

The freestanding vessels here present conical and pseudospherical profiles typical of Phil Brown's work. Reflecting his native team spirit, he provided more than a dozen handmade pedestals for exhibitors in this group show at the BlackRock Center for the Arts in Germantown, Maryland.

Photo: Tim Aley



# Phil Brown

## ON UNTRAVERSED SLOPES

David M. Fry



In both the flaring beauty of the lily and the brute power of the tornado, the funnel commands our attention among the primal forms of nature. Oddly, this simple vessel shape fitting the lathe so comfortably seldom emerges from the chips, judging from a Google search of images for “turned wood bowl.” Of the first two hundred shown, all but six have convex external curvature, and only one thrusts inward from foot to rim. It’s true, a few well-known turners have frequently exploited the vortex, although the ones that come to mind—Virginia Dotson, Michael Mode, and Michael Shuler—may have done so partly because of the mechanics of laminating their pieces. Meanwhile, the rest of us have probably veered toward concavity when attempting to cut beyond a crack or knot on the outside of a bowl. But where do we find outright celebration of negative curvature in solid-wood vessels, in forms

that suggest the plummeting imprint of weight on a suspended membrane?

A good place to start would be the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery and Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where the sweeping funnels of Phil Brown reside in permanent collections. Perhaps no other American turner qualifies as perennial champion of this distinctive design. The long-time Maryland resident has also racked up a parallel record of accomplishment by catalyzing and channeling a vast whirlpool of activities engaging amateurs and professionals, collectors, students, and the general public in the greater universe of woodturning.

### Beginnings

Growing up mid-century in Denver, Phil struck a far-reaching bargain with his mother to conserve limited family resources: “She’d buy the wood for me if I’d make household furniture with the

table saw, jointer, and drill press purchased with my earnings as a sweeper boy at school.” With precocious attraction to Scandinavian Modern, the self-taught teenager produced a suite of furnishings, including a large walnut credenza, that his mother used for more than forty years and that decorates his own living room today.

After Phil finished college and started a family and job as an agricultural economist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, his woodworking fell by the wayside, only to resurface in the 1970s after a tour of craft shops in Maine. When friends offered him apple trees from their farm, he took some logs to mill for lumber and shorter pieces to turn. He then purchased a small second-hand lathe to make bowls from the wood. Relying on Frank Pain’s 1959 classic, *The Practical Woodturner*, Phil sharpened his technical skills at the



Untitled, 2014, Spalted maple, 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ " × 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (11cm × 35cm) with a 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ "- (6cm-) diameter base

A few years ago, Phil started turning conical funnels with thickening convex interiors. Such shapes require thorough wood drying before turning.

Collection of Robyn Horn



This 6" × 19" (15cm × 48cm) funnel in paulownia (2015) weighs less than one ounce per inch of diameter.

lathe over the next few years, while refining his design sense through exposure to a variety of influences, especially Bob Stocksdale's simple and delicate fusion of Scandinavian and Asian forms. The pre-AAW symposia hosted by Albert LeCoff and Palmer Sharpless outside Philadelphia also had a major impact on him during the early years of the woodturning revival.

### From cone to pseudosphere

Phil's interest in funnel shapes crystallized sometime during the 1980s, around the time Preston Singletary's vortex forms were emerging in the world of art glass. After stumbling across a wedge-shaped poplar slab, Phil realized that without much reshaping, he "could turn a large-diameter,  $\frac{3}{16}$ "- (5mm-) thick bowl from it that would catch people's attention." Over the next thirty years, he has explored this basic form, from straight conical sides to deeply concave ones on the exterior (what mathematicians call a pseudosphere). As the inward curvature becomes more severe and the foot smaller—no greater than twenty percent of the rim diameter—more of the blank's top surface is retained outside the plunging center. The pseudosphere may thus represent the best solution for preserving maximum crotch feather, curl, or quarter-sawn flake in a blank, short of resorting to a two-dimensional platter. ▶

With its interior largely preempted by design, the funnel also draws the bowl away from its traditional container function toward the realm of sculpture.

