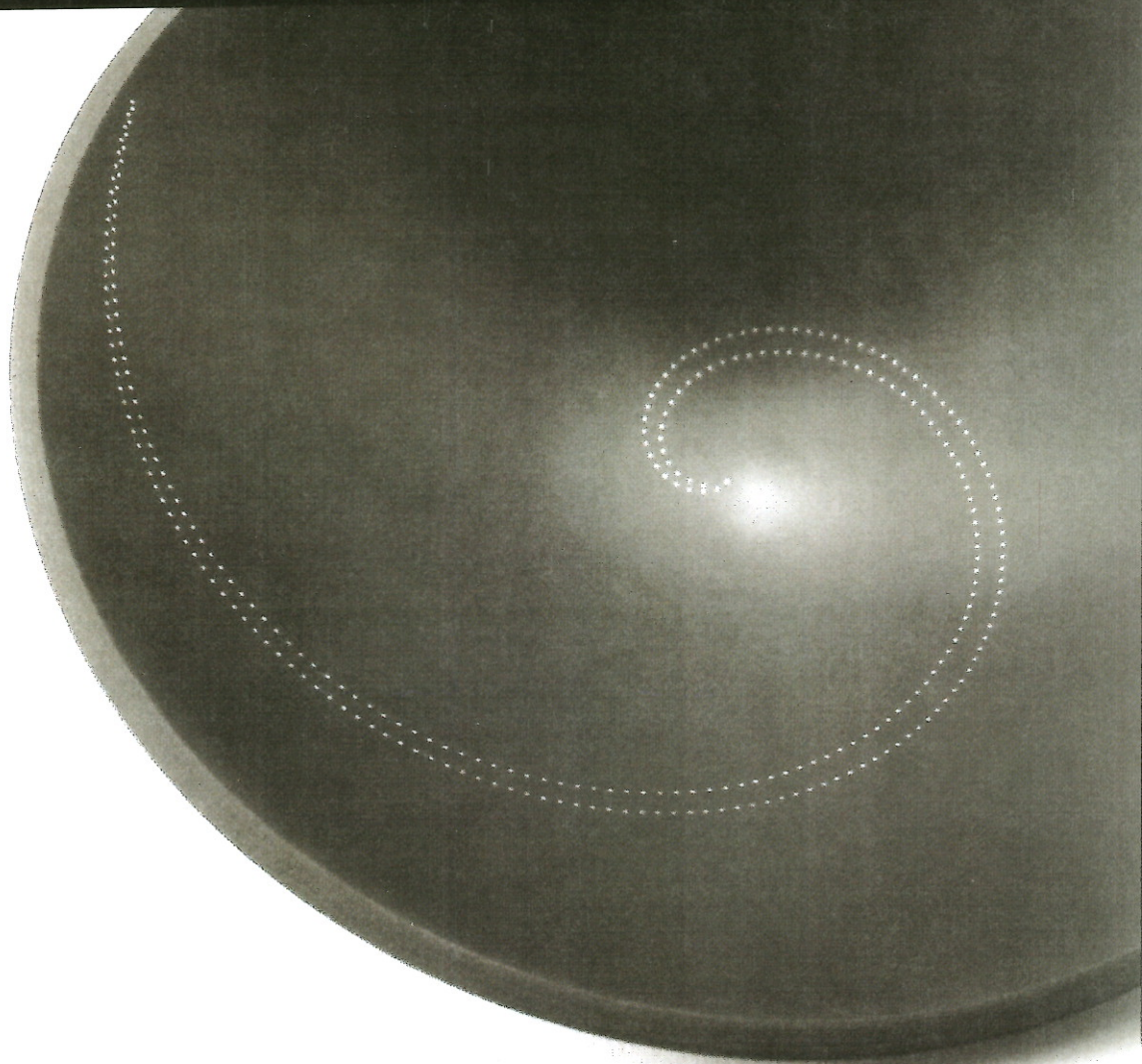
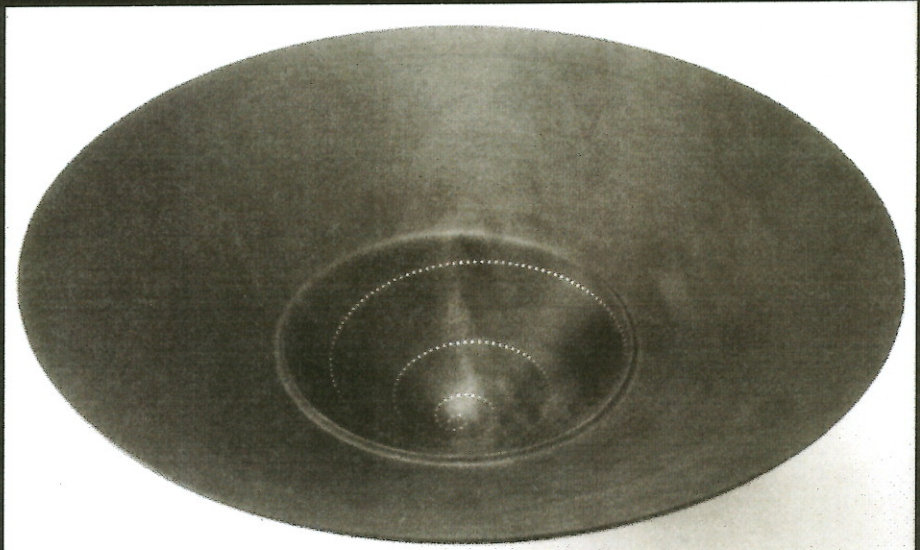


