

Information Vessel #1, 2008, Laminated book pages, 4" × 3¼" (102mm × 83mm)

Alternate view



Robert Lyon

From Wood to Paper, the Lathe, and Beyond

Gary Dickey

It's not unusual for Robert Lyon to think beyond the parameters of ordinary everyday uses of materials. For him to turn paper into wood, and then shape the resulting mass using the lathe, seems a normal progression of events. Robert's work is perpetually challenging notions of art and craft.

In Robert's words, "I have recently begun investigating materials that have a relationship to wood and can also be shaped on a lathe. In response

to the urging of some of my colleagues, I have begun gluing pages from books into blocks, and have found that, like the trees they are made from, they can also be turned on a lathe. . . .What you see here is my first exploration into this nontraditional format. I am fascinated by the ability of laminated paper to machine much like wood, and also intrigued with the complex metaphors that are implied."

When he finished his first object turned from glued-up pages of a book

and placed it in the instant gallery at a meeting of the Palmetto Woodturners (where he served two terms as president), one observer quipped, "There's a message in that piece—it's spelled out right there on the side." Even though words are clearly discernable in the finished material, that's about the only clue that the object is not made of wood. In fact, the coloring even seems to portray a clear division between heartwood and sapwood. The resemblance to wood of glued up pages from ▶



Lyon applies a coating of Tightbond glue to a page from a book.



When gluing sheets of paper together to form turning blocks, flatten the individual sheets using a roller. This process expels air pockets.

books, however, is simply because of the difference in colors of the paper.

Lyon began his almost four-decade art career as a ceramicist, yet he seems to have been continually moving toward wood as a medium, almost without realizing it. After earning his MFA in 1977 from the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, in Philadelphia, Lyon's diverse background took him from being a ceramics professor at Louisiana State University to his present sculpture professorship at the University of South Carolina, with numerous forays and detours. He has acquired a full gamut of artistic experiences, including ceramics, metals, glass, and wood.

Lyon has amassed a wealth of recognition and professional honors including a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship in Sculpture, a Southeastern Artists Fellowship, and a number of artist-in-residencies at places such as the Kohler Company in Kohler, Wisconsin; The Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada; and Sculpture Space in Utica, New York. Last year he returned to Philadelphia as a resident fellow in the International Turning Exchange (ITE) organized by the Wood Turning Center.

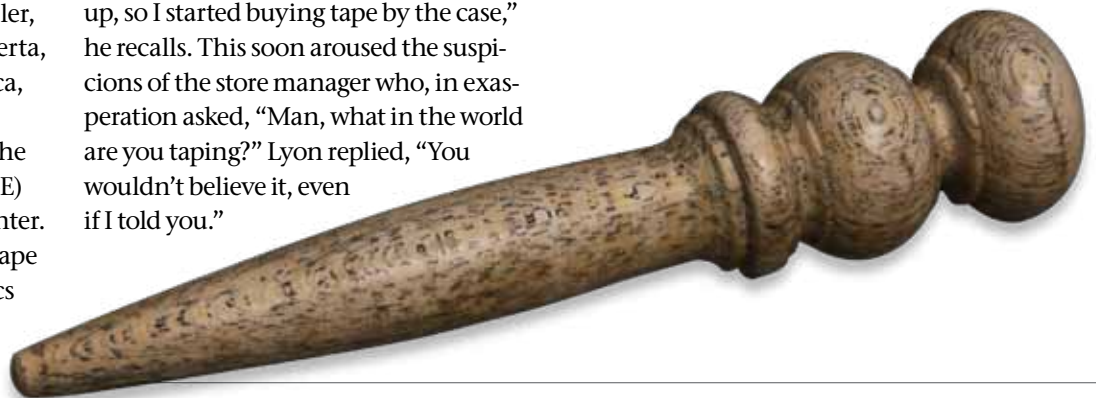
Drawing from his knowledge of shape and form, primarily based in ceramics and glass, he tries not to let the

