have a piece that I consider a failure, but it was very difficult and complex to engineer. I had to work out ways to hold on to certain parts and had a variety of ways to chuck it on the lathe. There was a certain chain of events that led to its final form, and that was very pleasing to me that it all came out perfectly. Unfortunately, it isn't one of my most pleasing forms, it's just kind of weird. I keep it around anyway, as it's good to remind yourself of how far you've come, just to keep you humble.

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

I still had some work going, and of course the birth of the IRD (Interactive Remote Demonstration) can be attributed to the lockdowns, I think. I suspect the long term will be that IRDs are here to stay in some form or another. I see that as positive. As a demonstrator myself, I find it advantageous to be able to stay home and give a demo from my shop. Beyond the hassles of travel etc. It means I can do a demo and then get on with my normal work, with less of an interruption. It's far cheaper for the clubs too, and though I mostly made my appointments, there have been delays or cancellations due to air travel that I had no control over. It's hard to make that call to a club saying you won't make it because of fog or whatever. Living in the mountains it has always occurred to me that I might miss a flight due to snow, so IRDs are a way around that during wintertime. Also, during Covid, I found that I was sitting on a pile of spindles that were stock for a customer who is a weaver. She wasn't doing classes, so wasn't selling spindles. I opened an Etsy store and that has opened another avenue for sales for me. I ship out three or four spindles and the cups that go with them per week and wouldn't have done that without the nudge from the lockdown.



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What are your aspirations for the future?

When I was in high school and deciding on a career, I thought forward to myself as a white-haired old guy, puttering around his shop after a lifetime of making. I've well manifested that vision for myself! I can't imagine retiring from woodworking, as it is what I want to do. I am very much enjoying learning about the machinist trade, learning how to use the metal lathe and mills. I think I would like to try my hand at clock making – maybe even go so far as to make my own wristwatch. We will see how that goes.

What do you do when you're not wood turning?

I have a dual sport motorcycle, a 950 KTM Adventure. That's what they call an Enduro now. It is happy cruising at 65mph on the highway, or at 20, gliding through the aspen groves in the mountains around my area of Colorado. I really enjoy taking little trips on that. I tried my hand at hunting, with little success, except for remembering how much I like just walking around in the mountains in the fall. We have an archery range in our area that is a lot of fun – I've been doing archery since I was a kid. My wife is from England, and we take trips back to see her family every year, and I love going antiquing there. Always on the hunt for that unknown treasure I just can't live without.