### In the shop

One machine dominates Phil's modest workroom, and it's not a lathe. An old 20" (51cm) bandsaw stands by not only to bring his slabs into round, but also to remove considerable material underneath through robust angled cuts on a jig. Its slot key and swivel pin help him control the otherwise-awkward operation.

The real surprise is the apparent idleness of a beefy J-Line trade shop lathe, standing just a few feet from Phil's first and (still) principal lathe, a Delta Homecraft that came with an 11" (28cm) swing over the bed and 14" (36cm) over the gap. Long ago, he had a machinist fabricate 5" (13cm) riser blocks for the headstock and tailstock, as well as a new banjo with a toolrest riser and 11" horizontal reach to extend the Delta's turning clearance beyond 20". But the lathe retains its original lightweight ways. "I'm lucky the bed casting has never broken," Phil muses, "since it has been really stressed and has flexed a few times. Fortunately, the headstock is bolted to two boards, 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (44mm) thick and 11" wide, that are anchored to the floor and ceiling. ▶

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Phil with a trademark trumpet form on his Delta Homecraft lathe. Five-inch risers and a custom toolrest give this machine exceptional capacity for its mass.



Phil's pieces often span years in the making. "One of the things I've learned is to be patient."



Otherwise, the big 100-pound-plus pieces I sometimes turn would probably tear the lathe apart. I start such heavy pieces at low rpm, with the aid of a jack-shaft/speed reducer. The setup is quite crude by today's standards." Crude, perhaps, but effective.

Phil usually chainsaws his raw material in the field to manageable 3" to 5"- (8cm to 13cm-) thick slabs and carts them to his van on a handtruck. Depending on his interest in the species and figure, the wood may be worked at his shop in short order, set aside to dry for months or years, or placed in plastic to induce spalting. Once he bandsaws it into a blank, rough-turning with a bowl gouge proceeds down to about 1½" (38mm) even wall thickness. The piece is completely waxed and set aside for at least a full year of hot-and-cold-weather cycling. While this schedule may strike many turners as needlessly long, it makes sense for large funnel shapes, which show warping perhaps more than any other vessel form does. Although a completed but distorted hemispheric bowl can often be remounted on the lathe and gingerly trimmed flat at the rim, a warped pseudosphere lip cannot be flattened once turned thin.

## Finishing

After drying is complete, preparation for finishing begins with warp removal during re-turning, which usually leaves the piece around ½" to ⅝" (13mm to 16mm) thick. At this point, Phil takes an unusual step, coating the wood with epoxy paint

to harden any soft spots and reveal the true color of the final surface. Set aside, the bowl continues to stabilize on his bench over the next few weeks or longer. He then returns it to the lathe for final thinning—usually to a uniform ⅜" (although in recent years, he has made a number of funnels with walls tapering to substantial thickness, producing an entirely different look and feel). Phil is not afraid to break the rules during the last passes as he cuts downhill on exterior sidegrain. The wood is now ready for sanding, starting with 150- or 180-grit hook-and-loop disks and ending with 600-grit handheld sheets.

The application of a spray finish is preceded by two coats of sanding sealer to smooth irregularities, prevent subsequent wood discoloration, and detect any flaws that may have escaped notice. Small cracks and voids need not spoil the perfect surface if they can be filled and camouflaged with sanding dust and, occasionally, watercolors in epoxy glue. It has proven helpful to keep sawdust samples of different wood species on hand to match ambient colors when defects come to light.

Phil lacquers most of his vessels with a conventional spray gun. His standard recipe is two coats of gloss plus one flat coat. He notes, "I create a dead-flat top coat by refraining from stirring a new can of flat lacquer. Instead, I spray thirty to forty percent of the can as gloss and then stir the remaining lacquer, which contains a much higher concentration of [light-scattering] stearates." The final application gets lightly rubbed down off the lathe with ultrafine abrasive pads. By this time, the accumulated hours devoted to finishing—applying epoxy paint, touchup, sanding sealer,



Funnel closeup. No one surpasses Phil in the finishing room. His satin surfaces show no traces of the making or surface irregularities, even in punky wood.

and lacquer—almost equal the number involved in the turning itself.

