Four Blocks ...

By Betty Scarpino

In our second annual "four blocks, four turners" challenge, each turner received a 10" x 10" x 2" block of walnut.

Do woodturners ever run out of creative ideas? What happens when they've turned dozens, even hundreds of bowls, and repetition begins to steal fun from their time at the lathe? Or maybe friends and relatives don't have room for yet another fruit or nut bowl? To address these questions and concerns, we asked four woodturners to each make something from similar chunks of wood, giving them license to be as creative as they wished.

Bob Bahr, Neil Gloudemans, Bob Lipp and Gary Travis live in Fort Wayne, Indiana. They are all members of a local chapter of the American Association of Woodturners. I've known Bob and Bob for over 10 years and figured they would eagerly undertake this project. I was right! They were enthusiastic from the get-go, and they easily convinced Neil and Gary to join the adventure.

Bob Bahr's spacious basement workshop is a regular meeting place for a dozen or so woodturners who congregate and create every Wednesday evening. We shipped the wood to him to distribute to the others.

A few quick e-mail messages helped settle the boundaries of the challenge: they could add something to the wood, providing the object was primarily made from the original piece of walnut, and it was at some point turned on a lathe. They were given just over a week to design and execute their projects.

What follows is the result of personal interviews with each turner. Shawn Spence, the photographer, and I made the rounds to their workshops, photographing, talking and laughing. Fort Wayne is about 90 miles north of where I live in Indianapolis.

Four Turners

Untitled, **Bob Bahr**

Untitled, **Bob Lipp**

Whimsical Lace, **Neil Gloudemans**

Uncommon Relationship, **Gary Travis**

Bob Bahr

Bob Bahr used the entire piece of walnut to create his turned and carved wall clock — he's made hundreds of timepieces since he began turning.

Turner: Bob Bahr

I was warmly greeted at Bob's front door by his wife, Sue, who said, "They're in the basement, of course!" We headed directly there and, not at all surprisingly, we heard raucous laughter floating up the stairs. Bob, Bob and Gary, not wanting to miss any of the day's events, were awaiting our arrival.

Bob Bahr is a retired physician and has been working with wood for over 40 years. His shop has "more tools than anyone can possibly use." From personal experience, I know he willingly shares this bounty.

Bob's home is full of his many creations: tables, chairs, bowls, vases, gadgets and the most recent addition, a handsome room-length walnut cabinet that Bob Lipp and he built. His dining room is a mini-museum dedicated to wood!

Bob's turning interests started with making spindles for furniture and candle holders. It wasn't until he met Bob Lipp that he started making bowls. Years later and with dozens of projects under their belts, they decided to expand their creative horizons by taking a class from Michael Hosaluk at Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. That set them free to cut, carve, reassemble, paint and texture.

Bob's project, not surprisingly, is a wall clock. He's made hundreds. This one is small by comparison, yet intricately made. He began by turning the basic shape, laying out circles for the clockworks and numbers and leaving a section for a carved border. He made full use of the entire piece of walnut.

The circles that represent the numbers are turned as well, made from mahogany and holly. He turned two mahogany spindles to 3/8" diameter and just over 4" long. He then drilled a 3/8" diameter hole through a 4" long piece of holly and glued the mahogany spindle into the holly. He then remounted the glued-up mahogany/holly assembly, using the centers from the mahogany spindle and turned the holly to 5/8" diameter. Each 4" length gets sliced across the grain, providing several "numbers." These circles are inlaid into the face of the clock. The result is more finished-looking and creative than using manufactured numbers. The number 12 is represented by a slightly larger, solid endgrain section of holly. Bob placed the number 12 in one corner so that his clock will be diamond-shaped when hung on a wall.

Even though Bob used a power carver to speed up the carving process, it took quite a lot of time to carve. His careful sanding left a beautifully finished, carved border. This clock would be a lovely addition to any room!

Turner: Bob Lipp

Bob works full-time and travels extensively with his job, but he managed to devote almost three days' time to making his clock. Yes, another clock: unbeknownst to either Bob, they both decided to make a clock!

I asked Bob Lipp, “Why a clock?” He said he needed to replace one in his lake home.

Bob’s been working with wood for about 30 years, and he’s attended at least nine week-long classes at Arrowmont school, all of them with Bob Bahr. Because they have enjoyed so many classes at this school, they have made clocks for most of the rooms there! Perhaps neither of them ever wants to run out of time.

Bob’s workshop is currently in transition (he’s in the planning stages of building a new, larger workshop), so when he finds time to turn, he uses Bob Bahr’s equipment. Bahr has two Oneway lathes, so they worked together on their clocks, turning, carving and sanding late into the evenings.

Bob Lipp sketched several designs for his clock. He wanted it to have a pendulum, so a major decision was whether to hang the pendulum directly from the clock’s body or somehow encase it as part of the clock itself — limited, of course, by the 10" diameter walnut. The design looked best with the pendulum encased. To achieve that, Bob added four columns of walnut to the original piece of wood.

