



'Envious', soapstone and wood, diam. 20 x 9 cm. Dale Larson collection

Segments of Daily Life

THE ARTFORMS OF CURT THEOBALD

Inspiration for Curt Theobald stems from diverse interests centring on the personal yet universal experience of daily life. His creative challenge is to portray through his work the emotions he experiences during its creation. Text by Kevin V. Wallace.

THE works of Curt Theobald are highly personal, reflecting his family and the place he calls home. He lives with his wife Wanda and their two daughters on the high prairie of southeast Wyoming, on a dry land wheat farm that his great-grandfather bought in 1922. Theobald's father operates the farm and Theobald works in a building that is mostly constructed from old railway ties and 2 x 10's that were once part of a potato cellar. 'My grandfather dug the wood out of the ground and made a ground-level machinery storage shed from the materials,' he says of the building that is now his studio. Theobald regularly assists with many of the farm-related tasks that occur throughout the summer months and the harvest and planting seasons.

Southeast Wyoming is a land of huge vistas, wide-open spaces and plentiful wind. 'We can see the mountain ranges 200 miles away. It is a rural setting with few people, but there is contentment in the solitude and sweep of the plains. It is easy to see the building thunderheads a hundred miles off in the distance.'

The piece *Eye of the Storm* reflects this sense of place and the transformation of colours and shapes as time passes and storms build. 'It is eerie, knowing the destruction that they can cause, yet strangely beautiful at the same time. The eye of the storm is often serene, calm and even settling. It can trick you into thinking all is well before the turbulence and destruction begin.'

The history of the southwestern States also inspired the



'Eye of the Storm', wood, diam. 41 x 9 cm. Ivins Memorial Hospital



'Lightning on the Horizon', diam. 27 x 11 cm. Dr. Richard Hillman



'Sisters', wood (sandblasted), diam. 10 cm. Dave & Karen Long

artist's work. In 1539, tales of the Seven Cities of Gold called Cibola incited Francisco Coronado to conquer the Zuñi nation. Problems worse than Spanish occupation befell Hawikuh in New Mexico, one of the largest Zuñi pueblos, which was destroyed in 1670 by Apache raiders. Not much remained after the attack but a few artefacts, including a polychrome jar, which inspired the work *The Gold of Cibola* – Theobald's homage to the Zuñi victims.

Much of the work Theobald has created during the past several years concerns the adoption of their two daughters from China. Early on in the adoption discussion, it was decided that his wife would keep her job as a schoolteacher and he would remain at home with the children.

'It was the obvious choice as I'm self-employed and could continue my work while being the primary carer,' he says. 'My days as a work-from-home dad are filled with lots of entertaining activities geared towards fun, learning, and interaction with a four-year-old child. Viewing the world from the perspective of a child is an eye-opening exercise that all of us need to do from time to time. The concept of "I can't do that" isn't yet imprinted in the mind of a child. Too often as we get older, we forget that we are capable of doing much more than we give ourselves credit for; that is, if we don't give up on an idea.'

As the father of two daughters from China, Theobald has looked deeply into Asian culture and investigated Chinese lifestyles and traditions. Aspects of Chinese life: daily rituals, architecture and the ceremonial, all provide inspiration. The difference in the meaning of colours, numbers and events in China and Western culture provide interesting concepts to explore visually in his works.

Theobald's *Family Series* is based on interlocking lattice-work found on doors and windows in China, reflecting how deeply a family can be joined with one another and features the Chinese character for "family". Interlocking boxes are also a recurring theme in Chinese architecture and the traditional latticework represents a multitude of things, including philosophies relating to longevity, wealth, and good fortune.

'Each of the interlocking boxes in these works illustrates how interdependent we are as a family unit. Every family member is a separate person, but our lives interlock and rely on each other and shape us and our futures,' he says. 'Tea is an important part of Chinese history and culture.'



'Sisters', wood and dichroic glass, diam. 17.8 cm. Artist's collection

The Chinese word for teapot is *Chá Hú*, hence the name of Theobald's wood teapot, which salutes the Chinese Art of Tea. The work celebrates this traditional ceremony and a respectful act, performed with intention and purpose.

My Mothers, created after the adoption of their first daughter, expresses how both the birth and adoptive mothers' love shape her character. The adoption of their second child from China took considerably longer, resulting in nearly three years of setbacks and delays. During this period he began the work on the piece titled *A Long Time Coming* – an episode which at times seemed endless.

