

# Celebrating the Functional Wooden Bowl

## *A Link to Nature*

Joshua Friend



(Top) **Joshua Friend**, 2010,  
Walnut, 5¾" × 14" (15 cm × 36 cm)

(Middle) **Joshua Friend**,  
2010, Walnut, maple, 5¼" × 16"  
(13 cm × 41 cm)

(Bottom) **Joshua Friend**,  
*Embellish Me Not*, 2010,  
Figured ambrosia maple,  
5¾" × 8" (15 cm × 20 cm)

The mere presence of a handmade wooden object stirs something inside me; using that object provides something extra. It's a feeling hard to describe, but there is a peaceful humility involved. Perhaps this is why I take special pride in making wooden objects that will be treasured *and* used by someone. It is a way of sharing who I am and making my mark on the world.

**O**f the many things my high school woodshop teacher taught me, two stuck as axioms: (1) Always wear safety glasses! (2) It is not enough for a wood project to be beautiful; it must also be functional—bold words when applied to contemporary wood art. My teacher's view echoed what I already believed as a young woodworker: Function and beauty should go hand-in-hand and are often one and the same. One's appreciation of an object is enhanced by using it.

When offering my hand-turned bowls for sale, I generally feel the need to discuss the functional aspect of a bowl separately from its beauty; customers seem unsure of a wooden bowl's suitability for everyday use. I hear, "It's beautiful, but I'd be worried about using it for food." Or, "Is it really okay to wash it?"

I absolutely want customers to use my bowls; they are not just for display. Fill them with food! Eat out of them! Clean a wooden bowl as you would other hand-washable kitchen items, then display and store things in its lovely curved interior until the next time it begs to be used. Herein lies the beauty of a handcrafted wooden bowl: It is functional and also attractively graces any tabletop.

Because of the wide range of customer reactions, I was curious to know how people actually use wooden bowls. Moreover, are functional wooden bowls truly marketable? Why do people hesitate to use wood for serving or preparing food? Conversely, what is the mind-set of the person who actively chooses wood over other materials for functional use? To find answers, I generated a survey that would reveal concerns and preferences. But first, a bit of history.

### **Some history**

It does not take a lot of research to learn that wood has been used extensively for food applications for decades. The term *treenware* refers to a variety of functional wooden objects, especially those used in the kitchen. Treenware was made of wood because wood was one of the best available resources at the time and it served its function well. Companies such as Munising Woodenware Co., of Munising, MI (in business from 1911 to 1955) focused mostly on wooden products for kitchen use. Their catalog, circa 1920, described the company as "Manufacturers of Woodenware, Variety Turnings, and Specialties." Their wooden products included bowls, butter molds, lard and sugar spades, ▶





**Glenn Lucas**, salad bowls, 2009,  
Beech, average 6" deep x 11", 13", and 15"  
(15 cm x 28, 33 cm, 38 cm)



Utility/serving bowl  
made by Munising  
Woodenware Co.,  
circa 1940, Maple,  
2¾" × 11"  
(10 cm × 28 cm)



ladles, dippers, spoons, rolling pins, tongs, mashers, bread plates, and carving boards. Notably, their successful years of operation were primarily before but overlapping with the advent of Tupperware, created by Earl Tupper in 1942.

Today, there are still manufacturers of turned wooden bowls, machine-produced and handmade. The Granville Manufacturing Co. of Granville, VT, known as "The Bowl Mill" ([bowlmill.com](http://bowlmill.com)), has been in operation since 1857 and continues to produce bowls, cutting and carving boards, rolling pins, and utensils. These are machine-produced, one-piece bowls of good quality, made by time-tested methods. Visitors to The Bowl Mill can tour the factory and see the original machinery and process. Although the machines are now powered by electricity instead of water, one gets the feeling of looking

into the past, a reminder from whence we came.

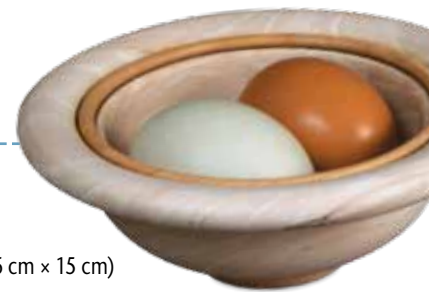
There are many woodturners who continue to ply the craft of the functional wooden bowl. Four well-known names are Glenn Lucas from Ireland ([glenn-lucas.com](http://glenn-lucas.com)), Mike Mahoney from Utah ([bowlmakerinc.com](http://bowlmakerinc.com)), Doug McGrath from Canada, and Robin Wood from the UK ([robin-wood.co.uk](http://robin-wood.co.uk)). People who appreciate (and are willing to pay for) unique items made with fine craftsmanship purchase and treasure hand-turned bowls made by individual craftsmen.

