

David J. Marks in profile

The work of David J. Marks expresses a sense of time and mystery, Tegan Foley finds out more about his superb turnings and surface effects

I was first exposed to David's remarkable work when I saw a photo of the fantastic 'Alchemist Vessel' whilst compiling the article on last year's AAW exhibit: Maple Medley – An Acer Showcase. I was instantly struck by the piece and have had a postcard depicting this image on my notice board ever since.

I didn't know a lot about David's background despite the effect his work had on me, so I set about starting from the beginning. David begins by explaining that in 1973, when he was 22, he took a carpentry job. From there he spent the next eight years going through a variety of woodworking jobs from making redwood burl tables, limited production craft items, repairing and refinishing furniture, working in a cabinet shop, as well as becoming a full-time finisher for a Swiss furniture maker for a year. David explains how he opened his woodworking studio in Northern California in 1981, and has been a full-time, self-employed woodworker ever since: "I built one-of-a-kind studio furniture throughout the '80s and '90s and maintained a furniture restoration business which sustained my cash flow."

In 2001 David received a phone call inviting him to audition to host a TV show on advanced furniture making. The show was called 'Woodworks' and aired on HGTV, DIY as well as 'The How To' channel in Australia: "By February 2004, we had completed three contracts and 91 episodes. From there, my wife and I decided to open our own woodworking school in California."

Discovering woodturning

So how did David discover woodturning? Even though he had a vast knowledge of woodworking, it seems that most of his experience centred on furniture making and general woodworking, so I set about asking the question. David tells me that he had one of his first bowl turning classes with Bob Stocksdale which was offered through the Baulines Craft Guild, back in 1984: "I was so impressed

to see Bob bandsaw a bowl blank of exotic wood, mount it on a screw thread, and turn it with a gouge into a magnificent work of art, that I decided then and there that this was a direction I wanted to go in." Throughout the 1990s, David's work became increasingly turning related and there was a shift in his work towards more turned and sculptural forms. His love for woodturning continued as he built up his portfolio of turned forms.

Turning style

When I asked David to define his style and the types of works he produces, he explains that he is currently focusing on turning hollow vessels and wall sculptures: "Since surface decoration is a huge part of my design vocabulary, I use my turned objects as a canvas to present my exotic finishes. I have gone off into the world of patinas on metal since the mid '80s and late 1980s; I was introduced to some techniques for creating patinas on metal leaf. One could say that I have become obsessed with this genre of surface embellishment ever since." He goes on to explain that form is an essential part of his designs so he spends quite a bit of time on this aspect as well.

Inspiration

In terms of inspirational sources, David tells me that inspiration can come from



OPPOSITE: David wet sanding a koa vessel

LEFT: 'Buckeye Vessel,' 2008, snakewood (*Brosimum guianense*), ebony (*Diospyros spp.*), poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) silver gilding, 355mm (14in) high x 165mm (6½in) dia.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID J. MARKS

many sources as opposed to just one, with nature being the primary one he mentions: "I like to go to the ocean and walk along the cliffs absorbing the impressions of that magical part of the world." As well as these natural sources, David also cites furniture, architecture, blown glass, ceramic designs as well as artefacts from Asia, Europe and Ancient Egypt as being influential. When he mentioned the Egyptian influence, I instantly thought back to the 'Alchemist Vessel' which, for me, conjured up Egyptian amphora bottles and such other delicate forms.

Going back to when David starting turning, I was interested to learn how his work has changed, as he must have started off turning limited forms before progressing into the stunning sculptural pieces he creates today. David says that his early work was limited by his lack of knowledge, experience and tooling: "My early lathes were an old Delta and an old

Oliver which were very good although limited for larger artwork. In 1999, I was able to purchase a Oneway 2436 lathe. Electronic variable-speed control literally changed my life! I now have the capability to turn large and difficult pieces at slower speeds." He goes on to explain his style as eclectic, combining different elements while emphasising graceful forms.