He began by turning the body of the clock, then took the finished turning to the band saw and cut away part of the outer circle. He attached the two sections together with four turned columns, also made from walnut. This made an elongated clock. Bob fluted each column to give it a professional, finished look. The numbers are made in the same fashion as Bahr’s, but the 3, 6, 9, and 12 are endgrain holly, surrounded by walnut. The remaining numbers are endgrain maple. This clock also hangs on a wall. I’m amazed at the outcome! The addition of four small columns — a minor amount of wood — tremendously increased the scale of this clock.

Bob Lipp has the following advice for other woodturners. “Don’t try to do it on your own; get with a group. Don’t get hung up on the material. If you break a piece, keep going.”

Bob Lipp

Bob Lipp added four walnut columns to his original block of wood. Not much wood, but it made a big difference in scale.

Fair curves, piercing and closed forms add technical challenges and mystery to turnings for Neil Gloudemans.

Neil Gloudemans

Turner: Neil Gloudemans

Neil retired several years ago from a career in electrical engineering and is now able to devote more time to his lifelong woodworking hobby. After retirement, he began building increasingly complex furniture items for family and friends. At one point, he needed a large number of tapered spindles and legs for some chairs, so he bought his first lathe and was instantly hooked. He joined the local AAW chapter, headed by Bob Bahr, and thus began creating wood art using the lathe. "Doc" Bahr has been a great mentor for Neil, as have other turners.

Neil enjoys the process of hollowing a vessel and also likes to embellish them with piercing, so he decided to use both techniques on this project. He turned a curved form, hollowed it to just over 1/16" thick, then added a macassar ebony collar for contrast. The last step was to pierce the surface, which added visual interest. Because the walls are quite thin, he can use a dental drill to do the piercing. Neil transformed his five-pound block of walnut into a delicate, thin-shelled, flat vessel weighing just eight ounces. It almost floats off the table!

Johannes Michelsen and Frank Sudol are two turners who have influenced Neil. After seeing Johannes turn a wood hat, Neil has created over 100 of his own. Sudol is known for his large, pierced vessels, demonstrating how to make them at various conferences and sharing his techniques. Seeing these demonstrations inspired Neil to try piercing on his own work.

Neil likes to work with "fair curves" in all of his designs. Closed forms are of continual interest because of the technical challenge and also because of their inherent mystery (what's hidden inside). Like Bob Bahr's home, Neil's is filled with his many creations — furniture as well as turned objects.

Neil's advice for other turners is, "Try new things and don't shy away from technical challenges. If you don't know how to do something, ask for help. Most turners are friendly, open and willing to share knowledge with others. Join a local turning group to get inspired. Woodturning is a skill that improves with practice. So what if you wreck something? Start over! The next one will be better. Keep in mind that mistakes often lead to discovery."

Turner: Gary Travis

Gary has been turning for five years and was self-taught until he joined the Fort Wayne group. His learning curve shot straight up afterward. Gary currently teaches design and foundation of 2D - 3D design at Indiana-Purdue Fort Wayne University for the Visual and Performing Arts Department.

Gary began this project by "thinking backwards": since he started with a square piece of wood; why not make a square bowl? He researched square bowls on the web, but most of them looked too boxy. Gary prefers more organic shapes, and he wanted to include balance and rhythm in his finished project. With those

design considerations in mind, he made a number of sketches, then made a prototype.

The final bowl is a bowl-within-a-bowl, an illusion. It's all one piece of wood, except for the addition of four small, intricate African blackwood feet. Turning a square bowl presents the challenge of keeping the four edges from tearing out while they whirl around on the lathe. Gary solved this by gluing pieces of hardwood to the edges to support the sides. Those pieces are cut away after the bowl is turned.

To bring attention to the rim and also tie it together with the black feet, Gary burned a design in the rim of the bowl. He achieved his aim to introduce organic curves. The floating bowl nestled inside a square-edged rim is flowing and elegant. The curves bring out the lovely grain pattern of the walnut.

Gary's advice is along the lines of the others'. "Don't be afraid to go outside boundaries to try new things. One way to expand your horizons is to visit museums and galleries."

Closing Thoughts

The growth and development of woodturning in the past 20 years have been phenomenal. New equipment, techniques, materials and processes have helped increase the scope of what can be created using a lathe. The main push, though, has been the result of sharing of knowledge within turning groups, at woodturning schools, and through regional and national conferences. The Fort Wayne chapter of woodturners is similar to many other groups who get together and share ideas and enthusiasm.

In my travels, teaching and demonstrating, I run across a similar theme: woodturning is so popular because it's instantly gratifying. Even though all four of these projects are relatively complex, none of them took more than a few days to finish, and a simple bowl can be made, by a beginner, in less than a day.

Whether you are part of a group or turn on your own, give something new a try. These four woodturners have. Grab a chunk of 10" x 10" x 2" walnut and see what you can create. If it doesn't end up as you intended, learn from the process. As Neil so eloquently stated, "the next one will be better. Keep in mind mistakes often lead to discovery."

*Betty Scarpino (*www.bettyscarpino.com*) lives in Indianapolis, where she teaches, writes and makes things out of wood. Her workshop is a converted garage, and she prefers native timbers.*

"Square wood? Why not a square bowl?" was Gary Travis's thought process in creating his piece.

Gary Travis