material dictate the final form. "I look at what the materials can do, whether it is wood, paper, clay, tape, or combinations such as clay on wood, glue mixed with clay, paper mixed with glue, or even simple latex house paints mixed with clay over wood. I always try to challenge the material that I work with." For example, Lyon was invited to participate in a glass exhibition. He decided to make a series of four cylinders, each measuring 20" x 12" (51cm x 30cm). Deviating from the norm as usual, Lyon made each of them from clear Scotch tape wound around a wire armature. Once completed, the wire armature was removed and the tape cylinders were able to stand by themselves. "I ended up winding literally miles of tape before removing the armatures. The effect was one of spun glass. I made dozens of trips to the university supply store. At first I would buy a few rolls at a time, but they were soon used up, so I started buying tape by the case," he recalls. This soon aroused the suspicions of the store manager who, in exasperation asked, "Man, what in the world are you taping?" Lyon replied, "You wouldn't believe it, even if I told you."

Lyon's interest in architecture, especially the cylindrical forms of Italian architect Aldo Rossi, small granaries from the Ivory Coast, and the ancient towers of Iraq inspired him to make various circular forms. Looking for a practical method of working with these forms brought him to working with the lathe. It appears that the lathe has forced Lyon out of his comfort zone and has him working with and investigating a new vocabulary for form. He is becoming proficient at shifting course, but only to explore the new path his work is taking him.

While his influences come mainly from his earlier work in glass and ceramics, he is quick to point to a number of

Information Tool #1, 2008, Laminated book pages, 1½" x 7½" x 1½" (38mm x 191mm x 38mm)



woodturners who were instrumental in attracting him to wood as a medium. He has long admired the works of Stoney Lamar and Michael Hosaluk. “I tend to gravitate toward artists who like to break the rules,” he noted.

His recent foray into turning laminated blocks of book pages arose from, as he says, “viewing common processes in reverse and simply asking myself ‘what if I did it another way?’” This viewpoint usually presents interesting challenges that require innovative solutions. He began the current project by collecting old books to use for his turning blanks. With friends, colleagues, librarians, and others donating worn and outdated books, Lyon set about the task of constructing blocks that were suitable for turning. This involved brushing glue on each individual page until he built up hundreds of pages to develop the thicknesses required for a turning blank. The process of building the blanks took several months, as he applied ten pages a day in hopes that the laminations would dry between each application of glue.



The artist’s dryer is a converted chest freezer. A 100-watt lightbulb on the inside helps maintain 155°. A hole in the top and two in the bottom allow airflow.

A natural draft occurs in the dryer, ensuring the release of moisture.



These blocks of laminated pages are waiting their turn in the dryer.

Once the thicknesses were appropriate, he set the blocks aside to dry. After three months of drying time, he put the first block on the lathe and began to rough out the shape. He quickly discovered that the glue had not dried. Back on the shelf for three more months drying time . . . still, the glue was wet.

He considered using a food dehydrator, but it was too small to accommodate the blanks. He needed something larger that would circulate warm air to dry the glue. He recalled an old welder’s trick of keeping welding rods in a refrigerator with a lightbulb inside to keep them warm and moisture-free.

The solution came in the form of a chest freezer. He found that by putting a 100-watt lightbulb in the bottom of the freezer, he could raise the temperature inside to a steady 155°. By drilling two holes in the bottom of the freezer and one on the top, the heated air creates a natural draft, venting excess

moisture. After another couple of months in the dryer, the blanks finally reached a moisture content of 6% and were ready for turning.

Laminated paper tends to tear more readily than solid wood; however, the biggest problem was dealing with small voids that existed in the glued-up paper blanks. These voids emphasized the need for very sharp tools. Lyon favors the Hunter tools with circular carbide replaceable inserts. But even with a normal bowl gouge he is able to cut fine shavings, yielding a smooth surface that requires minimal sanding.

There are layers and layers of metaphors inherent in using glued-up pages from books for turning into vessel forms. For instance the piece, *Information Vessel*, is suggestive of the idea that we humans are vessels of information. “We read books whose information resides within us, turning us into vessels of information,” Lyon says. Terry Johnson, co-photo journalist from the 2009 ITE residency, pondered, “Imagine drinking water or coffee from a cup made from book pages glued together. Each gulp could be compared with the way information is consumed in a society, drunk and reeling from information overload.” ■

Gary Dickey is the founding president of Palmetto Woodturners, the first AAW chapter in South Carolina, and is a former assistant editor of American Woodturner.