



Photo: John McDonnell

Barbara Dill

Variations on a Theme D Wood

In December 2011, an article appeared in this journal entitled, “Multiaxis Spindle Turning: Further Exploration.” It contained text, diagrams, and photographs in which Barbara Dill explained her explorations of multiaxis turning to help others get their heads around the principles of a seemingly daunting method of turning.

The article began: “Born into poverty in 1900, Louis Armstrong learned to play the cornet while in reform school. A few years later he was given his first cornet and mentored by King Oliver and others to play jazz by ear.” Conjuring the image of

Armstrong and his jazz genre, Barbara intended two things: one, to point out that the ability to create doesn’t come naturally to everyone: instruction is necessary and productive most of the time; and two, to suggest that once you’ve mastered the basics, the improvisation, like in jazz, will come readily and result in satisfying renditions.

Ironically, while the music metaphor is familiar territory for Barbara, she doesn’t like jazz. So, in telling *her* story, it seems important to use a compositional style for which she has affinity. Her preference is improvisational classical music, in particular *The Carnival of the Animals*, by the French composer

Camille Saint-Saëns. Written in 1886, *The Carnival* was originally scored for eleven instruments, including piano, strings, flute, and clarinet, but Barbara played it as a young trumpeter. The adaptation of an orchestral suite to brass instruments is improvisation in itself, further enhanced by the interpretation of a performer. Perhaps this unconsciously prepared the youthful Barbara for her late experiments.

Regardless, for the past thirty-two years, Barbara Dill’s “instrument” has been her lathe. And since she still enjoys picking up the trumpet on occasion, both instruments will feature here.

“Royal March of the Lion”

The Carnival of the Animals is a humorous suite of fourteen movements, each dedicated to the composer’s musical characterization of an animal. Although Saint-Saëns is best known for this masterpiece, he refused its publication during his lifetime, lest it sully his reputation as a serious composer. It was printed in 1922, a year after he died.

The opening movement portrays the lion, commanding attention with deep strong notes. The lion, for Barbara, was her father. J. Madison Dill was born in Tennessee and attended college to study music as a trumpet player. Following graduation, he became a band director in Nashville and then, like many of his peers, joined the Navy as a result of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He served on a minesweeper in the South Pacific and, rather than stay in the military when WWII ended, took advantage of the GI Bill and received qualification as an optometrist. Alongside his occupation, Madison continued with his passion for music. Barbara recalls: “He was the band director of the Post Five Legion Band in Nashville, where he went every Saturday night. He always brought us home Krispy Kreme donuts that we ate on Sunday before we went to church.” She also remembers that, instead of bedtime stories, he put his daughters to sleep with music, including *The Carnival of the Animals*.

Barbara and her sister Charlotte played brass instruments from a young age. In addition, the family belonged to a fundamentalist congregation, Church of Christ, where acapella singing prevailed. Barbara’s father was the song leader, and his daughters were brought up in the tradition of four-part harmony during religious services. Those vocalizations were probably heard at home during the week, too.

Early work



Barbara in 1992, prepping blanks outside her first workshop, a garage built in 1912.



Barbara’s first craft-show setup. Early work, prior to her explorations in multi-axis turning, largely comprised bowls and hollow forms.

Editor’s Note: Chainsawing photo shows historical context. Please use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) when operating a chainsaw.

Explorations



At far left is Barbara’s first attempt at a multi-axis spindle, 1994. The others are examples of early attempts to understand this type of turning. “I made hundreds of those in the 90s, randomly changing the axes, but stopped out of the frustration of not knowing what to do next.”



Spindles turned around 2006. “I turned lots of ideas and wanted to see what they had in common.”

Both Dill girls got music scholarships at the end of high school, and Charlotte furthered her knowledge by studying music at college. Unfortunately (or fortunately), she conveyed a dislike for the experience to her sister. As a result, Barbara enrolled in mathematics and subsequently acquired a bachelor of science degree in nursing in 1968. She says that nursing was a likely trajectory: “I was the kid who had the Band-Aid® box and would always

run when somebody needed one.” Initially, she nursed in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, then joined the Air National Guard as a flight nurse. Stationed in Germany, she was on a medevac team and, later, a Department of Defense school nurse. From Germany, Barbara was sent to Ethiopia and, at the conclusion of her military service, traveled in India and Kashmir before returning to the U.S.

Barbara resumed public nursing again in Boston and received a ▶



(Left) Variations on a theme. In 2009, Barbara experimented using three twisted axes on squarish pieces of wood rather than long spindles.

