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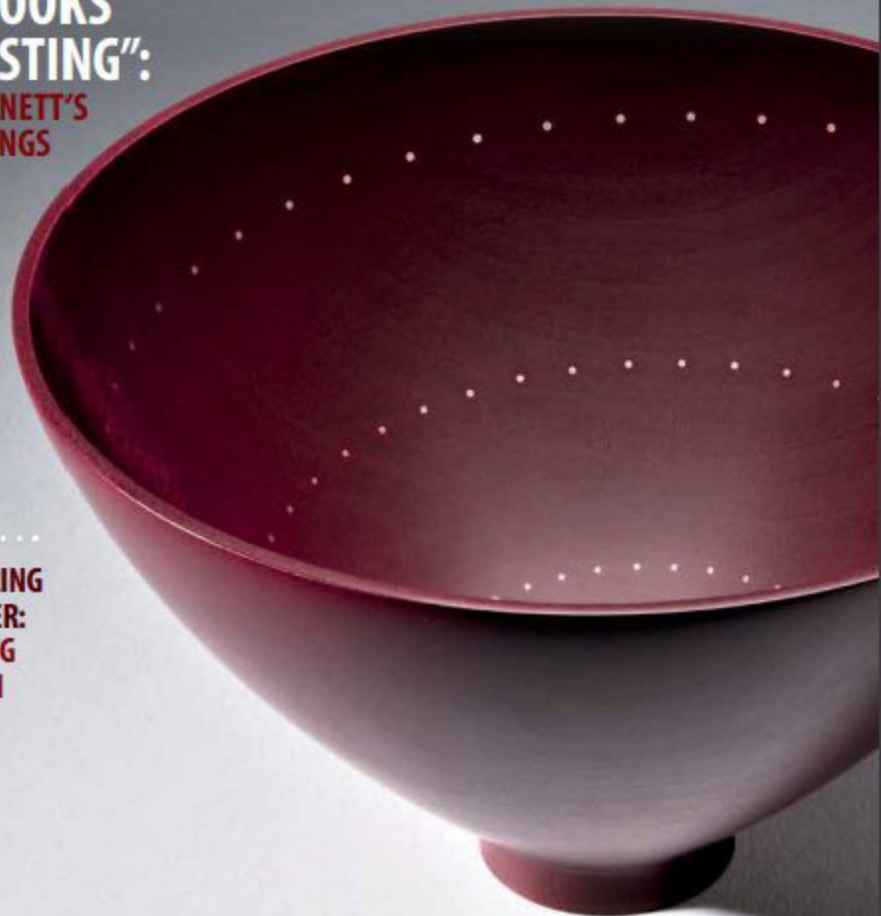
*THE ART
OF WOOD*

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**TURN A
SHAWL PIN**

.....

**STILL INSPIRING
ONE ANOTHER:
THE AAW/IWG
CONNECTION**



“THIS LOOKS INTERESTING”:

ROGER BENNETT’S SILVER LININGS

Steve Forrest

If you look in the *American Woodturner* archives, or if you have been around long enough to have watched the whole thing unfold, you will realize that modern artistic turning had a sort of “Big Bang” that lasted ten years or so. Everything since has been the further elaboration of a few key themes that were established early on—lightness and purity of form, hollowing and thin walls, surface embellishment, color. The trailblazers are well known: Ellsworth, Jordan, Gilson, Saylan, to name a few. Irish turner Roger Bennett’s work synthesizes many of the features that define modern turning, while retaining a unique and very personal voice. His work, like that of many artists, is instantly recognizable even as he explores variations on a theme. He’s one of the great Irish woodturners.

Origin story

Roger’s story involves more than a few big bangs of its own. Born in 1953 in an area so rural he names the county but not a town, Bennett grew up on a farm, surrounded by sheep and tillage, beets and barley. Despite the isolation, he felt it was a privilege to grow up where things were made and repaired, but there was also a world of books and ideas to explore. Flash forward to graduation from Trinity College in Dublin with a degree in modern languages, a nascent career as a secondary school teacher, marriage, and a young family. By all appearances, Bennett was set for a certain sort of genteel, urbane, middle class life. When asked if he had wanted to be a teacher, there was a moment of hesitation. “Yes and no,” he said carefully. “There were some good years.” After fourteen years, though,



he was definitely ready for a change. But to what?

