

# Play



**Want to go?**

**What:** Meetings of the Artistic Woodturners of Northwest Florida

**When:** 9 a.m. to noon on the third Saturday of each month

**Where:** Ragon Hall, 2600 Stratford Road

**Cost:** Dues are \$30 per year. Note that some demonstrations have admission costs, with discounts for members

**Details:** artisticwoodturners.org

Pieces are displayed July 21 during the Artistic Woodturners of Northwest Florida's meeting at Ragon Hall. JOHN BLACKIE PHOTOS/BLACKIE@PFL.COM

## ARTISTIC WOODTURNERS OF NWFL NEVER STOP LEARNING

**Mike Suchicki**  
Special to Pensacola News Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The long row of folding tables on this early Saturday morning in the Ragon Hall square dance facility is covered with several dozen beautiful collisions of art and function, all shaped from wood.

There are bowls, cups, vases, stools, pepper mills, Christmas ornaments and even an elaborate depiction of a hot-air balloon.

At the front of the room sits a large lathe, such as you'd see in the average well-equipped wood shop. Video cameras on either side are focused on the power tool, their images displayed on large monitors. About two dozen men and women are seated in front of the lathe, eagerly awaiting the morning's demonstration.

Obviously we're not talking about turning out your average chair leg or table leg. The creations that will spring from the featured lathe on this day, not to mention from the lathes of many of those in attendance, have loftier ambitions than simply supporting the average chair or table. (And if they are chair legs or table legs, rest assured they're going to be fabulous.)

This is the monthly meeting of the Artistic Woodturners of Northwest Florida, a diverse group devoted to the craft of turning, well, just about anything that can be shaped on a woodturning lathe.

It's also dedicated to the continued instruction and preservation of the woodturning craft.

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Guest woodturner Fred Messer, of Gautier, Mississippi, demonstrates his skills July 21 during the Artistic Woodturners of Northwest Florida's meeting.



# Woodturners

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At the beginning of the meeting, President Mike Demiline tells the group, "If you want to learn it, and there's someone's here that's doing it, we'll teach you how to do it."

Created in 1991, the club is an affiliate of the American Association of Woodturners, and welcomes woodturners of all skill levels, from novice to professional.

Member Darnell Jackson says, "There are really two different types of turners here. There are some that we call amateurs or hobbyists, and we have some who are production turners, who go to arts and crafts shows. Some of them will go to eight or 10 different arts-and-crafts shows across the country and sell their stuff." Jackson says he's a hobbyist.

The meeting begins with an auction. Member Neil McWilliams, a retired pediatrician, holds up what appears to be a slice of a tree trunk, one of several on the table.

"OK, lot No. 1, a mystery wood for hollow form," he said. "It's a green wood. Who'll give me a bid of \$1? Who will give me \$2? Going, going ... OK, sold for \$1 to George."

One of the wood chunks is identified by McWilliams as mahogany.

Another member says, "A good mahogany turns unlike anything. It's like butter."

Obviously these folks know their woods. And they know where to get them. Comparing notes, they talk about their proud wood finds. One member says he spotted a nice wood blank in a barbecue restaurant's woodpile while on vacation in Costa Rica. Two other members said they snagged fallen tree parts from neighbors' yards, with permission, of course. Some-one points out that the production turners, the arts-and-crafts folks, tend to have deals with tree services to get discarded wood, particularly the fancier stuff such as pecan.

Member Adron Joyner says, "The only upside to hurricanes is that it brings out all the woodturners."

Joyner also points out some of the interesting characteristics of woods.

"A lot of woods are known by names that have nothing to do with the wood," he says. "Philippine mahogany is not a mahogany, it's a pine. Another is Spanish cedar. It's neither cedar nor from Spain. It's Nicaraguan mahogany. The Spanish discovered it and it smells like cedar so they called it Spanish cedar."

Following the auction is the show-and-tell. Members hold up their latest works and describe how they made it and what they learned.

George Trice is almost apologetic as he displays a small plate, pointing out its imperfections and areas for improvement. Still, he gets a hearty round of applause from the membership.

Later, he says he's still just a novice, having joined the group exactly a year ago, but is deeply in love with the craft.

"It goes back to when I was in high school in the '70s. I took an industrial arts class and fell in love with the lathe, but then I joined the Navy. In 33 years of constantly moving, I never bought a lathe, so when I retired here, my wife said, go get a hobby. I still had that passion to get back on the lathe. Mostly I've just been practicing. I'm still a novice as far as figuring out how to place the tools, but that's why I'm here. I'm a little intimidated by some of these guys, but I guess everybody's been a novice at one time."

Finally the demonstration portion of the meeting begins. Fred Messer of Louisiana has come to demonstrate some wet-turning techniques and the use of handmade tools, which he uses in the construction of some tool handles.

Also conducting a handle demonstration is member John Byl, who later says he's been woodturning for 10 years.

"My dad was a professional wood finisher," Byl says. "He loved to turn and he was probably one of the best spindle turners ever. He always tried to get me into it, but I always made an excuse. When my mother died, I would drive all the way to Ponchatoula, Louisiana, to take him to his meetings of the Bayou Woodturners. The first time I walked in, I saw the stuff these guys were doing and I thought, I've got to learn how to do it."

The allure of woodturning, it seems, is different from member to member. For Byl, it's the appreciation of the finished product.

Jackson says, "Wood turning is like a puzzle. I'll lie awake at night thinking about how could I make something. The trick is how to put it on the lathe so you can do it."



Woodturner Jeff Olive talks about his piece July 21 during the Artistic Woodturners of Northwest Florida's meeting at Ragon Hall. JOHN BLACKIE PHOTOS@BLACKIE@FWJ.COM

He walks over to the show-and-tell table and picks up an intricately carved ornamental piece with a flat side.

"For example, this piece right here. To get a flat side on a round piece, you turn it round first. Then you put it in between the two center points on the lathe and turn this in from the side. You change the axis," he says.

Patsy Allen, who's been turning since 2003, says, "It's such a different world. My grandfather turned, but I never got into it as a kid. But as an adult, I took a few classes and got hooked. It's addictive. And you start appreciating wood and learning about what wood works which way. It's just a nice hobby with a lot of different options in it."

Joyner, 81, has been working with wood for more



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than 75 years. He's even written on woodworking for Popular Mechanics and Popular Science magazines. He got his first lathe in 1967 to build bedroom suites for his children.

"But it was just another tool in the shop," he says. "I used it for bed posts and legs and such. Then I got hooked into this club seven or eight years ago. Since getting mixed up with all these guys and some of the fantastic stuff that they did, it's reversed. Now my shop supports the lathes. And now I have seven of the damn things."

The Artistic Woodturners, Joyner says, give a lot back to the community. Just the week previous to the meeting, for example, the club demonstrated woodturning at a Baptist Hospital kids camp for a group of adopted teenagers.

For many of the Artistic Woodturners, the group is all about the continuing education and sharing of tips, techniques and, perhaps most important, the wood.

Member Jeff Olive says, "All these people in here will swap wood constantly. It happens all the time. It's part of the joy. These are some of the most generous people you'll meet, because they share stuff like that."

Even the octogenarian Joyner says he's still learning new things at each meeting. "It never stops," he says.

Says member Bill Davis, "Our vice president, Ed Rose, likes to say, 'If you're not learning, you're not turning.'"

Mike Suchecki is a freelance writer for the News Journal.

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