



Woodturning is not an exact science. Wood is an organic and unpredictable material, subject to a range of irregularities, and, prone to twist and turn of its own accord as it assumes a new shape. Many woodturners celebrate these qualities, the woodiness of wood, creating pieces that unashamedly declare that they originate in trees. Not so Roger Bennett, whose wooden bowls first appeared in 1994, remarkable both

for their delicacy and for their colour, paper-thin flared vessels resting on their narrow bases as lightly as butterflies. Bennett works mainly in sycamore, a wood with a natural pallor, which he colours with a water-based stain that works with the wood so that the grain is both muted and enhanced. He is currently exploring the possibilities of working in maple, beech, and cherry, but is quite clear that the wood is not the most important thing. It's a medium, like any other.

Gradually, over the years, his colours have deepened as the work grows in confidence, his forms becoming more exact. 'The problem with turning thin is trying to control the shape of the profile, and keep the rim regular. As the bowl becomes thinner the tension in the wood changes, and it moves almost as though it's alive. There's a point when you realise that if you go any thinner you'll lose the shape.' Influences include the coloured and incised bowls of the American Al Stirt, and the thin-turned pieces of the English woodturner Bert Marsh, but Bennett has particular reverence for the ceramics of Lucie Rie. 'Her work has an incredible sense of form and lightness of shape. It would be nonsensical to say that form is everything, but I do think that it is the most important element. If the form isn't right then all the other elements – surface, decoration, and finish – can't carry the piece.'

One of the major breakthroughs in Bennett's work came in 1999 when he began to incorporate silver, inlaying the inside of the bowls with tiny silver dots in patterns that he described as 'controlled random'. The effect was magical, each bowl seemed to hold a microcosm of the night sky; the process was painstaking and exacting. 'Each dot is the cross-section of a piece of silver or gold wire. I draw the pattern onto the wood, drill the holes using a jeweller's pendant drill, and insert a short length of silver wire into each hole. Then the wire has to be snipped off and gradually sanded down. I had a lot of advice from jewellers along the way.' It's a meticulous and time-consuming process, but Bennett is slowly expanding his repertoire, using the silver to create spirals and geometric lines that accentuate a sense of movement within the bowl. 'In some ways the woodturning process has parallels with the movement of the potter's wheel. I trace the spiral on to the wood while the bowl is spinning on the lathe. The spiral is like a spring coiling from the centre, but also like a track that draws the eye down into the centre of the bowl.'

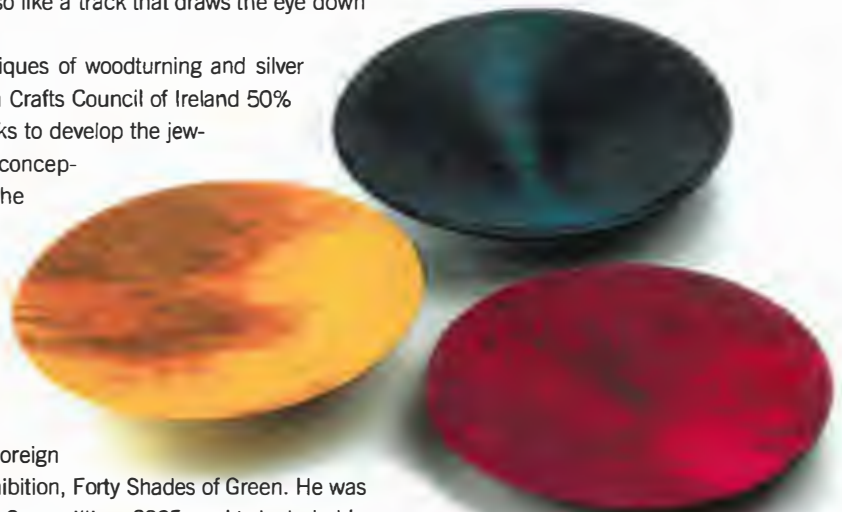
He has also begun to make jewellery, adapting the techniques of woodturning and silver inlay to create pendants and brooches. A recent recipient of a Crafts Council of Ireland 50% funding award, Bennett is working with the jeweller Erika Marks to develop the jewellery range. The learning process has been a useful one, the conceptual stretch of thinking about different shapes has freshened the bowl designs, and working on flat surfaces has introduced new possibilities of working with pattern. Woodturning is a reduction process – the gradual honing of form, the art of knowing when to stop – and Bennett describes the pursuit of technical excellence in similar terms, a continual process of refinement. The future promises new shapes, sizes, colours, and patterns of inlay.


Bennett's work has been bought for the Department of Foreign Affairs Collection and is exhibited as part of the celebrated exhibition, *Forty Shades of Green*. He was awarded first prize for woodturning in the RDS National Crafts Competition, 2005, and is included in the Crafts Council directory, *Portfolio*. He has recently been selected to show his work in the inaugural *Origin 2006* at Somerset House, London, and at *SOFA 2006*, Chicago.

For further information see www.rogerbennettwoodturner.com



ELEANOR FLEGG discusses the work of Roger Bennett, chosen by a panel of experts on behalf of the Crafts Council of Ireland to acknowledge consistency in design excellence



 Crafts Council of Ireland