Inspirational sources

Earlier in the interview, David told me that his first turning lesson was alongside Bob Stocksdale, but which other turners has David been inspired by along the way? He starts by citing David Ellsworth, as according to David, he has been one of his biggest influences in woodturning through his articles and videos, and the wonderful Batty family: "Both Alan and Stu have taught at my shop. I love their attention to detail and expert classical technique and style."

He also mentions Dale Chihuly, who influenced David with his magical use of colour: "Wendell Castle was a huge influence on me when I discovered his work in the early *Fine Woodworking* magazines in the '70s. I love his 'Trompe Loeil' series and sculptural wood furniture."

Workshop

For some reason, I was

BELOW: 'Gold Fusion,' lathe turned, quilted maple (*Acer campestre*) centre, gold gilding, 940mm (37in) dia. x 180mm (7in) deep





OPPOSITE: Inset view of 'Alchemist Vessel' showing gold leaf and patina detailing



OPPOSITE: 'Alchemist Vessel,' 2009, ebony (*Diospyros spp.*), snakewood (*Brosimum guianense*), walrus tusk ivory, spalted maple (*Acer campestre*) burl, silver leaf, gold leaf, chemical patina, 510mm (20in) high x 180mm (7in) dia.

anticipating David's workshop to be full of woodworking paraphernalia due to the sheer number of skills and disciplines he undertakes, and it seems that I was not wrong, as I soon began writing down an extensive list. David explains that his workshop/studio is on the same property as the family home: "My wife and I bought an acre of land back in 1981 with our house in the front of the property, and an old horse stable with a separate driveway in the back of the property. Over the last 29 years, I have remodelled it at least three times and it has gone from an 800 sq. ft. shop with 100-amp service and no bathroom, to an 2200 sq. ft. shop with mostly 10 ft. ceilings, good lighting, windows, 200-amp electrical service, and a nice, clean bathroom.

David explains that the workshop is very well equipped, as I had expected. In terms of equipment he has six bandsaws and 11 lathes: four Vicmarc mini lathes, six Vicmarc Beaver lathes, a Oneway 2436, as well as four jointers. "In 2005, when Victoria and I did our last remodel to the shop, our intent was to turn my studio into a part-time school where I would teach classes throughout the spring and summer and private students throughout the year. That is why I have so many tools. In addition, I have a table saw, planer, two drill presses, six scroll saws, a disc sander, a multi-router, chop saw, Tormek sharpening station, two drum sanders, eight work benches, eight routers, and who knows how many other various hand tools and power carving tools." I think you will all agree when I say that this is an impressive list!

So what special tools does David use for his work and which of these can't he do without? He refers to his Oneway 2436 lathe, which he uses for turning deep hollow vessels and large pieces: "There is also my 915mm (36in) Mini

Max bandsaw for milling large turning blanks, as well as my various Torque arrest boring bars for hollowing deep vessels," he tells me.

So with these pieces of equipment in mind, I was intrigued to learn how long, typically, it takes him to complete one of his pieces. David explains that this varies quite a lot because he is not a production turner: "I turn one-of-a-kind art pieces and every one presents a different set of challenges. I can spend a week on one piece and two months on another. I have one turning that involves movement and a bentwood lamination base that allows the sphere to spin on three axis points, that I had put over 500 hours into," he informs me.

Work ethos

Learning more about David and the space in which he works allowed me to build up a better picture of this turner, but what is his work ethos as far as the

pieces he creates is concerned? David explains that he absolutely loves being in his workshop and can't get enough of the feeling it gives him: "I love the entire process from design, to finding unusual pieces of wood, to the constant challenges of woodturning. Unlike some statements I've heard from other people who work with wood, I actually enjoy the process of sanding and finishing." He further explains that after hand-to-hand combat on the lathe, he looks forward to the quiet hours in the evening when he can hand sand and detail his pieces.

Highs & lows

From what I have read and heard, David is a hugely successful and well-revered woodturner, as well as being internationally acclaimed. I was interested to hear what the highs and lows of his career have been. He begins by citing a major high as winning 'Best of Show' at the Artistry in Wood Show at the Sonoma County Museum in 1987, 1988, and 1991, as well as winning 'Best Piece-Turning' in 2009.



