

# Jon Siegel in profile

We meet a snooker-mad American whose background cued up his passion for wood and helped to nurture his love of invention. **Catherine Kielthy** puts him in the frame



Jon's walnut bench in progress. Here, he can be seen applying a split dowel to the back of the crest rail to form a scroll

Spend any time in the company of US woodturner Jon Siegel and you can't help but notice there's one theme to which he keeps returning: history. He's not just interested in the now; he wants to know how we got here, what we've missed and, crucially, how we can make things, particularly tools, better for the future.

His own family history, perhaps unsurprisingly given his profession, is steeped in woodworking. Back in 1916, his paternal grandfather founded a lumber business and millwork shop in Chicago, Illinois, which was later managed until 1972 by Jon's father and uncles. It was within this environment that his interest in woodturning, to which he was introduced in seventh-grade 'shop class, aged 13, took root and grew. "Woodworking was in my father's

blood," says Jon, "and in the 'shop they had about 30 pieces of industrial woodworking machinery, so I was exposed to that from an early age." Nonetheless, his teenage self initially chose to take a two-year engineering course, only to find it boring: "everyone at that school was obsessed with microwaves," he opines.

## Insatiable appetite

Having made the decision engineering wasn't for him, he began reading up on subjects in which he had a genuine interest: machine tools (and their history), manufacturing processes (and their history), science, especially astronomy (yes, and its history) and, of course, woodworking. "Through woodturning I feel connected to history," he explains. "And it's a history that is all

around us; it's in furniture and buildings. The artistic application of woodturning throughout history is a seemingly endless subject for which I have an insatiable appetite. This has led me to rediscover how to turn the angled back legs of chairs, the entasis (curved taper) of classic columns and so many other functional items."

Another of Jon's passions is the restoration of tools and machines. This isn't only from a conservation aspect, however. There's also a deep desire to understand the thoughts and processes of their designers and mechanics. "When I restore a machine and examine its design and workmanship, I can see into the minds of the people who designed it and the machinists who built it," he says. "And I am inspired by the inventiveness and brilliance of these mechanics of the

Industrial Revolution as well as the role they played in the economic and cultural success of our world.”

He pursues these passions from his home in central New Hampshire, in the heart of leafy New England, where he has lived for some 40 years. He has no intention of moving again, but this has less to do with his enviable surrounds than one might imagine. There’s a far more practical impediment. “I have too much machinery ever to move again,” he admits, “so I’m staying here.” It is from this base that he runs his business, which he describes on his card as: ‘Woodturning for furniture and architectural applications’. This, he says, is as concise as he can be, but adds that most of his work consists of spindle turning (between centres) and ranges from porch posts to pool cues. Here, Jon can’t resist adding – mainly for readers on the UK side of the pond – that he has recently become a huge fan of snooker. “I even attempt to play six-red snooker on my 9ft pool table.”



Installing columns at a job site. The blanks are turned from hollow tubes that are coopered from 10 individual staves



Jon with a 2.5m column ready for installation. Regular orders for columns led him to study the details of classical architecture, linking in to his love of history

## Influences

Putting the pool cue down for one moment, Jon expands further on the nature of his work and the people and practical considerations that have influenced its development. “When I was first learning woodturning, there were only a few books available,” he recalls. “But Frank Pain’s *The Practical Woodturner* influenced me the most, and with this guide I taught myself by trial and error.” Jon’s relatively isolated base meant he was unaware of the American Association of Woodturners

and he recalls that the woodturning renaissance was already well under way by the time it reached him. Nonetheless, he has gone on to become an acclaimed woodturner, teacher and demonstrator and has promoted his craft at the World Turning Conference in Wilmington, DE, myriad AAW symposia and five times at the New England Turning Symposium in New Hampshire. He also represented New Hampshire at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival and at the

Celebrate New Hampshire event in 2000. On top of all this, he co-founded the Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers, a group dedicated to woodworking education, and was a long-time member of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters Association. Oh, and there’s also Big Tree Tools, Inc., the company he set up with his wife Patrice Martin to provide innovative tools, accessories and sharpening equipment for woodworkers and turners (see panel, page 54).

## Adrenaline rush

“I sometimes make art objects, but I have always been most interested in the functional applications of woodturning,” he says, “and, of course, this has required the study of historic examples. I read the books and catalogues of Wallace Nutting, such as the *Furniture Treasury*, and fell in love with the early American furniture styles that were so inextricably tied to woodturning. Then in the 1970s I saw pictures of the giant turnings of Stephen Hogbin, but I had to wait decades before I got the Putnam pattern maker’s lathe that was big enough for me to be able to attempt similar work.”

The Putnam allowed Jon to enter the world of very large, heavy, and slow-turning workpieces. “I was able to make architectural posts and columns to 3.6m in length and faceplate work up to 1.2m in diameter (inboard).” According to Jon, the Putnam weighs about 2270kg, and so far the largest piece he has turned is about 227kg, which “it handled effortlessly being only 10 per cent of the lathe’s weight”. He obviously loves this bit of kit: “When I have a workpiece 1.2m in diameter and weighing hundreds of pounds

spinning on the lathe, there is definitely some adrenaline involved as I bring the chisel up to it.”