Following the sad loss of a baby at birth in 1991, Roger took a sabbatical from his teaching position and took stock of his life. With his wife Siobhán Parkinson as the breadwinner, he happened to come across a woodworking event in a local sports hall. “This looks interesting,” he thought, a phrase that seems to have marked every big bang since. Among other demonstrations, five woodturners had their lathes going. Roger had never even *seen* a lathe before. This was 1992, and Bennett was 39 years old.

Enter woodturning

“It was magic—the ribbons of shavings streaming into the air,” he recalled. “I felt like a child in a sweet shop.” Roger returned home and knew he had to try woodturning. He took an initial class from an old-school gentleman turner named Tom Newman. “It was wonderful, like a teenager’s first kiss,” Roger said. His first project: the humble egg cup. Next came the small shed in the backyard, a small Record lathe, and years of throwing everything against the wall to see what would stick.

Fortunately, Siobhán’s work afforded Roger the opportunity to learn by doing. Rapidly building up both his

Untitled, 2001, European sycamore, water-based dye, Danish oil, 3" x 8" (8cm x 20cm)

Photo: Francis Morrin

With or without silver inlay, Roger’s work generally features transparent color and elegant, minimalist forms.



skills and his inventory, he started selling at local crafts fairs, benefiting from the direct feedback of potential customers. It's hard to believe now, but "those early bowls were awful—shapeless and thick-bottomed," he noted wryly. The early work "wasn't worth showing," but it couldn't have been that bad. Simple principles—a gallery owner noted that he needed fair curves—registered deeply. Richard Raffan's *Turned-Bowl Design* (Taunton Press, 1987) was a touchstone, as it has been for so many turners since.

The next big bang came when Roger saw a demonstration in 1993 by English turner Paul Clare. Clare was using color—bright color. Roger thought, "This looks interesting." Woodturning at that time was still mostly round and brown, and the people who were breaking that down ran into plenty of resistance. But color resonated with Roger, and he thought he could happily spend his time exploring it.

Leap of faith

So far, Bennett's story might seem like so many others: middle-aged person finds instant gratification through woodturning. But here is where being Irish gave Roger a particular advantage over his American counterparts. His teaching job afforded him a five-year sabbatical, and the Crafts Council of Ireland (CCoI, now the Design and Crafts Council) offered an intensive program in the business of making a living at craft. A modest living allowance, workspace, and tutelage were all offered, and in 1994 Roger became the first woodturner to enter the program. (Glenn Lucas and Emmet Kane followed soon after.)

Making the leap from teacher to professional woodturner wasn't easy. Bennett had to provide his own lathe and would return home on the weekends. Siobhán bore the brunt of it, between child rearing and keeping the

household going, but as Roger said, she made it clear she would leave him if he went back to teaching! It was readily apparent that he needed to go ahead and jump.

The CCoI program had the desired effect: opening doors, generating orders, and accelerating Roger's career. In 1996, he finally pulled the plug on teaching and became a fulltime wood artist. Happily, Siobhán also underwent a career change. Following the same event that prompted Roger's own transformation, Siobhán began writing stories for children. Successful writing became successful editing, then publishing, and now their son has taken over Siobhán's business.

Connecting the dots

Bennett's last big bang had a longer fuse. While Roger began using color even before starting the CCoI program, he didn't begin incorporating his signature silver dots until 2000. But it was during the CCoI course five years earlier that the seed for silver was first planted. One of the hallmarks of the program was that people from a variety of crafts were included, with the explicit goal of cross-pollination of ideas and techniques. One of the other artists, a jeweler, first suggested that Roger use silver in his pieces. A few turners had done this earlier—he mentions Garth May and Hayley Smith—but it was largely unplowed territory.

