

3 NEW PROJECTS

CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS

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Woodturning

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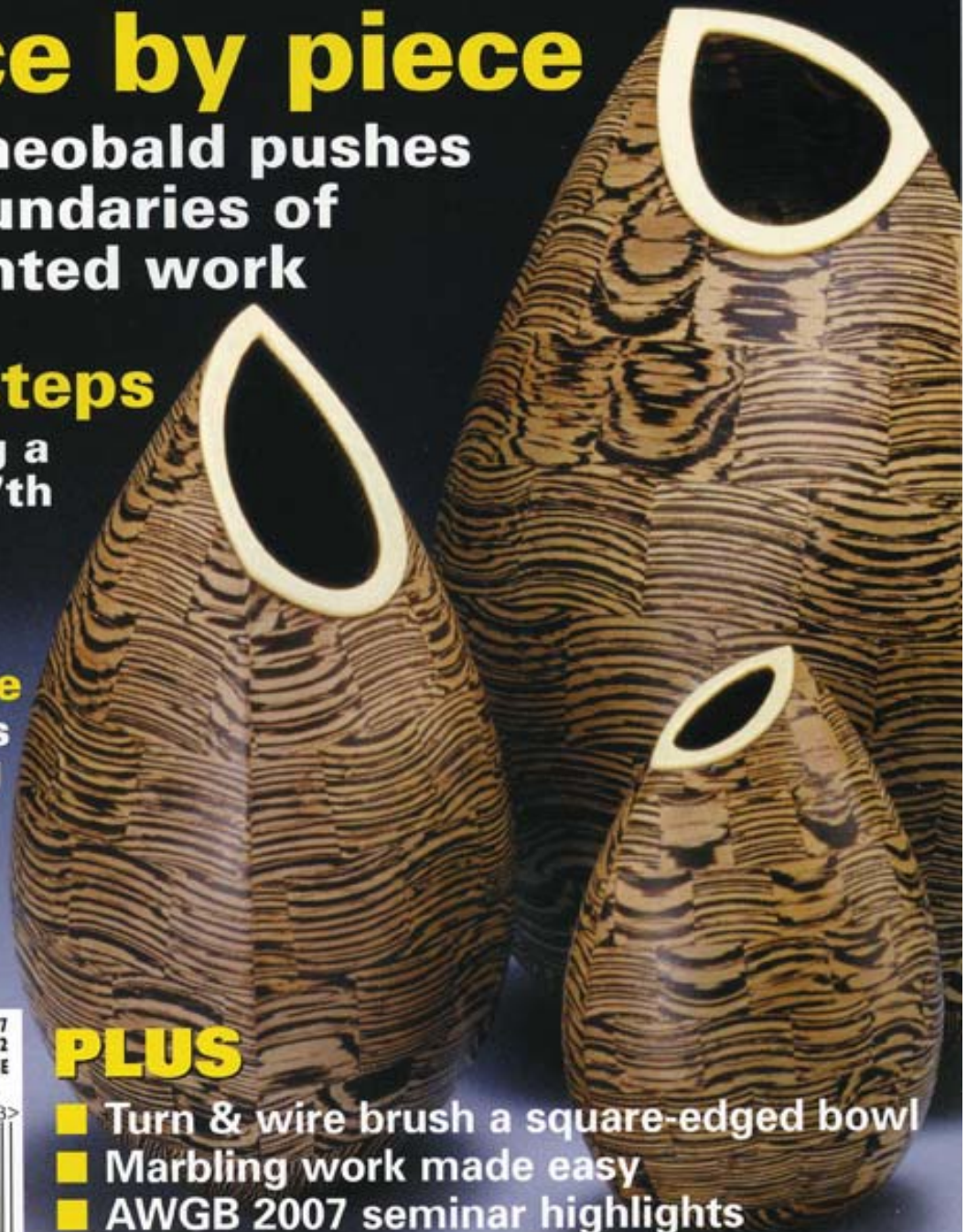
Piece by piece

Curt Theobald pushes the boundaries of segmented work

Easy steps

to turning a replica 17th century goblet

Technique
Ins & outs of cutting coves



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PLUS

- Turn & wire brush a square-edged bowl
- Marbling work made easy
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ON TEST Vicmarc's new hollowing system



Looking deeper

Kevin Wallace meets woodturner Curt Theobald

Curt Theobald and his wife Wanda live on the high prairie of southeast Wyoming, on a dry land wheat farm that his great-grandfather purchased in 1922. It is a land of big vistas, wide-open spaces, and plentiful wind.