The list of available wooden bowls also includes production-made pieces imported (mostly from Asia) and sold inexpensively at department stores. These are often multilaminated with questionable glue joints. Some are better than others, but ultimately you get what you pay for.

## Research findings

My research was decidedly nonscientific. I created an Internet-based survey and sought responses from nonwoodturning households; I did not want respondents to have a predisposed affinity for wood. I asked whether people owned any wooden bowls, and if so, how they used them. I also asked what they liked and disliked about using wooden bowls.

Despite my sincere wish otherwise, my survey revealed that today's homeowners do not need wooden bowls (or other wooden items) in order to have a well-equipped kitchen. It is obvious that if you were buying a bowl purely for its functionality, wood would not be the most logical choice. Wood is not as cost effective as other materials, especially if the wooden bowl is handmade with exceptional care. Plastic, ceramic, and glass items are easier to clean and maintain and serve a dual purpose of storing food with an airtight lid. Because one should not put wood into the dishwasher or microwave, wooden items are deemed less convenient.



## Judy Ditmer

Many years ago when I began doing craft fairs, I noticed an interesting phenomenon. At that time I made a lot of functional bowls (solid, round bowls with no defects, suitable for actual use to hold food), along with other items such as pens, clocks, bud vases, and jewelry. In talking with a customer about the bowls, I'd mention that the finish was food-safe and easy to replenish if necessary. Often the person would look at me as if shocked, and say something like, "Oh, it's way too pretty to use!" As I began making more decorative pieces, with bark inclusions and natural defects, I'd hear comments such as, "What good is a bowl with a hole in it?" It was exasperating, to say the least.



**Judy Ditmer**, 2006, Pear, 2½" × 5¾" (6 cm × 15 cm)

I quickly reached the conclusion that function, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. I also decided that if functional bowls were too pretty to use, and the more sculptural ones were too nonfunctional to purchase, then when it came to bowls, I would abandon any attempt at classification, and would thenceforth please myself. I make bowls to satisfy my own artistic interests and needs. If people like them, I'm glad; if they don't, that's okay.

It does not work for me to accommodate complicated and often contradictory ideas about function versus anything else. I have no need to attempt fitting into any categories implied in the concept of "versus." Happily, I have come to a broader view of the concept of function. To me, something beautiful that I love to look at and hold is quite functional. I consider the need for beauty and grace in life entirely legitimate and as important as any other need.

**Judy Ditmer**, bleached bowls, 2005, clockwise from upper left: Persimmon, spalted maple, dogwood, spalted maple, spalted sycamore, average 4½" (11 cm) dia.

One respondent commented, “I view wooden bowls as functional more than art, and as such am not willing to pay too much of a premium. Also, I am not up to speed on maintenance and would not want something that would not be durable or need extraordinary care.” Another said, “I don’t feel wood offers any additional benefits compared with other materials, and it is more difficult to keep clean.”

But this story has a happy ending for us woodturners. Three-quarters of the respondents own at least one wooden bowl, and most of them own more than one. Of the people who use wooden bowls in a functional manner, the majority (almost 90%) use them for serving salad. About half said they keep or display fruit or other food in wooden bowls. And about one-third of the wooden bowl users said they store something other than food in wooden bowls, such as keys, USB memory sticks, pine cones, glass Christmas ornaments, jewelry, and coupons.

### Why we love wood bowls

So, if people don’t *need* wooden bowls, why do so many of us own them? Well,

**Judy Ditmer,**  
2003, Hard maple,  
7" x 8" (18 cm x 20 cm)



because they offer intangible benefits, such as in the presentation of food. A beautiful wooden salad bowl is not just a salad bowl, as one respondent noted, “The presentation of food is just as important as the food. The wooden bowl transforms a salad from ordinary to extraordinary.”

Perhaps the primary reason people choose wooden bowls, according to my survey, is that using a wooden object makes us feel more connected to nature. Marketing experts tell us that the way a product makes us feel is important. Wood is warm. Whether in a piece of furniture, a bowl, or other carefully made object, wood has the unique ability to evoke an emotional response. One respondent explained, “Because my wife and I grow our own vegetables, the connection to

nature when we eat salad is very apparent. Using wooden bowls for serving the salad enhances that connection.” Many others said they appreciate the natural look and warm feel of wood: “Wooden bowls look more natural, in keeping with other items in the house. I hate plastic.” Still others commented on the “earthy” look and feel of wood.