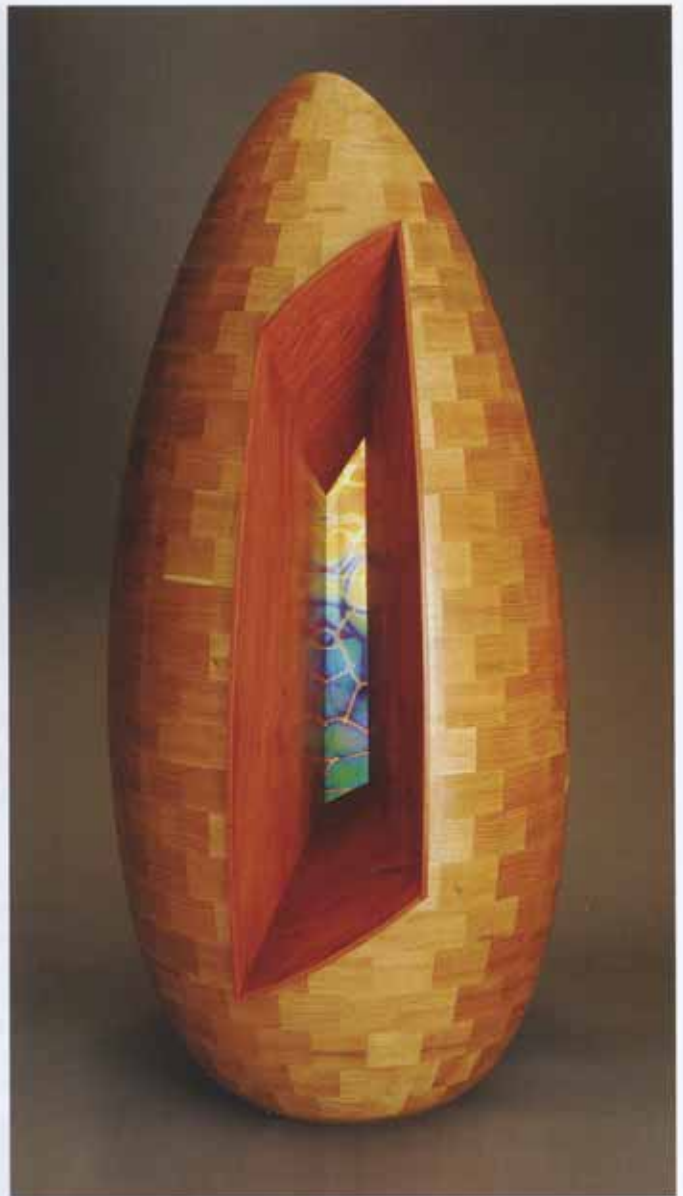
'As I considered both adoption and this work, I wondered how hard a second adoption could be or how challenging it might be to make such a large a piece,' says Theobald.



'Chá Hú', carved wood, ht 20 x 7.6 x 10 cm. Sonny Kamm collection



'Family (variegated)', dyed wood and metal leaf, ht 25.5 x 14 x 8,9 cm



'A Long Time Coming', wood and glass, ht 107 x 56 x 46 cm



'The Gold of Cibola', wood, diam. 12.7 x 10 cm. Honolulu Museum of Art

'I learnt that neither was an easy concept to embrace. The scale of this piece presented immense challenges during the process of construction. Similarly, the adoption of our daughter also presented many obstacles. In this work the intensity and powerfulness of the colours of glass inside speak to the magnitude of complexity which both the adoption and creation of the sculpture presented. The focal point in the piece was narrowed down to describe how, in both the adoption and the creation of the work, I needed to focus on the ultimate goals – finishing the piece and bringing home our girl.'

Works in the *Sisters Series* represent their two daughters with regard to the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang and how opposites can be complementary (rather than opposing) forces, which interact to create a balance and harmony.

'Each half of these works is very different from the other,' says Theobald. 'In a similar way, the personalities of our daughters are very distinctive. Sibling interaction is an interesting and spontaneous dynamic – each child's personality stretches the other in ways that are new to them. Yet, as different as they are, they can exist in harmony.'

Many of Theobald's works have Biblical references, as he sees his faith as a part of his inner being, with what is on the inside naturally coming out through the creation of his works. *Tablets of Stone* concerns Moses smashing the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments upon his return from Mount Sinai.

Later, Moses was commanded to return to the mountain with replacement tablets that he was to hew by himself. The Book of Revelation's references to foundations decorated with every kind of precious stone and a street of pure gold are echoed in the work *Streets of Gold*, where peering through the cracks in the wall rewards the viewer with the golden glow of the streets of Heaven.