# Sometimes the Wood Reveals Itself and Surprises You — A Profile of Roger Bennett

BY AMBROSE O'HALLORAN PHOTOGRAPHY AMBROSE O'HALLORAN







L-R:  
 Roger Bennett  
*Double Spiral Bowl*  
 sycamore, inlaid silver  
 7 1/2 x 2" (19 x 5 cm)

Roger Bennett  
*Silver Spiral Bowl*  
 sycamore, inlaid silver  
 9 1/2 x 3 1/2" (24 x 9 cm)

Roger Bennett is one of Ireland's most exciting turners. He makes simple forms which contain a tremendous amount of movement and energy, while the use of metal and color in his work is deeply reflective and moving. I first met Roger in 1994, just as he was starting out as a fulltime turner, and was immediately struck by his quietly spoken manner, his extreme attention to detail and his purposeful approach. As the years have gone by my initial sense of admiration has deepened as the subtlety of his work has increased. If Craft is the bridge between Art and Technology, then Roger's work is definitely on the Art side of the bridge. At one level, his pieces are fairly traditional forms, but with radical use of texture and metals. The subtlety of the marriage of wood, color and metal is packaged with Roger's perfectionism and his own quiet persona. It is simple form combined with very deliberate geometric patterns of sterling silver or gold inlay.

Roger lives in the center of Dublin, the capital city of Ireland, with his wife, author Siobhán Parkinson, and their son Matthew. Initial impressions include the

fact that he is the only professional turner in Ireland who makes and sells exclusively colored work and, in a field where larger pieces are frequently more applauded, Roger makes very small pieces. He began turning in 1992 while on a break from his career as a French-language teacher. His next step was deciding to become a fulltime woodturner. As part of this big stepping stone, he took a year-long Craft & Design Business Development Course in the former Kilkenny Design Workshops. There were nine people on the course, including two ceramists, a jeweller and five textile artists. "I had my own workspace and my mentor was the furniture maker Clive Nunn", says Roger. Nunn is one of Ireland's leading furniture designers and makers. "We had regular sessions on business skills, such as bookkeeping and accountancy, marketing, pricing, etc. It was an extremely stimulating environment and I think it helped me greatly in my decision to become a professional woodturner. Most craftspeople will freely admit that it is often a very precarious way of life and that year gave me a lot of insight into the realities of such a career."

Roger was initially drawn to the work of turner Bert Marsh and, through that influence, to the work of ceramists like Lucie Rie. Eventually he started to find his own voice. "I am not interested in producing large heavy work, but prefer to work with small delicate pieces. I am drawn to the fragility and thinness of a piece." Other influences were Paul Clare from the UK and Al Stirt from the USA. "Al Stirt has a fabulous sense of shape and interesting use of color and pattern," says Roger, "sometimes carving through the color". He admires the work of many turners but, like others, Roger has had to find his own style. "Of course you learn specific techniques from other turners. You have to, in the same way that a jeweller must learn stone-setting, etc. If it happens to be a specific technique that another woodturner has invented, so be it. There's very little that is really new, after all. But there's no point in simply plagiarising another turner. What is important is how you absorb the ideas or techniques, adopt and adapt them, make them part of your own personal style or idiom. It is often a fine line between being derivative and





L-R:  
Silver Spiral Bowl, Untitled, Night Sky Bowl

*I am drawn to the fragility and thinness of a piece . . .*

being innovative.”