Bennett finally acquired a Dremel and some silver wire and started experimenting. With a well-established style using subtle color and delicate form already in place, Roger reacted to his silver dots in typical fashion: "This looks interesting." He first offered bowls with silver ornamentation for sale in 2001, and they took off. In fact, the use of silver dots has become his signature technique, offering endless opportunities for variation. The bowls don't just provide a neutral field for the silver patterns, their three-dimensional forms and colors combine with the graphic element of the silver dots for a powerful, cumulative effect.

Exploring the work

I first saw Roger's work in the pandemic-induced Virtual Instant Gallery generated by the AAW's Virtual Symposium in 2020. In clicking through the photos, I took note of the pieces that spoke to me, and I kept coming back to Roger's 2018 bowl. It was an almost black-and-white image, with a simple flared bowl with a narrow base, thin walls, delicate, and reminiscent of Japanese-style work. The wood grain was very faintly sublimated, and across the surface were several flowing, curved tendrils of silver dots, like seaweed, or the tresses on Botticelli's *Venus*. It conveyed a sense of both balance ▶



Untitled, 2018, European sycamore, argentium silver, water-based dye, Danish oil, 3" × 11" (8cm × 28cm)
Photo: Trevor Hart

Untitled, 2004, European sycamore, argentium silver, water-based dye, Danish oil, 2" x 4" (5cm x 10cm)

Photo: Trevor Hart



and movement that made me gasp. Elegant—no wasted motion, nothing extraneous, all of it powerful. I thought, “This looks interesting.”

Welcome to Roger Bennett’s work.

Roger’s early pieces were promising, for sure. But the addition of the silver dots truly elevated his work to a new level.

By 2004, Roger had already explored a number of approaches. With the bowl at left, the silver is emphasized by the contrasting black interior, set off against the blue glow of the outer wall.

The pattern is “controlled random,” an idea Bennett has returned to repeatedly. The bowl form, of course, is classic, understated, perfect—nothing random there. The walls, while thin, still have some substance. There is a lovely, quiet tension in the piece that is constant across virtually all of Bennett’s work.

Further work in 2004 explores the same elements in a variety of ways. With this piece (*second down, left*), the walls have been thinned down, the form is now flared up and out from a tiny base, and the inside is divided between a wide textured band and a smooth center with a spiral leading our eye inward. Here, he has inlaid 18-karat gold instead of silver.

Sometimes the silver pattern is randomized, and other times, geometrical; there may be a contrasting texture. The colors range widely, but they are almost always transparent. The wood is not highly figured—usually European sycamore, which is like maple, but softer—but the grain is not invisible. Instead, it provides a subtle, organic contrast to the human-imposed order of the silver dots. Moreover, since the dye absorption is variable depending on the grain direction, the color itself has a fluid, almost shimmering quality. (Glenn Lucas noted that early on, he sold the unused cores from his sycamore blanks to Roger, thereby providing the perfect source, and demonstrating just how small and interconnected the Irish woodturning world is.)

The silver pattern is frequently a dominant graphic element, but not always. It took some encouragement, but Roger eventually tried silver on silver (shown at *left*), with a plume of just three wavy lines, and the effect is sublime. And while the silver color is distributed over the entire piece, the tiny dots themselves retain a delicate, filigreed quality.

In 2019, Bennett was part of a coterie of wood artists who received



Untitled, 2004, European sycamore, gold, water-based dye, Danish oil, 3½" x 10¼" (9cm x 26cm)

Photo: Don Giovanni Studio

Untitled, 2015, European sycamore, argentium silver, water-based dye, Danish oil, 4¼" x 5½" (11cm x 14cm)

Photo: Roger Bennett



Untitled, 2007, European sycamore, argentium silver, water-based dye, Danish oil, 1½" x 6¼" (38mm x 16cm)

Photo: Estelle Barrett-Morgan

unfinished blanks from Ray Key’s widow. His completed “collaboration” was one of Key’s characteristic forms, with just a dyed rim inlaid with Bennett’s gold. The piece presents seventy-six dots, one for each year of Ray’s life. Roger has also extended beyond his signature bowls by going smaller with jewelry and larger with wall pieces, but always relying on the flow of silver dots played out against the canvas of dyed wood.