As well as these accolades, David also tells me about further winning two 'Niche awards' for his sculptures in 2001 and being selected from over 100 woodworkers in the US who auditioned for the host of the 'Woodworks' TV show in 2001: "Also, seeing my 'Alchemist Vessel' make the back cover of the June issue of *American Woodturner* magazine."

He further states that having Dr. Irving Lipton purchase four of his vessels in the late '90s and finding out years later that one is in the Contemporary Museum of Art in Honolulu, as well as recently receiving notification that another one is in the permanent collection of the Long Beach Museum of Art in Southern California: "In addition to those wonderful high points, being asked to travel to New York City and lecture alongside one of my greatest mentors, Wendell Castle, at the American Crafts Museum on the subject of 'The Creative Process' in 2000. My father travelled from New Jersey to attend the event - in ill health - and died shortly after. It was the last time I ever saw him," David finishes.

He also tells me about having to undergo hand surgery for tendinitis in the '80s, which was obviously a low point, as well as another one for carpal tunnel syndrome in the early '90s, on his left hand. He explains that this left him questioning his ability to continue his career, and understandably this was a very difficult time for him. Thankfully he did not give up and persevered until he was well enough to continue.

So what is the best thing about woodturning when compared to all the other forms of woodworking out there? I asked David this question and he remarked that this particular discipline allows him to find himself completely captured by the moment: "Time stands still and my attention is focused on my work."

Promotional sources

I am familiar with David's website and browsed it extensively before conducting this profile. I asked him more about this fantastic online resource and he informs he that the website is very large and quite comprehensive: "I have over 16 YouTube videos out there. My television show has made quantum leaps in terms of getting my name recognised. I started with shows, newspaper articles, and magazine articles help, although primarily I rely on shows and galleries showing my work to make sales.

OPPOSITE: 'Time Is Relative' pernambuco (*Caesalpinia echinata*), poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), silver leaf, dutch metal leaf and copper with patina, 890mm (35in) dia. x 90mm (3 1/2in) deep



The future

So what are David's aims and aspirations for the future? He starts by telling me about his desire to create his own line of educational DVDs: "Currently I am attempting to learn the process of video editing so that I will be able to express a lot of my teaching ideas in high definition video."

In addition to this, David expresses his desire to continue with his creative artwork and tells me about the designs he has for some large-scale constructed vessels that could potentially be 5 or 6 ft. tall. Some of these will be on stands made out of wood that are a bentwood lamination. He is also experimenting with outboard turning on his lathe, and explains that he has several works in progress ranging from 3-4 ft. in diameter. David's goal is now to push the envelope and see how far he can go with woodturning, sculpture, and patina finishes. "I see myself in a unique position having access to my own studio that is big enough to do some larger scale work and well equipped enough that I can now successfully bring into existence some of these unusual designs that have been floating through my brain for many years."

It was great to work with David and Victoria in putting this profile together and learning more about someone whose work I so much admire. I wish David every success for the future and look forward to seeing what direction his career takes. ●

LEFT: 'Curly Koa Vessel,' koa (*Acacia koa*), snakewood (*Brosimum guianense*), black palm joined to koa (*Acacia koa*) and snakewood (*Brosimum guianense*) on ebony (*Diospyros spp.*) stand, 485mm (19in) high (including stand) x 190mm (7½in) dia.

LIKES & DISLIKES

Likes:

- The steady rest for stabilising deep vessels during the hollowing process
- Torque arrest boring bar system. This makes it possible for me to turn a deep, hollow vessel
- Negative-rake scraper – I love this tool!
- Trusting my instincts. Design can be a tricky thing and there can be plenty of people who will say negative things about your designs. When I feel strongly about something, I have learned to isolate myself and just see a project through to completion

Dislikes:

- Poor design that makes things look mechanical
- Bad finishes
- Poor craftsmanship

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