

# THE UNMISTAKABLE IMPACT OF

# ALBERT LECOFF

Terry Martin



Every day, Albert LeCoff works in his office surrounded by a lifetime of memories.

Photo: John Carlano

When I recently heard a young turner say, “Who is Albert LeCoff?” I was surprised, but then realized it was not her fault because we should all acknowledge Albert more, so I decided to set down my version of his story. I first met Albert in 1995 at a woodturning symposium in France. Over the ensuing years, I have come to know Albert the legend quite well, but I never really felt I knew Albert the person. Finally, twenty years after we first met, I was able to spend four weeks in Philadelphia interviewing him, and he opened his life to me.

This is where I would usually say, “Albert was born in...” But getting to this kind of detail with Albert is a challenge. In *Turning to Art in Wood*, published to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wood Turning Center (WTC, now called The Center for Art in Wood), Albert wrote, “Interviewers always tell me they have a hard time separating me from the organization my twin brother Alan and I started in 1986.” So in Philadelphia, while Albert sat at the center of an array of woodturning memorabilia in his office, I asked him about himself. He frequently deflected my questions with something like, “See that box next to the bowl there...” Eventually, Albert’s own story did unfold. But before we go to his personal story, I want to focus your attention with a simple but critical fact: Albert LeCoff invented the woodturning symposium.

### The first woodturning symposia

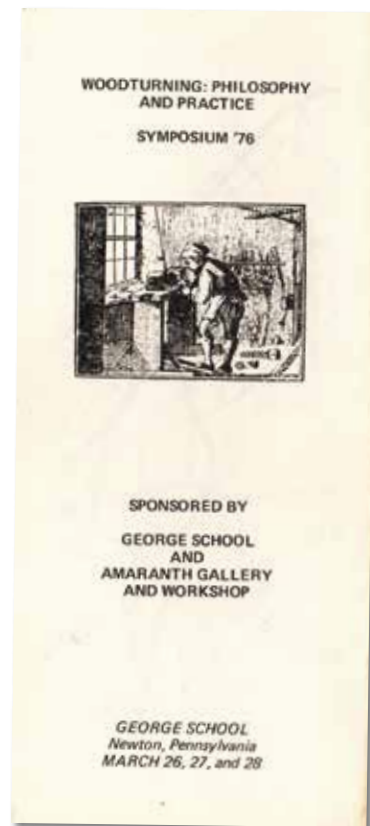
From 1976 to 1981, with the help of his brother Alan and Palmer Sharpless, Albert ran ten symposia in Philadelphia, and the template has not changed much since then. The seeds that grew into all the turning symposia across the world, from the largest international events to the smallest local gatherings, were planted by Albert in Pennsylvania.

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Albert likes to tell everyone that John Kelsey was the one who encouraged him to start the symposia, that Palmer Sharpless organized the shop and the equipment, and that his twin brother Alan looked after the finances and logistics. This is as it should be, but it was Albert’s energy that drove everything. Albert describes the humble beginnings of these groundbreaking events: “The early symposia cost \$35 to \$40 to attend and eventually it went up to \$125. I didn’t offer the demonstrators much, and some of them even gave that up because we didn’t always raise enough money. The first symposium was called *Woodturning: Philosophy and Practice*. It was a good name because we weren’t just talking about the *how*, we also wanted to talk about the *why*.”

Back in 1976, the idea that turners would come from all over the United States to openly share ideas was unheard of, and Albert credits Palmer Sharpless for this. Palmer was the woodshop teacher at George School, a venerable Quaker institution that sits in park-like grounds an hour north of Philadelphia, and that was where they held the early symposia. Albert always speaks fondly of Palmer: “He embraced the idea of the symposia because he really believed in reaching out to everyone. That reinforced my beliefs.”

