

January-February 2016

Woodworker WEST

Promoting Craftsmanship in Woodworking in the West since 1988



\$2.95



- *Sam Maloof Centennial Celebration*
 - *WoodCentral.com: Sanding Short Cuts*
 - *Hawaii's WoodShow • Sonoma's 'Artistry in Wood'*
 - *Greater Denton's 'Materials: Hard & Soft'*
 - *David Marks: Answering Readers' Questions*
 - *SketchUp: A Better Approach by Robert Lang*
 - *Turning Green Wood: Parameters by Howard Lewin*
 - *Woodworking Ideas Northwest*
 - *Profile: Curt Theobald, turned wood artist*
- News • Events • Exhibits • Clubs • Classes & More**

Profile: Curt Theobald



Thunderbird
Butternut, Wenge Carob & Holly
(4 1/4" h, 6" dia)

In addition to wood, Curt Theobald creates segmented work out of alabaster



Diamonds
Alabaster, Ebony
(4" h, 5" dia)

Curt Theobald of Pine Bluffs, WY uses segmented turning to express observations. Here is Curt's story, in his own words.

From early childhood, I have always loved to assemble things. My first exposure to woodworking was looking over my father's shoulder, as he was always busy doing some kind of construction or repair. By age 9, I no longer was satisfied with making objects out of toothpicks, and my father relinquished the use of his electric jigsaw to me. After minimal instruction and a safety comment ("Don't cut yourself!"), I was off cutting various patterns in wood. From that point, I was hooked, wondering what could be created with wood.

In high school, I took a lot of wood shop, though it was more like exploring on your own. For example, the instructions on how to use the lathe were "grab something off the rack, stick it in the wood, and see what happens."

Being a wheat farmer, my father relied mostly on his own abilities, determination, and creativity to repair almost anything that broke. Growing up helping him, I internalized these same skills, which helped me secure a job with a construction company as a concrete form builder and cement finisher. For several years, I built and set forms and poured hundreds of thousands of yards of concrete, moving from project to project. Even after becoming crew foreman, I woke up one morning in a Salt Lake City hotel and decided that there was more to life than living out of a suitcase.

I landed a job in a production cabinet shop in Cheyenne, WY and found the skills that I learned building concrete forms translated well to the building of cabinets. Not being able to match my construction salary, the owner allowed me to use his tools on the side, and pretty soon, I was working late hours on pieces that I brought in myself. After a while, it only made sense for me to go out on my own, and I opened a cabinet business, out of a barn on the family farm.

While working at the cabinet shop, I noticed an old Shopsmith lathe in the corner, and I purchased it, got it running, and began turning wood. I found working in the round was a great alternative from making square boxes, and I tried to set aside time every day to turn. After discovering a segmented turning project in a magazine, I went crazy, drawing up different designs that I could make. All I could think about was gluing wood together and turning. This passion consumed my every spare moment, until I became a full-time studio woodturner—with the encouragement of my wife Wanda—in 2002.

As with most novice segmented turners, my early work was native American influenced. Living in Wyoming, I don't have to go far to find chips or pieces of arrowheads, and I did research on the tribes of my region to replicate their craft designs in wood, such as *Thunderbird* (upper left).

Today, I do sculptural pieces, related to my family, life experiences, and observations. *My Mothers* (on the cover) is dedicated to my wife and the birth mother of our adopted daughter. The smaller piece on the left symbolizes our

daughter, composed of segments from both maternal forms. In *Sisters* (below), my two daughters are shown as polar opposites, existing in harmony as siblings.

I begin each piece by making rough sketches of ideas, and then a quick and dirty prototype of the shape, out of cheap wood. Once satisfied, I will go back to the drawing board to interpret what I'm thinking in my head and how I want to present it to the public. Ultimately, I create a full-scale drawing, detailing what wood segments will be used and where the joints will be.

The key element in segmented turning is paying attention to wood movement across the grain. There is interesting segmented work that has end grain to side grain glue joints, which is only a recipe for failure. It is also important to be aware of grain and color in designing the piece. Non-segmented turners are under the impression that I can just use scrap wood, but if I want a vessel out of the same species, I want to use pieces from the same tree to insure the same shade and color throughout. In addition, the grain of the assembled segments can convey emotion, when working in harmony with the shape. It invites the viewer along on a journey of a deeper, more contemplative experience.

Precision is the killer. If you strive for perfection, it will be close enough. If you go for close enough, it won't be. I use machinist calipers, and I measure to the thousands of an inch. That becomes real evident in my miniature pieces that are $\frac{3}{4}$ " in diameter with over 300 pieces of wood. If you are off by a few thousandths, it will be quite apparent.

Motivated by the challenge has kept segmented turning fresh for me, since the 1990s. I constantly push myself to do work that is new or at least better than the last piece that I have done. And I enjoy sharing my knowledge. I have produced two videos, *Introduction to Segmented Turning* and *Segmented Patterns*—and I teach in my studio and at various symposia. I will be among the demonstrators at the 2016 *Desert Woodturning Round-Up*, Feb. 26-28, in Mesa, AZ.

For more information on my work, visit my website: www.curttheobald.com.



One of Curt's miniature turnings, where precision really matters.



Family
Dyed wood,
Metal leaf
(10" h, 5 1/2" w, 3 1/2" d)



Sisters
Walnut, Holly,
Dichroic glass
(7" dia)

Eye of the Storm
Walnut, Holly,
Pernambuco
(3 1/2" h,
16" dia)