'I've always liked to assemble things,' Theobald says of his development as an artist. 'My earliest exposure to wood-working was looking over my father's shoulder. Being a builder, he was always busy all hours of the day engaged in some kind of construction.'

By the age of nine, Theobald was proficient at creating forms by gluing up pieces of wood – although at the time these were airplanes made out of toothpicks. He felt ready for a greater challenge. His persistence paid off when his father relinquished the use of his electric jigsaw. He was given minimal instruction and recalls a flippant comment regarding safety: "Don't cut yourself." Soon after, he was off cutting various patterns in scrap wood and was hooked, wondering what could be created with wood.

His first exposure to woodturning occurred at high school, chiefly because the lathe was one of three machines in the workshop that worked. The other two were a bandsaw and a radial arm saw. Years were to pass before he experimented with turned and segmented works.

On leaving high school, Theobald worked in large-scale construction for nearly 10 years, which eventually led to another itinerant job that involved travelling across the continent building electrical substations.

On a rare week at "home", Theobald heard about a position at a cabinet shop. After meeting the owner he was told to show up the next Monday. While working there he saw a disused Shopsmith lathe in the corner and remembered his father letting him use his while in high school. Hence he purchased the lathe and began experimenting.

'I hacked out a few walnut bowls before reading a chapter on segmented ring construction in Dale Nish's book *Creative Woodturning*, which led me to turn segmented bowls.'

While working at the cabinet shop, where he eventually progressed through the ranks to become shop foreman, Theobald also did side jobs after hours building cabinets. When the hours spent working for himself were nearing the hours spent working for someone else, he started his own cabinet shop. Operating as a one-person shop, he always had plenty of work, yet even though business was good, he still had a desire to turn wood.

'I would try each year to devote six consecutive weeks to woodturning,' he says. 'Those concentrated weeks kept my passion alive. Though the cabinet shop was prospering, my desire for prolonged woodturning was not satisfied.'

With the encouragement of his wife, Theobald became a professional woodturner and soon his work was being exhibited in leading galleries, acquired by collectors and admired by woodturners internationally.

'There are many segmented turners in the wood art circle but Curt's work has evolved over the years and set him apart,' offers Binh Pho, who has invited Theobald to collaborate with him on a number of works. 'Curt's work is no longer concerned with only vessel or bowl forms, but has expanded into sculpture explorations with architectural references and depth of meaning.'

'Curt's mastery of the segmental method of creating his works are impressive,' notes Thomas R. Riley, a leading gallery in the US. 'More importantly we applaud his striving for timeless forms which transcends technique – and appreciate that the integrity of his work is matched by the integrity of his person.'



'Circle of Life', wood, ht 28 x 7.6 x 11.4 cm. Franklin G. Burroughs-Simeon B. Chapin Art Museum (pending)



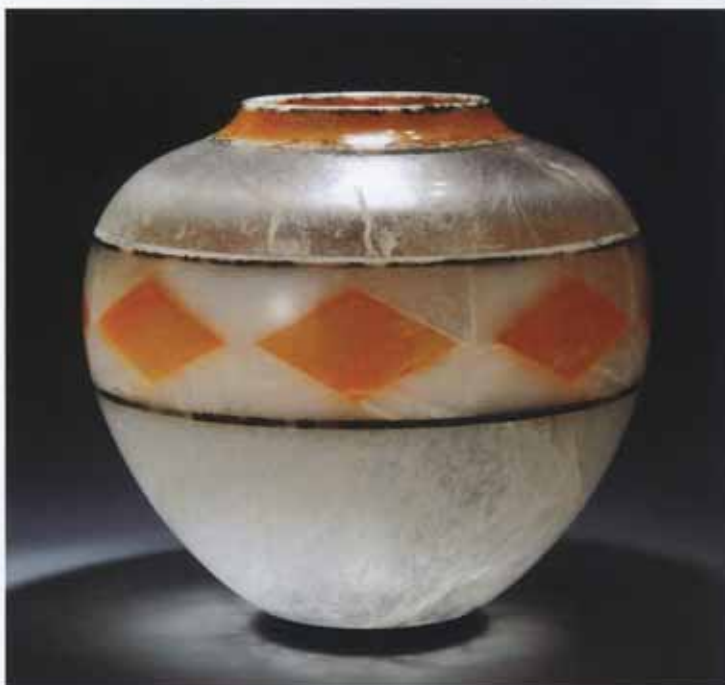
'Tablets of Stone', Italian alabaster, wood, resin, diam. 10 x 5 cm



'The Silence Speaks', wood, diam. 33 x 40 cm. Julianne Howshar collection



'Blood Brothers', wood, each diam. 5 x 4.4 cm. Ken & Nancy McCann collection



'Diamonds', diam. 12 x 10 cm. Bill and Katie Crawford collection

While he is now considered a leading figure in the field, woodturning is only one aspect of Theobald's process.