Albert warms to the subject quickly as he explains how the symposia



The first symposium [in 1976] was called *Woodturning: Philosophy and Practice*.

changed the way people saw woodturning: “I remember saying after the first symposium, ‘What brings a ninety-year-old potato farmer and an architect, both from Seattle, to George School in Pennsylvania? It’s woodturning.’ I think the strength of what we were doing was that nobody knew they were breaking rules—they didn’t even know there were any rules. The philosophy for the symposia was simple; I believed there was more than one approach to turning, and I believed in hands-on instruction.” Albert continues, “At the beginning, each instructor would give a forty-five-minute presentation to the whole group and then they separated into small groups. We made people stay with their group because some people might only watch Bob Stocksdales, but they might not know about Frank Cummings, for example. I remember a production turner who was watching ▶

The 1993 World Turning Conference, held at the Hagley Museum, quickly evolved into the Windgate International Turning Exchange, one of Albert's proudest achievements to date. Albert's father, Jesse LeCoff (pictured here with Albert), a philatelist, designed the postal cancellation mark used to stamp mail sent from the event.



Frank, saying, 'I wish I had that creativity!' and Frank saying, 'I wish I had your skills!'"

Nowadays, amateur turners regularly produce cutting-edge work that is exhibited beside legendary professionals, but what Albert achieved was unprecedented, and his pride is evident: "The growth was amazing. At the first few, you could clearly see from the work on display who the instructors were, and who the others were,

but soon the quality of craftsmanship and design improved to the point where you couldn't tell. A lot of the instructors came back as participants, and I often asked a participant to be an instructor at the following symposium. People really responded and by the ninth one other people were doing symposiums too, like Rude Osolnik in Berea and Dale Nish in Provo."

### Family

So why did Albert have this vision? Scattered throughout his story we find the answers, the hints of community spirit and the determination to succeed. Of course, it begins with his family. Albert proudly told me about his mother's father: "He was an amazing man. He sold flowers on the streets of Philadelphia and at the end of every day he would give any unsold flowers to hospitals for the patients' rooms. He died four days before I was born, in 1950, and I was named after him because I was the first-born grandson."

Albert's grandfather on his father's side migrated from Kiev. "He was a master coppersmith," says Albert, "and eventually he was in demand all over the U.S. during the prohibition era because he could make stills to brew liquor. He was already retired when I got to know him, but we were close. I remember him looking at my hands and saying they were really good working hands. In fact, they were callused from

gymnastics, but he liked the idea that I had hands like his." Albert points to a large flat-headed hammer framed on the wall: "That's one of his tools right there."

Albert's father's career was the classic immigrant story of the hard, grinding climb to success: "He went to Drexel University in Philadelphia, where you could work part-time in your field while you went to school. My father took seventeen years of night school to get his mechanical engineering degree, and he ended up being head of the metallurgy department."

### School days

Albert reminisced about his school days and much of what he told me accounts for his still-powerful physique: "All through school, I liked sports. I was really good at wrestling, and I got a varsity letter because I was undefeated." In fifth grade, Albert became interested in woodwork, and he remembers that not many people were using the lathe at his school, but that he enjoyed it: "I glued up wood and made salad bowls for my mother, and I made three candlesticks of different sizes up to almost three feet tall. The teacher put them on display, but then they were stolen. After my father made a big commotion, one day as I left our house I found the candlesticks wrapped in paper with a note that said, 'Here are your candlesticks. Please don't pursue this any further.' I still own them."

Albert's story highlights the sad loss of woodshop classes since those days: "Our generation was fortunate. We had equipment any craftsman would be proud to use. I remember the shop teacher had a pile of how-to books and he asked us to each choose something from a book and make it, but we weren't allowed to exactly copy it—we had to change at least one element." Such early influences can leave a lifelong impression on a young student, and the echoes of this idea reverberate throughout Albert's life.



Walnut candlesticks (tallest one is 24", or 61cm) made by Albert in 1967, when he was a junior at Cheltenham High School. They were stolen and later returned.

Photo: John Carlano

Albert admits he was not a good all-around student: “All I thought about was how to get to the machinery before the other students, and different routines for gymnastics.” Tellingly, a career test indicated Albert should be involved in some activity involving other people, but that was not what his family had in mind: “When I told my parents I wanted to teach industrial arts, they said, ‘No, you are going to major in math.’”