## Marketing

At one time, several galleries in the Capital area, Chicago, and California carried Phil's work. Since the Great Recession of 2008, however, most have closed or lost contact with him, shutting off a steady stream of income. These days, sales of his bowls largely take place through local juried exhibitions and direct customer purchases around metropolitan Washington. Occasionally something sells on the Internet. But the market for bowls in his typical retail range (\$500 to \$1,200) seems to have declined overall. In addition, he notes, "I haven't increased my prices in twenty years despite [fifty-percent] inflation," an allusion to the span of his retirement from USDA.

An opportunity arose recently to explore a different pricing niche. When Phil brought home some small oak logs from Tudor Place, the Georgetown estate of Martha Washington's descendants, he decided to turn a few bowls that might interest patrons and visitors. "I didn't want to put in too much time for inexpensive gift shop items. So I decided to switch from lacquer to simpler oil-finished, natural-edge pieces that could retail under \$200. The staff liked what I brought in but wondered whether even \$200 was too steep for the typical customer. I said, 'Why not go ahead and double my wholesale prices just to test the market.' Twenty-six hours later I received an e-mail saying five of six bowls had sold. I've delivered more since and occasionally receive a check from ongoing sales."

## Networking

Early on, Phil realized that selling one's work goes hand in hand with networking and learning the larger craft scene. When he joined the James Renwick Alliance, the outreach and fund-raising

auxiliary of the Renwick Gallery, his aim was primarily to educate himself. Through that connection, however, first as a member and eventually an officer, he developed invaluable relationships with curators, gallery owners, collectors, well-known artists, and public-spirited individuals. In return, he has reached out to other makers to alert them to local happenings and build critical mass for group shows. He developed an equally productive relationship with the Woodturning Center (now Center for Art in Wood), hosting visits of its international fellows and arranging tours of private collections for them. And he has made himself a pivotal resource for other organizations looking for new artists to exhibit, demonstrators for their events, and even pedestals for show installations.

After helping start the Capital Area Woodturners and Chesapeake Woodturners in the 1980s, Phil eventually took it upon himself to found another AAW chapter that would shorten driving time for many within the congested metropolitan area. He recalls that he "got in touch with those on the AAW Maryland member list within a reasonable distance of Rockville and invited them to a meeting; twenty-three people showed up." Today, Montgomery County Woodturners has about eighty members and numerous mentoring

and public service programs. Thanks to Phil, the club also circulates an exhibit of member turnings among a half-dozen county libraries.

## Collecting

The Washington, D.C., area can claim at least five internationally known collectors of woodturning, and Phil has personal relationships with all of them. It is therefore not surprising that he has built a collection of his own, in tandem with his wife, Barbara Wolanin, longtime curator of the U.S. Capitol's vast art and archival holdings. Many of Phil and Barbara's own acquisitions reflect extended interactions with the artists. Often, a story is associated with a particular piece. He remembers, "Around 1990, Bob Stocksdale walked into a Capital Area Woodturners meeting hosting a Bonnie Klein demo. He had a box of bowls that he laid out on a table, priced at \$500 each. Most had sapwood cracks, but I managed to buy a flawless kingwood piece, which is now in our collection. Fortunately, I had a check with me that day." It's safe to say that at some level, Phil is usually thinking ahead, aware that if a golden opportunity for others or himself suddenly arises, knowledge of the slopes may funnel good fortune to within reach. ■

*David M. Fry turns wood and writes near Washington, D.C.*



Part of the Brown-Wolanin collection, which contains many works in glass, clay, and fiber, as well as the output of world-renowned woodturners.