'The lathe is the means to the end; it's how I can convey my ideas,' Theobald says. 'A lathe is the quickest way to symmetrically remove material. The speed at which you can transform wood on a lathe is amazing. I draw, saw, sand, glue, turn and carve my sculptural pieces. The lathe plays a major role in defining my work, but I don't let it restrict my vision. The drawing defines my work the most, then I use whatever tools necessary to achieve the vision that I have on paper.'

Theobald credits Bud Latven for introducing the technical aspects of segmented turning and Ray Allen to the detail, yet considers David Ellsworth his most influential woodturner. 'His willingness to share with me the artistic and business aspects of making a career out of working in wood has made it possible.'

While woodturners have inspired his growth as an artist, Theobald also points to contemporary studio glass art as a major influence, saying, 'I am drawn to the colour and asymmetrical shapes in sculptural glass. It has been a direct influence on my current sculptural work.'

This interest has prompted him to explore using glass in his wood sculptures, as well as casting his forms in glass. Despite the success of these works, wood remains his material of choice.



Curt Theobald

'Wood has variety, an endless pallet of smells and textures and warmth,' Theobald says. 'I like the emotion the grain can convey. Yet, as vast as the possibilities may be, wood does have boundaries. I do enjoy the challenge of learning how far I can explore and still remain within the capabilities of wood. Ultimately, you have to work in harmony with the material to have success. Wood makes you think – it is alive and always remains so, no matter if it's a tree, a table, or a woodturned object. The wood never stops changing. That in itself is exciting.'

Each work by Curt Theobald is extensively thought out on paper before he cuts a single piece of wood. Usually it will go through several design changes before he even enters the studio. 'Once I'm satisfied with the design I then construct a prototype. This process allows me to modify aspects of the piece and resolve any design challenges before I begin actual construction of the piece.'

Making a prototype can take up to a week. This consumption of time may seem wasted, but Theobald does not want any surprises when working with more valuable species of wood.

'The more technically challenging the project becomes, the more passionate I become about it,' says Theobald. 'Solving the challenge is where my passion lies. Some of



'Freedom's Never Free', wood, diam. 13 x 12.5 cm. Artist's collection

these challenges include predicting what the grain will look like in its final form, dealing with the hygroscopic nature of wood, learning how to construct the complex sculptures that I've envisioned and drawn, and making a piece technically precise by sawing and then sanding each segment. The easiest and fastest way to make a segmented turning is rarely the most enduring.'

While most of Theobald's work utilises juxtaposing various woods to take advantage of their natural coloring, *The Silence Speaks* focuses on a single wood. Here the simplicity of a single species of wood has the potential to speak louder than a work composed of multiple woods.

'In today's world there are not many places where silence is the loudest sound. We are so inundated by noise that we need to train our ears to listen to silence. If you think about it, music would not be music if there weren't any pauses between the notes to separate the changing sounds. In casual conversation we are always listening with our eyes to the silence and the pauses between the words. Often it's in the silence that there's a presence that speaks louder than the verbalised word.'

Diamonds is a piece which makes reference to both the gemstone and the artist's process of working with wood: 'Contrary to popular belief, cutting and polishing will add little to the overall value of a diamond, as the value is largely based on the diamond's quality in the rough. The nature of my work requires sawing, sanding, gluing and clamping, which leave an unfinished look. By being very attentive in each of these steps, I have the satisfaction of making a diamond from the rough.'

Ultimately, the simple joys and challenges of everyday life are the greatest influence on Curt Theobald's work. The teardrop opening in the sides of *Circle of Life* symbolises the emotions we face as we share life with others, passing through the stages of birth, growth, graduation, marriage, middle age and death.

'Daily family life is an ever-changing dynamic,' says Curt Theobald. 'Life has a way of throwing you unexpected situations alongside the normalcy of existence. These unexpected times as well as the normal offerings of daily life can give ideas or inspiration that provide avenues for further exploration in the studio.'

Kevin V. Wallace



'My Mothers', dyed wood, tallest piece 15 cm. Richard & Elizabeth Hogue



'Family', dyed wood and metal leaf, ht 25.5 x 14 x 8.9 cm. John & Patti Quinn Hill