In 1968, Albert got a gymnastics scholarship to North East Louisiana State, where things did not go as his parents had hoped: “I did a lot of gymnastics and a lot of partying, but I didn’t study and I flunked. I had to face my father and I was really afraid, but it changed our relationship. He said to me, ‘We’re going to work this out.’ Albert took courses at several colleges from 1968 to 1973, including Bucks County Community College, Temple University, and Antioch College, and he performed well at all of them. This contrast with his earlier experiences triggered a lifelong interest in the educational process, and at Antioch his passion for creative innovation was kick-started: “I did a course called Visual Thinking taught by Penny Balch, who was in charge of public sculpture for the city of

Philadelphia. One assignment was to create a three-dimensional representation of what you do in a week. I cut up scrap pieces of turned wood into different shapes to represent different activities. So, for example, my mother was in the hospital at that time, and I cut a shape to represent me visiting her every day. I was really proud of this project, but I never thought about this cutting up of turned pieces again until I met Stephen Hogbin.” It was during this period of Albert’s education that his life started to be influenced more and more by woodturning.

### Apprenticeship

Albert started to dream of something very rare at that time—to do an apprenticeship with a master craftsman. “I wrote all over the world,” he explained, “but I couldn’t find one.” Then he met Manny Erez, an Israeli turner who was working in the U.S. “Manny wanted to go back to Israel and was concerned his clients would need a skilled turner when he was gone,” explains Albert. “So he decided to train someone. He came to interview me with my parents, said how much it would cost, then told me that at the end he would give me his complete woodworking shop. At the age of twenty-three, I thought

that was pretty incredible. In fact, I hadn’t been particularly interested in turning, but I watched him turn a newel post by eye in fifteen minutes, then put it in a basket with a bunch of other posts that were identical. I realized what an art there was to turning like that, so I started learning in earnest.”

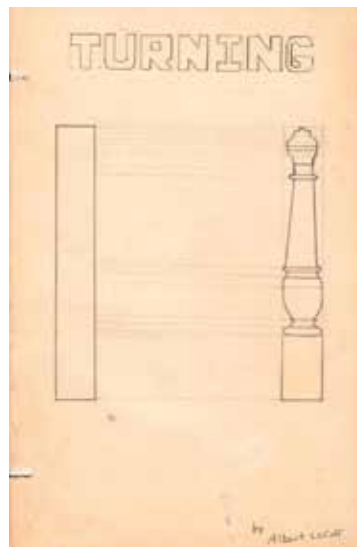
Albert’s experience with Manny reflected how apprentices have learned over the centuries: “I remember turning, and Manny would be sitting at his desk. If I made a mistake, I’d look up at him and he’d shake his head.” As always, repetition was the key to acquiring the skills: “Manny got an order for scoop handles and thought it would be a good way for me to learn.” Albert reached behind his chair and handed me an old scoop with a turned oak handle. “I found this in an antique shop, and because I turned several thousand of them, I wondered if I had made it.”

Albert soon learned that in a trade, everything has to pay for itself, including the apprentice. “Manny waited a long time before he let me turn a baluster,” he says. “He always ordered exactly the wood he needed for a production run and if I messed it up, it would cost him. Eventually, he trusted me to do it and later I wrote a book on ▶



“I found this in an antique shop, and because I turned several thousand of them, I wondered if I had made it.”

Photo: John Carlano



A unique publication created by Albert as part of his coursework at Antioch College, 1974. This was the start of Albert’s 40-plus-year journey to educate people about turning.

it as part of the documentation for my degree. I wanted to show that in production turning, while you have a tool in your hand, you do all that you can with that tool before you put it down.” Manny finally returned to Israel and left Albert with his fully equipped shop: “I had his lathe, a table saw, bandsaw, shaper, car... So at twenty-five, I was very fortunate.”

During Albert’s first symposium, Manny came back for a visit. “He was really ill,” Albert explains, “but he couldn’t believe that there were so many people interested in turning. He said, ‘Tomorrow, I want you to bring my tools.’ The next day, everybody watched him in awe, and I still have the piece he turned.”

## Exhibitions

Before his George School symposia, Albert had already met many of the people now well known in the turning field: “Until our symposiums, the only way these people knew each other was through craft shows around the country. That’s how I met some of the turners I invited, like Al Stirt. I first

met Mark and Mel Lindquist at a craft show, and I invited both of them. Mel agreed, but Mark said, ‘Albert, you can’t ask people to put their pieces on paisley tablecloths. You’ve got to make a gallery with plinths and everything.’ He was way ahead of his time.”