Keeping Jon’s Putnam company in his 130 square metre workshop are another two wood lathes and two metal-turning lathes, one being his beloved restored Hendey: “I have been fortunate to have bridged the worlds of woodworking and metalworking,” he says. Jon’s other wood lathes include a Blount VS55 from about 1960 and a new Rikon 12in VSR midi-lathe.

His shop also has a complete set of millwork equipment: 914mm bandsaw, 405mm jointer, 510mm planer, 405mm radial-arm saw, 305mm table saw, hollow chisel mortiser and 510mm geared drill press with power feed. “Most of these machines are more than 100 years old,” explains Jon, “and in my opinion they are better than anything made today.” First on the list of tools that Jon couldn’t do without is his sharpening



Jon’s heavy-duty Putnam pattern maker’s lathe, from about 1900. This style is called an ‘extension bed lathe’ and the bed has separate upper and lower tiers

machine: a flat-platen belt machine he built by modifying a 4x36in belt sander. This is followed by steady rests – Jon recalls how for years his spindle turning process was plagued by workpiece vibration until, after much experimentation, he developed a steady centre rest and, voila, the quality of his spindle turnings immediately improved – spur drive centres, and self-made chisels created when he was unable to buy the tools he wanted.

It is this drive that, in part, propelled him to create the item of furniture that he regards



Photo by Charley Freiberg

**Jon's bench, with walnut from Pennsylvania, is 2m long and contains 52 turnings. It resides in Representatives' Hall at the New Hampshire State House (the oldest continuously occupied state house in the US) and is used by speakers waiting their turn to speak at the podium**

as his career-defining moment so far. The piece in question, a walnut bench, was a commission for the New Hampshire State House in Concord. In the style of an expanded bannister back chair, it has two intermediate legs, a crest rail akin to the headboard of a bed with horizontal finials and a seat like a church pew. The back comprises split turnings with the flat side facing forward. Jon's design was chosen from several submitted to the Joint New Hampshire Historical Commission as a memorial to former house representative Mike Whalley. At its public dedication in 2011, Jim Seroskie, editor of *The Journal of The Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers*, said: "The extensive turned spindle work [of the bench] mirrors the balusters of the visitors' gallery and fits perfectly with the style of this most beautiful space... The design choice, meticulous construction, rich walnut wood and natural oil finish fit perfectly with the [representatives'] podium and dais. This bench looks as though it belongs and has always been part of this space from the beginning."

That his bench resides in such an historical setting seems only fitting given his passion for the craftsmanship and processes of days gone by. Not that this stops him looking to the future. "After more than 50 years of woodturning, every job still presents new problems to solve and that's the stimulation that keeps it interesting. I still find the process exciting and challenging because I never stop learning."



Detail from walnut bench

Photo by Charley Freiberg

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

It's hardly earth-shattering news to hear that woodturners are creative folk, but Jon is nonetheless 'amazed' at the large number who are inventing tools. "At a recent AAW symposium, for instance, most of us were running back and forth between the trade show floor, where we were selling tools, and the rooms where we were doing demonstrations." Jon has also invented many of his own tools and in 1996 founded Big Tree Tools, Inc with his wife Patrice to produce wood lathe accessories and sharpening equipment. It came on the back of Jon's invention of the 'spur centre with a spring-loaded point, and removable, replaceable, and independently adjustable spurs'. While the couple enjoyed some success with the first version of the spur centre, it proved too costly and, according to Jon, too complicated. It has since been redesigned with a safety guard and is now being manufactured and distributed by Rikon Power Tools. The company is also collaborating with Jon to develop a new and better sharpening machine.



The newly launched Badger Safety Spur Centre



Jon's 'Elliptori' coffee table. The mahogany base is made from a 1.2m diameter turning, while the glass top is 20mm thick and 1420mm long

### WHAT MAKES JON'S DAY...

- Playing pocket billiards or snooker with cues I made myself

### AND WHAT GETS HIS GOAT...

- Too much sanding

### TOP TECHNIQUES...

- Most of my techniques are conventional, and my chisels are traditional. I do spindle turning with cutting tools (gouges and chisels, aka skewes), and use scrapers only for bowls or chuck work.
- I have been sharpening all of my

woodworking tools on abrasive belts for 40 years. The belt/buff process takes seven seconds, including set-up time, or about 10 seconds for skew chisels because you have to grind both sides. There is no hand-honing required in this system

### ...AND TOP TIP

- Although the materials used to make chisels constantly change, one thing does not. The successful application of a cutting tool requires mastery of sharpening, because a sharp edge, no matter how painstakingly achieved, is only temporary •



Jon measuring a replacement column base for an historic building

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