A note on scale. As with much woodturning photography, you can’t tell how big or small the pieces are from the photos themselves. Roger’s work tends to be small—on the order of 4” to 6” (10cm to 15cm) in diameter. Paradoxically, much of the power of the pieces is derived from their diminutive size. The delicacy, complexity, and precision of the silver patterning, expressed on the thin bowl walls, have a cumulative power that catches the viewer by surprise. How can something this small be this epic? The work is quite literally breathtaking.

Bennett’s work has achieved wide notice, showing up in museums, Irish national collections, and the pages of this and other journals, as well as being featured in a number of exhibitions. *Growth Spiral* was Bennett’s entry in AAW’s 2020 POP exhibition, *Nature/Nurture*.

He was included in the prestigious Homo Faber 2022 European and Japanese Craft Collection as well as Made in Ireland 2022, and was named one of Ireland’s fifty Craft Heroes. Emmet Kane, President of the Irish Woodturners Guild, said that part of Roger’s influence has been to raise the bar for excellence, and he has led the way in demonstrating museum-worthy quality. Irish turner Max Brosi said, “Roger’s work has forced other woodturners, including myself, to re-evaluate what attention to detail means. His proportions, finesse, and attention to detail set a benchmark in Irish craft.” ▶



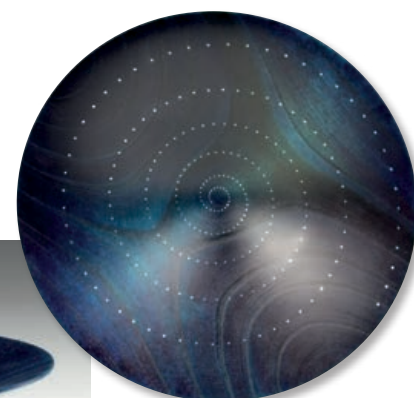
Roger Bennett/Ray Key collaboration, Bowl, 2019, Ash, gold, water-based dye, Danish oil, 2" x 6" (5cm x 15cm)

Photos: Paul Hannaby



Much of the power of Bennett’s pieces is derived from their diminutive size.

Photo: Shane O’Neill



Growth Spiral, 2020, Cherry, silver, water-based dye, argentium silver, 1½" x 6" (38mm x 15cm)

Photos: Tib Shaw/AAW



Roger Bennett (right) explains the details of his work to Irish President Michael D. Higgins and his wife Sabina at Dublin Castle, 2021. The event was a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Design and Crafts Council Ireland.

Photo: Leon Farrell



A gathering of giants in Irish woodturning, from left: Mary Leahy (Liam Flynn’s partner), Glenn Lucas, the late Liam Flynn, Roger Bennett, and the late Brother Ciarán Forbes. At the opening of the *Fine Forms* exhibition during the Éigse Arts Festival, Carlow, 2004. Glenn had invited Liam and Roger to exhibit with him; Ciarán opened the exhibition.

Photo: Cornelia McCarthy

Behind the scenes

So how does he do it, inlaying hundreds and hundreds of tiny silver dots? It starts with a drawing using an old-school computer program, Corel Draw, that lets him play with the dots, systematically varying the arrays until he arrives at his desired pattern. He then prints and cuts it out by hand, and sticks it to the wood. Then it gets tricky. Roger punches through the pattern to mark each dot on the wood, then drills each hole to the precise depth so as not to pierce the wood. (Recall that many of his pieces may be as thin as 3mm.) It turns out that the pattern, perfectly spaced and aligned on the inner face, gets distorted if it is projected onto the larger surface of the exterior wall, so that is why the pattern only appears on the inside. The diameter of the dots themselves ranges from 0.5 to 1.0 mm. Magnifier glasses are a critical tool for this work.