(Right) Around 2012, Barbara observed a turner making goblets on many axes, using the tenon to throw the axis off center. This piece was the beginning of playing with a new method for not just goblets, but also bowl forms.

master of psychiatric nursing degree from Boston University in 1980. She was inspired by transactional analysis, developed by Eric Berne, which uses social relationships and interactions as a basis for analyzing human behavior. Barbara's master's thesis offered a systematic explanation of theories of communication, an attempt to simplify the weighty medical tomes that were part of her studies. She went on to coordinate psychiatric aspects in the emergency departments at Boston City

Hospital and the Hospital of the Medical College of Virginia/Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

“The Elephant”

“The Elephant” is the fifth section of *The Carnival* and was obviously based on misinformation about this creature. Whereas Saint-Saëns portrays the elephant as a plodding, heavy beast, an elephant makes almost no noise as it ambles through its territory. For Barbara, the elephant was the growing grey mass of what she

calls “compassion fatigue” that was the result of observing illness, injury, and death in the emergency room setting. Psychiatric patients could not be adequately dealt with in that environment, and the concurrent decline of the healthcare system provoked burnout. She thought it best, for her patients' sake as well as her own, to leave nursing after twenty-one years.

Prior to acting on that decision, a significant event occurred during her time at VCU. Barbara saw an issue of *Smithsonian Magazine* that contained an image of a carved bowl in the shape of a fish. She experienced a longing for the bowl but knew the only way she could have it was to make one herself. Barbara recounts the coincidence that influenced her future career: “The next day in the mail there was a flyer from Henrico Adult Education [one of the counties around Richmond, Virginia] and there was a carving class. Sid Morton was the teacher and I dragged myself out of the ER. He taught us how to sharpen the tools and for two weeks we couldn't even touch the wood—we sharpened tools. When we got to touch the wood, I was able to create the bowl that I thought was so lovely.”

Play develops insights



Barbara arrived at the form in the image at left by changing the axes randomly. This play led to an understanding of the dynamics at work, and from that knowledge, she made *Harmony* (at right) in 2012.

That carving class in 1988 was assisted by her mother's chisel and mallet. While living in Hawaii during Madison's time in the Navy (1947-1949), Barbara's mother was inspired by local totem poles to make her own. The walnut pole subsequently disappeared, but the tools are still in the Dill toolbox. The hobby of woodcarving prompted Barbara to attend craft fairs to see what else was going on. Her first encounters with turned bowls and a lathe prompted the thought, "I'll betcha I could do that, too!"

"Kangaroos"

Barbara couldn't find anyone teaching woodturning in the Richmond area at that time. The Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts (Gatlinburg, Tennessee) offered a course in the summer of 1990 and Barbara signed up. "I didn't know what a headstock or tailstock was. I didn't know anything. It was a design class. I was the only woman. But I loved it, and everyone was so helpful to me." The teacher was Michael Hosaluk. Michael recalls: "I remember Barbara taking my class at Arrowmont. She showed an enormous love and interest for woodturning and brought so much fun and energy to the class."

This period in Barbara's life was one where she hopped back and forth—like Saint-Saëns's kangaroos—to Arrowmont, filling her pouch with woodturning knowledge from Ray Key (1991) and David Ellsworth (1992). To have early instruction from these masters provided a phenomenal grounding, which she practiced on a General International lathe sited on a hand-poured cement slab in her 1912 garage. Barbara made bowls and hollow forms and took a broader interest in the woodturning community. She attended the World Turning Conference in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1993 where she encountered people from around the world. She describes

a highlight: "The Europeans did a lot of multiaxis turning, and I saw Mark Sfirri's and Michael Hosaluk's work. I thought, 'How do they do that?' I came home and created my very first spindle. The axes were separated because I thought they had to be separated by a lot of space in order to make such amazing objects. I learned a lot from that first spindle."

Barbara's fascination with multi-axis turning provoked the fabrication of countless spindles with randomly altered axes and varying depths of cut. But she wanted to *understand* multi-axis turning and since she didn't (yet), she dropped that part of her woodturning repertoire. Barbara continued turning, exhibiting her work in craft shows and teaching basic bowl turning at the Woodcraft store and the Visual Arts Center in Richmond. She enjoyed sharing her skills, and the remuneration helped support her addiction to woodturning tools and supplies.

Charlotte died suddenly and unexpectedly in 2003, and grief curtailed Barbara's woodturning for some time. Doug Finkel was teaching at VCU and invited Barbara to just hang out, join the classes, and give demonstrations to get her mojo back. Mark Sfirri was a guest instructor, and while Barbara took copious notes and made numerous drawings during his three-day multi-axis turning workshop, she still did not fully understand what was going on. When she returned to her workshop, she found that she was merely copying Mark's examples.