I asked Roger why he started turning and he answered disarmingly, “Wood is an easy material to work with. Sometimes the wood reveals itself and surprises you, and you have to decide whether to include or eliminate the surprise”. In Roger’s work you see his love for clean lines, good proportions, harmony, good finish – but there is much more going on. Roger is a highly-educated, reflective man who brings all his belief systems into his work. Nothing is by simple chance, or a mere whim. His careful and thoughtful nature is reflected in each piece.

For Roger, turning is only part of the total process. He is fascinated with the spiral patterns generated inside the bowl as the piece is being turned. This was the inspiration for his spiral patterns using precious metal inlay. The path of each spiral is carefully drawn in pencil as the bowl spins, so it is different every time – organic, unique to each bowl. Then very precise, tiny, blind holes are drilled to take the metal inlay. The inlay is painstakingly added – just one mistake will ruin the entire piece. Roger admires the movement

that Virginia Dotson and William Hunter achieve in their work. His *Double Spiral Bowl* shows that he achieves equal movement in his own work.

When you look at a Roger Bennett bowl you are first and foremost struck by its simplicity. It is not just an exercise in thin turning, but is the result of a search to find the most beautiful form that could be liberated from that particular piece of wood. Although this can be said of many woodturners, what makes Roger’s pieces unusual is that the subtraction of unnecessary wood is balanced with the addition of precious metals and color, which combine to produce the overall piece. It is not simply a colored bowl with metal added; rather it is metal held in a medium of turned, colored wood. This is the trinity that forms each piece, as exemplified in *Night Sky Bowl*. At first glance, there is an illusion of randomly-added sterling silver dots of various diameters. Roger describes the placement of the silver dots as “controlled random”. The piece, while remaining true to the material, has been molded exactly the way that Roger intended.

“One problem using color is that it shows blemishes, so the work must be very carefully finished. Each piece is a challenge and the excitement comes both in the making and seeing the finished piece,” he says. “You plan with the head, make with the heart and hope the piece sings at the end.” Roger chooses his colors very carefully. He can go on at length about the significance of the color blue and you realise just how passionate he is about his choice of colors. “Blue is my favourite color—in fact it is most people’s favourite. There is a long history associated with the color blue, although blue is not named once in the Bible as many civilisations had no specific word for it.”

Roger almost always turns wet sycamore. He adds water-colored dyes to draw out the inherent qualities of the wood. He likes water colors as they allow the wood grain to show through. For Roger the natural coloring, grain patterns, figuring and tactile qualities of the wood are very important. He wants to enhance what is naturally in the wood, not simply paint over it. “I like the way the color is absorbed in a bowl at different rates in end grain versus





*Gold Spiral Bowl, 11 x 4", sycamore, inlaid gold.*

side grain. So, in all the bowls, you get this light band of color running through the center of the bowl. This gives beautiful subtle variations." The choice of color is dictated by each piece. If the piece is highly figured or spalted, he will use a very light color such as yellow. To further enhance the coloring, Roger frequently textures the rims and/or exteriors of the bowls with coarse abrasive, although this is done with subtlety and delicacy.

A very quietly spoken man, Roger is nevertheless a powerful artist who sees each piece as a challenge. It is the marriage of traditional skill and production of pure forms with a modern use of mixed media that make it exciting. His work has been recognised by collectors such as Ruth and David Waterbury, who have some of his pieces in their collection. "They have been very generous with encouragement," he says. Roger's work can also be found in various collections such as The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii; Columbus State University, Georgia; and the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland. These have all helped in his career development. "Most

craftspeople work alone and it can be very easy to become prey to self-doubt. When one of your pieces is selected for an exhibition or bought by a collector, it is a very welcome type of validation." Roger has also been in a number of exhibitions. A list of these may be found on his website at [www.rogerbennettwoodturner.com](http://www.rogerbennettwoodturner.com). As I write this article, Roger is preparing to demonstrate at a woodturning symposium in Galway with Todd Hoyer and Hayley Smith. Also, he has just arrived back from the 28th Annual Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show where his bowls were extremely well received. Just reward. The work of this artist deserves to be on the international stage.

Roger thinks that this is a very exciting time in the turning field. "The internet has made woodturners much more aware of each other's work. Today, it does not matter where in the world you live, you can be in touch with another artist and their work. This is encouraging woodturners to experiment more with different techniques and influences." Roger's own journey in the field is one of progress and evolution in his own technique and design.

It is a journey I have watched since 1994 and I look forward to what the next decade will bring. As the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, put it, "A man is original when he speaks the truth that has been known to all good men."

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*Ambrose O'Halloran works as a Technical Officer at University College, Galway. He is a committed woodturner who teaches and demonstrates, and he also organizes woodturning conferences in Galway.*