Albert met David Ellsworth in 1976 because, as he explains, “There was a girl in Denver I was really interested in. I wanted to make her a present, so I tried to find a local turner and use his lathe. Someone suggested David. I went to his place but never turned the present. He was the first person I met who designed his work on the lathe, so I also invited him to Philadelphia. I met Dale Nish through his first book and Frank Cummings through Dona Meilach’s book.”

Albert’s symposia became one of the reasons woodturning was changing, until it was no longer just another declining trade—it was becoming a grassroots movement with its future in the hands of the makers. However, the symposia were mainly preaching to the converted, and Albert knew this was not enough. He wanted to

organize exhibitions to inform a new buying public: “I tried to organize shows that reflected what I wanted the field to become—not just bowls, but furniture and sculpture.”

Over the course of thirty-seven years, beginning in 1979, when he co-organized *Wood ’79*, Albert was a key organizer—and often the only organizer—of 103 exhibitions of turned wood and wood art. The number of exhibitions alone is amazing, but the list of makers who took part is a Who’s Who of the contemporary field, both legendary and forgotten names of those who created our extraordinary woodturning family. Also, many of these exhibits toured to multiple venues across the U.S., inspiring new turners and buyers. Most importantly, Albert started to gather credibility for this new field, and every show laid foundations for further growth and understanding. A list of Albert’s exhibitions can be found on The Center for Art in Wood’s website, [centerforartinwood.org](http://centerforartinwood.org).

## AAW

With his extensive involvement in woodturning, Albert was bound to be part of the early days of the AAW. He explains, “At the 1985 *Vision and Concept* conference at Arrowmont, I was the keynote speaker, and at the end I said, ‘Isn’t it time for the woodturning field to have its own organization?’ Dick Gerard had come to the symposium ready for just that, and he had a survey he wanted everyone to fill out. That’s when a group of us decided to meet over the weekend to talk about it. It was the following year, 1986, that the AAW became incorporated, the same year I started the Wood Turning Center.”

When I asked Albert about the early relationship between what appeared to be two complementary organizations, he thought very deeply before answering: “Sometimes I am too far from what other people want,” he said. “Because I had already been working in the field



At the first George School Symposium, March 1976. Manny Erez, Albert’s woodturning mentor, shows everyone how a real production turner works. Albert, in the blue plaid shirt, looks on with pride. When Manny lived in London during WWII, he is said to have singlehandedly turned and painted 125,000 shaving-brush handles for the British army.

Photo: John Kelsey

of woodturning for ten years, I initially thought the AAW was an extension of what I wanted to do, and I had visions of a physical facility, programming, traveling exhibitions, and a permanent collection. A friend had given me a \$5,000 grant to establish the WTC, so at the second meeting of the AAW, I showed my design for a center and presented my idea for a major exhibition. But it was clear the AAW board thought the whole thing was too ambitious. Palmer, who was on the board, said, 'Just let Albert go and do it.' So the AAW gave us a grant to hold the International Turned Objects Show and helped publicize it with calls for entries."

Albert still has deep regrets about this parting of ways, but he remains positive about what each organization has to offer. "The AAW does a great job with the symposium and the journal," he says, "but I believe its exhibitions should reach beyond the AAW. It has been done before—the first International Turned Objects Show (1988) went on from the AAW symposium to tour to ten museums. We all have to reach beyond our own borders to get more exposure." Albert continues to seek ways the two groups can support each other.

## International Turning Exchange

When I asked Albert what he is most proud of achieving, he didn't hesitate: "It's the Windgate International Turning Exchange (ITE). It is about people sharing with each other and growing from that experience, and it has also connected communities around the world." Albert explained how this world-famous event came to be: "For our first World Turning Conference in 1993, I brought forty international artists, scholars, curators, and historians to talk about the state of turning. Many of them said to me, 'You've paid me to come so far and talk for forty-five minutes. Can't

you utilize me more?' I realized there were plenty of programs in other fields for artists to get together, so why couldn't we do it? We started in 1995 with our first grant from the Windgate Charitable Foundation, and they have funded it ever since."