The upshot was her commitment to the same process she had used with her master's thesis on theories of communication: isolation, analysis, and simplification of the various types of multi-axis turning. "I just started turning a lot of random spindles to see if any of them looked similar and what they had



Alternating beads and coves on both twisted and parallel axes, 2013.

in common. Within a few months, I began to see commonalities regarding axis placement: whether the axes were parallel or not and the outcome, and the circular or arc type, depending on the depth of cut. I [organized the results] in quadrants, and it started to make a lot of sense." Barbara nervously put together a demo, including a board of samples, for her local woodturning club. It was seen by Tom Crabb, who said, "Wow, Barbara, you've just figured it out! I want you to demo at the Virginia Symposium. And you need to write about it." Finding the vocabulary and articulating the process resulted in two articles for *American Woodturner*: "Multi Axis Spindle Turning Part 1" (Fall 2007) and "Multi Axis Spindle Turning Part 2" (Winter 2007).

"The Swan"

"The Swan" is the penultimate movement of the suite. It is the most revered part of *The Carnival* and despite Saint-Saëns's prohibition ▶

A step further



(Left) *Wave*, 2017, Ash, 7½" × 4½" (19cm × 11cm)

Wave was made by turning two coves twisted at 90 degrees.

(Right) After spending time with Max Brosi in 2018, Barbara decided to carve out the insides of *Wave*, resulting in *Exoskeletons*.

Multiaxis bowl forms



Shadows, 2017, Holly, each: 2" × 5" (5cm × 13cm)



A multiaxis goblet in holly (in progress).

against publication, he allowed "The Swan" to be printed during his lifetime. The movement's beauty, grace, and serenity reflect Barbara's sense of satisfaction at having resolved for herself the mystery of multiaxis turning. The knowledge she gained also brought her real joy: "Now that I understood it, I would wake up in the morning and wonder, what would happen if I did this on three axes? Every day I would experiment with new ideas. What would happen if I changed the size of the wood? What

would happen if I did this or that? My whole life became an experiment."

Barbara feels she should probably have been an engineer. As a child, her curiosity about how things worked initiated the dismantling of the toaster, radio, and a watch in the Dill home. The same applied to her psychiatric nursing: she was curious about how the human psyche worked. Her nature calls for the systematic understanding of an issue or process, which, when solved, is coupled with a willingness to share that understanding with others.

Now, in her studio surrounded by forest in rural Virginia, Barbara continues to experiment. She has applied color to her turnings only to a small degree because she prefers naturally light-toned woods. "My main focus has been on the form and the way light hits the wood as the axes change. I noticed over the years that whiter woods, like holly and maple, show shadows a lot better than cherry and walnut. So I started focusing mostly on holly. We're lucky down here to have huge holly trees. People bring

me holly to work with.” Barbara turns green wood because its ease of cut aids tool control and results in a superior quality surface, as compared to kiln-dried wood. She aims for clean cuts and does as little sanding as possible.

Barbara’s remuneration from woodturning comes from teaching and publications. In addition to the previously mentioned articles, *American Woodturner* also published her work in the February 2010, October 2013, and June 2021 issues. Her book, *Multi Axis Spindle Turning: A Systematic Exploration* (Schiffer Publishing) came out in 2018. She identifies as an experimental turner and is fortunate to have a partner whose financial and emotional support preclude the need to exhibit and sell work. It’s not that Barbara’s work is too mechanical or scientific to warrant purchase or collection. It’s more about being comfortable with, and simply valuing, who you are and what you do.

Finale

As the trumpets, tuba, trombone, and French horn conclude *The Carnival of the Animals* in crisp, bright, spirited harmony, two turners and teachers offer closing thoughts. Michael Hosaluk: “We open doors for people and share our knowledge and as teachers are rewarded when someone you shared time with excels and further shares with others.” And Barbara Dill: “I think my experience in psychiatric nursing and all the nursing jobs I’ve had made me who I am today and made me understand the world the way I see it. I’m also thankful that I have a peaceful place to work and don’t have to deal with illness and death and tragedy every day. I feel so grateful that at the end of the day, I can say, ‘Look what I made with my hands.’ It makes me smile and it makes others smile. I never dreamt this would be my life.”

Encore

Barbara noted *The Carnival* as an example of her preference for classical improvisation over jazz. But regardless of the genre, improvisation and its companion—variations on a theme—are central to Barbara’s approach to the lathe. She noted that when teaching multi-axis turning, she sees “one simple spindle that [could be changed] by applying different variables and ideas to make it a more complex

turning. This type of turning is improvisational as well! It’s the fun of experimenting and exploring.” ■

For more, visit barbaradill.com.

D Wood designed and made furniture to earn a Diploma in Crafts and Design at Sheridan College in Canada and an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 2012, she earned a PhD in Design Studies from University of Otago. D is the editor of Craft is Political (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021).



Spheres Interrupted (Series), 2018, Holly, 2½" × 5" × 2½" (6cm × 13cm × 6cm). Alternating spheres turned on two axes “twisted” 90 degrees.



Turned spheres placed upon multiaxis pedestals (2021), which have a slightly concave top, allowing the sphere to spin and roll around—a fun toy!