

# WHY ASSOCIATIONS MATTER



**A**t the banquet dinner during the 2017 AAW Symposium in Kansas City, AAW President Greg Schramek asked everyone who volunteered during the Symposium to stand up. More than half the room stood—at least 500 people! I was inspired by this show of dedication and decided to ask members of the AAW and other associations what they find so valuable about this type of group and why they are willing to volunteer so much of their time and energy.

## **Camaraderie**

The most popular answer overwhelmingly was camaraderie. It seems we love getting together with people who share the same passion. For woodturners, many of whom work alone in their home shops, there is something special about getting out of that shop and interacting with people who share the same interests and goals. These days, that interaction often takes place online, but in person gatherings certainly remain important. That's part of the ongoing value of local club meetings and symposia.

Social media has allowed us to communicate like never before, and craft associations act as a hub (both online and in person), where people can meet and develop friendships. When I asked people what they liked most about going to conferences or symposia, the most enthusiastic response was, “seeing friends.”

## **Education**

The second most popular response, and probably the most important, was education. When we get together, we

are doing more than socializing, we are sharing knowledge, asking and answering questions, mentoring, teaching, and learning. Associations provide a place, both physical and online, to learn new techniques, improve our designs, investigate new tools, and hone our skills.

Being part of an association like AAW gives you close access to professionals willing to share their considerable knowledge. Much of the “guidance” you might find online is incorrect, misleading, and often dangerous. Members of associations are committed to spreading accurate information through printed materials, exhibitions, websites, blogs, social media, and email. Most associations provide websites with answers to almost every question you can ask, and that information has been vetted as safe and accurate. One association member said his organization is “like a clearinghouse for online education.”

## **Conferences and symposia**

Attending conferences and symposia is a significant benefit of being part of an association. At the AAW Symposium, you can watch demonstrations on beginning through advanced techniques, listen to panel discussions with experts sharing their knowledge on many subjects, see the latest and greatest tools (and buy many of them at a discount), be inspired by incredible displays of work, have your own work

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critiqued by professionals, and stay up way too late socializing with friends.

One of the vendors I spoke with at the Kansas City Symposium said the best part of the conference is getting feedback on his tools from attendees. Camaraderie and education are abundant at these conferences, whose success would not be possible without the amazing organizational work of the association and the generosity of its members.

## **Safety**

Many of the people I interviewed are involved with crafts that are inherently dangerous (well, maybe not so much the member of the knitting club). Woodturning, glass blowing, and furniture making are all activities that can hurt or even kill people. In all of these cases, there are associations that study, investigate, and share ways to improve safety. It is because of associations that we have better safety equipment and protocols to follow, which make our work and lives safer. Everyone participating in these fields benefits from the safety advocacy sponsored by associations. And, thankfully, in the case of a doctor I interviewed, he has associations that help him learn better ways to treat us if we do have an accident.

## **Promoting the field**

The work organizations do creating awareness and promoting the field benefits everyone down the line. With the power of a large group, they are able to keep the field alive. Last year, I was involved in the Collectors of Wood Art presentation at SOFA Chicago (Sculpture Objects, Functional Art, and Design),

where we placed wood art in a very favorable light. I recall one couple getting incredibly excited when they realized that everything they were looking at in our booth was wood. They were a young couple and couldn't afford any of our pieces that year, but you can bet in a few years when they become more successful, they will remember that experience and consider wood art to decorate their home.

A collective group can be far more effective at marketing than a single individual. It also provides a central place for vendors to promote their wares. It is difficult for small manufacturers to compete with large companies, but within an association, innovation thrives as ideas are brought forth in a public, accessible manner. A few vendors I spoke with said they would not be able to exist without being in relationship with their associations.

## Publications

Sharing and disseminating information are important functions of associations. Whether through journals or e-blasts, one of the best ways to stay current with your field is through the information passed out by your association. Where else can you keep up on new tools, learn new techniques, and see fantastic work by other members? The fact that you are reading this article goes to the value of the AAW journal, where even the most seasoned turner can learn something new from every issue. One member I spoke with said reading *American Woodturner* "keeps me energized."

Most associations have comprehensive websites that are incredible resources for their members. Rather than sorting through random websites looking for what you need, you can look to an association website, where information is accessible in one place and presented accurately by experts. These websites often have active forums where members can have discussions, as well as galleries where members can promote their own work and be inspired by the work of others.

Many of the associations I learned about pick artists to feature online or through their journals. While not everyone can be chosen, it's a great benefit for those who are and it generally helps promote the field.

## Networking

Within associations are other members willing to share information, collaborate, or assist on a project and give tips and advice. It takes a lot of time and effort to stay on top of all the events going on in a single field. Networking with other members can help you discover a new show, get into a new gallery, or even meet a collector. Even for non-professionals, networking is a great way to hear about events in your area. For woodturners, it's a great way to learn about free wood when someone has a tree down and wants to share the wealth.

## Grants and scholarships

Have you ever wanted to purchase or develop a new tool, travel to a new place to investigate a special technique, or even take a class at a college or craft school, but you don't have the funding? Almost every association, AAW included, has grant and scholarship money available to its members. All you have to do is apply, and you'd be surprised at the number of requests granted.

## Final thoughts

There are many volunteers who contribute an enormous amount of time to make all of these association benefits happen. Unfortunately, they also cost money. The dues to belong to an association usually range from \$50 to \$100 per year, and every little bit helps. Personally, I think the return on the investment is an incredible bargain. So next time you see someone volunteering for your association, thank them for their help and continue supporting them so all these great benefits can continue. ■

—John Beaver



AAW Symposium attendees eager to learn, make valuable connections, and have fun. Kansas City, Missouri, 2017.



Associations like the AAW rely heavily on volunteerism to fulfill their mission.



Many associations offer exhibitions of inspiring work, some with professional critiques to help further the skills of members. Mark Baker offers his expert impressions of an Instant Gallery piece, Atlanta, Georgia, 2016.

Photos: Andi Wolfe