I asked Albert what role the ITE has played in the transformation of woodturning into wood art, and his answer was very firm: "More so than any other program we do. When I give tours of the Center and its museum collection, more people point to ITE pieces than any others, without knowing that they came out of that program. It's because it gives the artists the opportunity to break away from their usual work. Now we allow anybody working in wood, regardless of their process, to apply, so we get sculptors and furniture makers. In 2015, we had only carvers—no turners at all. For a turner to get in now, they really have to shine. The influence of this program has been amazing and apart from the U.S., the biggest influence has been on the French, then Australia, then England."

## Albert the turner

With Albert's many other achievements, it is easy to forget that he was once an aspiring woodturner and that

he continued selling his own turnings until 1986, when he formed the WTC. I asked if he regretted stopping: "Not really. I enjoy helping others achieve their goals, and there are more ways of being creative than making wood art." However, every now and then, he can't resist taking up a tool again. I first saw him turn at Emma Lake in 1996, and he told me that was the first time he had turned in years. I next saw him turn a spinning top on a pedal-powered lathe in France at the second *Journee Mondiale* in 2003. Albert told me of another, more recent, occasion: "During the 2013 ITE, I saw the most awful spindle turning and asked, 'Who made this? You really have to learn.' I showed them how to turn a really long spindle with my hand over the wood to stop it from flexing, and it was like I'd never quit. You don't forget."

From his early work, we can see that Albert would have been a very creative turner. He says that Stephen Hogbin affected his own work more than anyone else. "I used Hogbin's lathe to make a pedestal for a *tzedakah* box, a donation box for the poor, in my synagogue. The negative space in the stand represented a person, and as the money went into the box, the figure was filled." ▶



Photo: Stephen Hogbin



A meeting of two countries: in 1978, Albert had the rare privilege of working on Canadian Stephen Hogbin's lathe to produce his inside-out pedestal for a donation box presented to his synagogue. The negative space in the pedestal is meant to represent the human form.

At the early Wood Turning Center when it was located in the LeCoff home, Albert explains objects and gives turning lessons. Albert still enjoys teaching children about the joys of turning.



educational outreaches to thirty schools in Philadelphia; the Center's vast collection of turned wood, both creative and traditional, which every turner should visit; the irreplaceable archive, which is only a shadow of the knowledge Albert holds in his memory... The list goes on. At your next AAW symposium, find Albert where he always is, at the Center's book table, and take the time to talk with him about his achievements. Yes, he will hit on you to become a member, but it's a good cause and helping Albert pursue his mission of promoting wood art is the best way to thank him for all he has done.

Like many who have traveled the unpredictable road of a relationship with Albert, I have benefited deeply from his vision. If I had not been invited to take part in the ITE in 1996, I would not have attended the AAW's 10<sup>th</sup>-Anniversary Symposium that year in Greensboro, North Carolina, after which I began writing for *American Woodturner*. So this story, written twenty years later, is also my personal thank you to Albert LeCoff. ■

*For more, visit [centerforartinwood.org](http://centerforartinwood.org).*

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## Looking back

From those early days as a boy filled with boundless energy, and those first unexpectedly influential symposia, Albert's long woodturning journey is like no other. A born risk-taker, he never gives up, even when the odds are stacked against him, and his life mission has benefited us all. He likes to give credit to others, but this is Albert's gift—the ability to see the potential in others' ideas and the dogged determination to bring them to fruition. I asked Albert how he explains this strength. "Well," he said, "I suppose I've got a one-track mind. I really love getting people together. Everyone I have ever worked with deserves thanks, but I owe special thanks to my brother Alan,

who has worked with me since the first symposium. But of all the people who have helped me pursue my dreams, Tina is the special one. We married in 1990, four years after Alan and I established the Center, and for more than twenty-five years, she has lovingly supported my mission. You can have all the ideas in the world, but if you don't have people around you to help, your ideas would just die on the vine."

So we have come full circle in the story, and Albert still can't help giving credit to others. I hope readers will now have a deeper understanding of what Albert has done for woodturning, although the full bare-bones list of Albert's achievements alone would be longer than this story. His



Tina and Albert LeCoff: Without their work, our turning world would be very different.

Photo: John Carlano



Albert (far left) proudly shows students and their teachers around his crowning achievement, The Center for Art in Wood, which now stands as a testament to his life's work.