Once the holes are drilled (and they frequently have subtle, intentional variations in their diameters), he glues the silver wire into place, then snips it off,

leaving a nubbin of silver to be sanded down afterward. The wire is tarnish-resistant argentium silver, which can be sanded down perfectly flush to the wood. Any given piece might have hundreds of these dots, and some pieces might have well over a thousand.

It is exacting, precise, repetitive work, but the cumulative effect is astounding. As Roger noted, though, form comes first. It's only worth doing if the base piece can stand on its own merits. Roger had already perfected his forms and bowl-turning technique, long before introducing the silver element. Water-based dyes provide the transparent color he desires. His tool needs are fairly limited: a couple of bowl and spindle gouges, a jeweler's drill, and a draw plate for ensuring the silver wire is sized correctly.

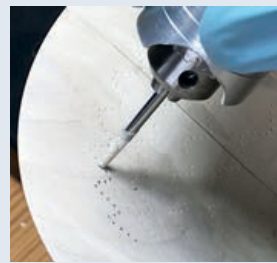
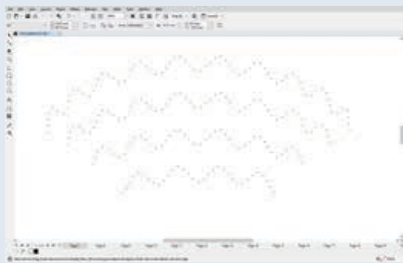
Roger's style is a harmonious combination of aesthetics and logistics. He knew he needed to get good enough at something distinctive to make a living. Rather than seeing art and commerce as opposites, he has found a result that

allows him to make what he wants and that people want to buy. His urban workspace is small; he was never destined to make large-scale work. He likes color and is innately attentive to detail. Brosi said, "Obtaining a flawless finish at the scale Roger works at is unequalled." And, as Kane said, "By God, he is patient."

Above and beyond

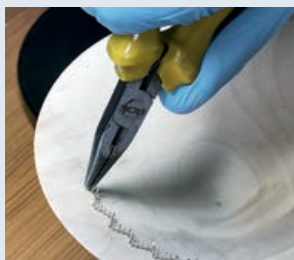
Not only is he patient, he's considerate. More than any other word, this kept coming up in interviews about Roger. Glenn Lucas and his wife Cornelia McCarthy sang Roger's praises, noting that his quiet encouragement was very important early on for Lucas, who started turning before Roger did but joined the Crafts Council program the year after Roger. "You always walk away feeling better" after talking with Roger, Glenn said. Max Brosi said Roger "has been incredibly generous in his encouragement and support of my own development as a turner. Roger's work really reflects his personality as a humble, kind, and generous master of

Paper pattern to wood



The work starts with a detailed drawing in a graphic art program. The patterns can be manipulated until the desired effect is achieved, with the computer doing all the work of keeping and adjusting distances and ratios. After printing it out, Bennett sticks the pattern to the blank and begins punching through the pattern to mark the wood. He then drills to the appropriate depth.

Insert, snip, sand, finish



After drilling the holes, short lengths of silver wire are dipped in cyanoacrylate (CA) glue and inserted. The wire is then nipped off close, followed by sanding the dots flush. This exacting process is repeated for hundreds of individual dots. Sanding, dyeing, and oiling complete the demanding work.

his craft. His persona comes through his work; what's in the heart comes out through the hands."

As if all this weren't enough, Roger is also a prolific writer who has profiled a number of illustrious turners and has written about other crafts and craftspeople. As with his woodturning, so it is with his writing: his prose is thoughtful, quiet, carefully measured, but still sensual. Cornelia McCarthy said that, even more than a teacher, Roger is an educator, the sort of person who leads people to engage in their own learning, rather than handing ideas down from on high. People seek him out as a source of wise reflection. He has written about the joys and heartaches of turning wood, about the meaning of craft, and about a touchstone bowl. Roger has also written extensively about ceramics, finding much in common between clay and wood.