In our modern world with its vast array of conveniences, it is easy to lose our sense of connection to nature. Trees (and other essential elements of nature) are too often taken for granted. The simple act of eating out of a wooden bowl, however, can remind and reassure us, on a deep level, that we are of the natural world. My research revealed that the marketability of wooden bowls could be effectively linked to the pleasure we humans derive when we are stimulated to feel a connection to nature.

*Joshua Friend, woodturner and writer, is a member of the Nutmeg Woodturners League, an AAW chapter that meets in Brookfield, CT. See [jfriendwoodworks.com](http://jfriendwoodworks.com) for examples of his work and contact information. ▶*



### Mike Mahoney

I am a professional craftsman who specializes in making utility bowls. Creating beautiful items that hold food is reflective of the way I think. The type of wood, the design, the base diameter, and the finish are of the utmost importance to how my work gets used and how long a bowl will last. Having my work last for generations, being used, fulfills my purpose as a craftsman.



*(Top)* **Mike Mahoney,**  
2006, Norway maple,  
5½" x 12" (14 cm x 30 cm)

*(Bottom)* **Mike Mahoney,** 2009,  
Mormon poplar set,  
5" x 14" (13 cm x 36 cm)

*(Right)* **Mike Mahoney,**  
Stack of bowls, 2003,  
Various woods,  
5" x 13" (13 cm x 33 cm) (typical size)





## Robin Wood

As a turner working today, I have a choice: Do I produce artwork or domestic ware? I choose domestic. Over the past fifteen years, I have produced more than 15,000 wooden bowls and plates. All those vessels are out there bringing pleasure at every meal. I regularly get letters from people telling me how they love eating from their bowl. A wooden bowl becomes intensely personal, and it is difficult to describe how people form relationships with them in a way that doesn't happen with other materials. I wonder how many artists get letters from people, telling them how much they have enjoyed looking at the artwork every day for ten years? When you produce functional work, it's common! This feedback makes up for the lack of status and the lower financial return that come with choosing to make woodenware.



**Robin Wood**, *Quaich*, 2010, Laburnum, silver, 1½" × 3½" (4 cm × 9 cm)



**Robin Wood**, 2006, Pear, 2½" × 7" (6 cm × 18 cm)

**Robin Wood**, Stack of bowls, 2009, English sycamore, 8" (20 cm) average dia.



**David Lancaster**, 2009, Cherry, 5" × 15" (13 cm × 38 cm)



**David Lancaster**, 2008, Ash burl, 8" × 18" (20 cm × 46 cm)

## David Lancaster

I make one thing: bowls. I never get bored making bowls. I love the repetitive motion and getting into a rhythm. Most of them are functional. When I decided to become a professional woodturner, I wanted to make something that would appeal to everyone; if you are going to make a living at something, you better be able to sell what you make. My designs focus on the gentle curve of the bowl's body and the way it flows in one fluid arc from the base to the rim. Each wooden bowl is delicately detailed by adding my signature touch to the rim. To be considered an Heirloom Bowl, each piece must be subtly elegant, lightweight, yet balanced, and feel right when held. I'm a firm believer that a bowl is more than just a vessel; it should also capture your imagination and make you feel good.

## Granville Manufacturing Co. (The Bowl Mill)

Wooden bowls have been used for centuries, their primary function being food preparation and serving. Since 1857, our company has turned bowls that are more functional than aesthetic. In the past 30 years, the bowls have become somewhat more aesthetic, with colors and lacquered finishes being added. But we have gone back to a more basic marketing and want to emphasize function. Bowls can be used in food preparation, as in bread bowls, or in their most popular function as salad bowls. Many bowls are used as serving dishes for popcorn, chips, sauces, and almost anything you can dream of. As long as there are people, we think there will be a demand for quality wooden bowls, and we want to continue with this tradition.



Utility/serving bowl made by Granville Manufacturing Co. (The Bowl Mill), 2008, Maple, 3½" × 12" (9 cm × 30 cm)

## Glenn Lucas

I have always enjoyed the process of making functional bowls, from processing the log, to delivering a good product to my outlets on time. The repetition of making similar objects allows me to perfect technique and to refine the process. Efficiency allows me to offer a product at a price that will allow quick sales in order to generate a sufficient weekly wage. I have always loved working with wood and I can get lost gazing at a beautiful grain pattern. Paying the mortgage and supporting my family, however, tends to guide decisions about the items I produce. I still get great joy when I go into someone's home and see one of my bowls full of salad or fruit and being just part of family life.

**Glenn Lucas**, bowl, 2009, Ash, 5" × 15" (13 cm × 38 cm)

Courtesy of The Crafts Council of Ireland