Roger works not just on his own turning, but also on shining a light on others' work. Mary Gallagher, who owned a gallery in Wexford, Ireland, for many years and has curated major crafts expositions, spoke glowingly of Roger's attention to and encouragement of other makers, and of those involved with the arts at any level. "He's always measured, thoughtful, constructive," she said. "He's kind, but not soft." Gallagher also appreciated Bennett's capacity to get others to think twice, to look again. She admitted that before she met Roger in the early 2000s, she had thought of woodturning as "crude salad bowls." Roger's work couldn't be further from that description.

Just as his woodturning is a distillation and an extension of many of the major threads in modern turning, Roger's influences range far and wide. They include Irish turners Liam Flynn, Ciarán Forbes, and Liam O'Neill; English turners Ray Key, Bert Marsh, and Mick O'Donnell; as well as American turners Al Stirt, Merryll Saylan, William Hunter, and Virginia Dotson. And of

“ Roger’s work really reflects his personality as a humble, kind, and generous master of his craft. His persona comes through his work; what’s in the heart comes out through the hands. —Max Brosi

course, there's Richard Raffan. Long before he even dreamed of becoming a woodturner, Roger and his wife received as a wedding gift in 1978 a salad bowl of Brazilian walnut that still gets daily use. But it wasn't until many years later that "the penny dropped," as Roger is fond of saying, and he realized the signature on the bottom was Raffan's.

One particular landmark for Roger has been the work of groundbreaking ceramicist Lucy Rie. Rie's work is elegant, at times veering to severe, but is instantly recognizable as part of the development of modern forms. Photos of some of her work look like they could have been turned and carved out of wood as readily as clay. Along with Raffan's book, Rie has been a constant influence on Roger's aesthetic. Ceramicists Grainne Watts and Jennifer Lee also rate highly in Roger's list of inspirations.

In a second-hand shop, Roger once stumbled across a beautiful little oak bowl that spoke to him. He has written eloquently about the depth of feeling the bowl evoked in him. Flipping the bowl over, he found that it was signed by the late Ciarán Forbes. A masterpiece of simplicity, turned by one of the leading lights of Irish woodturning, languishing for a couple of euros in a charity shop—it sits on Roger's shelf now where he looks at it every day.

The only gap I found in the esteem people expressed for Roger was that, as Glenn Lucas said, "You can't have a good bitch with him." Unlike with Ciarán Forbes, apparently there are no off-color stories, no juicy bits of gossip, no late-night adventures involving, say,

a few pints and an errant tool. No, with Roger, there are just warm feelings for a serious, talented turner who invariably focuses his attention, and his light, on others. "It's all about the aesthetic with Roger," said Cornelia McCarthy. "He's working for purity and lasting power." Roger Bennett is who he appears to be.

"Chance and circumstance play a huge part in every career," Roger has written. His career is the living embodiment of that sentiment. But it's not just random. Mary Gallagher spoke with feeling about the sheer technical skill and bravado it takes to make Roger's work. Emmet Kane said that "the intensity of Roger's work is extraordinary. He's making treasures for the future." Working on such a small canvas amplifies every detail and every flaw. Quite simply, there is no margin for error. That exceptional skill isn't developed by chance and circumstance. The romantic part of Roger's story is that he dropped everything in middle age, followed a dream, and made it work. But that belies the quiet determination and relentless focus it took to reach those heights. Roger Bennett's story continues to get more and more interesting. ■

For more, visit rogerbennettwoodturner.com, and follow him on Instagram, [@rogerbennettwoodturner](https://www.instagram.com/rogerbennettwoodturner).

Steve Forrest is a former RN and teacher whose third act is as a woodturner. He also gets to combine his various interests and skills as an editor and occasional writer for American Woodturner and Woodturning FUNDamentals. He is the current President of the Wine Country Woodturners in Sonoma County, California, where he lives with his wife, pets, and lathe. See his work at steveforrestwoodturning.com and on Instagram [@steveforrestwoodturning](https://www.instagram.com/steveforrestwoodturning).