"We can see the mountain ranges 200 miles away," Theobald says. "It is a rural setting with few people,

but there is contentment in the solitude of the wide-open plains."

Today, Theobald's father operates the farm and Curt creates his work in a building constructed mainly from old railroad ties and 2 x 10s that were originally part of an underground potato cellar.

"My grandfather dug the wood out of the ground and made a ground-level machinery storage



Longing for China, 95 x 38 x 47mm (3½ x 1½ x 1½in), walnut, gold leaf, acrylic

shed from the materials," Theobald says of the building he converted into a woodworking studio.

Artist's development

"I've always liked to assemble things," he says of his development as an artist. "My earliest exposure to woodworking was looking over my father's shoulder. Being a builder, he was busy all hours of the day doing some kind of construction." ➤

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CURT THEOBALD



Streets of Gold, 240 x 90 x 90mm (9½ x 3½ x 5in), mesquite, gold leaf, acrylic paint

◀ By the age of nine, Theobald was already proficient at creating forms by gluing up pieces of wood – although at the time these consisted of aeroplanes created out of toothpicks. He felt ready for a greater challenge and his persistence paid off when his father relinquished the use of his electric jigsaw. He was given careful instruction and recalls a bit of useful advice regarding safety –



Squash Pot series, 150 x 150 x 190mm (6 x 6 x 7½in), Colorado Aspen, ebony



Narrow Gate series, 392 x 150 x 200mm (15½ x 6 x 8in), elm, tulipwood

“don’t cut yourself”. Soon after, Theobald was cutting various patterns in scrap wood and was hooked, wondering what could be created with wood.

His first exposure to woodturning was in high school woodshop, where a lathe was available as well as a bandsaw and radial arm saw. It was during this time that he created his first segmented bowl after reading the chapter on ring construction in Dale Nish’s book *Creative Woodturning*. Yet it was years before he had the opportunity to make another segmented turning or explore the lathe’s potential.

Following high school, Theobald worked heavy construction for nearly ten years, including pouring and finishing concrete, building forms and large-scale structural concrete work. The skills he gained in forming and finishing concrete led him to another itinerant job that he thought would be better – travelling across the continent building electrical substations.

“One day I woke up in a motel and all I had in my possession was



The Wizard, 185 x 63 x 95mm (7½ x 2½ x 3½in), wenge, Colorado Aspen, gold leaf

my suitcase of clothes,” he recalls. “I thought to myself: ‘I don’t want to do this anymore’”.

On a rare week at home, Theobald heard about a position at a cabinet shop. “I talked to the owner and he told me to show up the next Monday.” He eventually progressed through the ranks to become shop foreman.

The lathe

While working at the cabinet shop Theobald saw a Shopsmith lathe resting idly in the corner and remembered the machine he’d used occasionally while in high school. He purchased the lathe for \$75 and blew up the motor that same evening.

“I hacked out a few walnut bowls before rediscovering segmented turning through a magazine article,” he recalls.

While working at the cabinet



After the Storm, 240 x 90 x 125mm (9½ x 3½ x 5in), sandblasted Kentucky coffeetree

shop, 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 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 for woodturning alive. The cabinet shop was prospering, yet my desire for prolonged woodturning was not satisfied."

With the encouragement of his wife, Theobald became a professional woodturner.

"Each day I feel very blessed to be able to pursue my passion for woodturning," he says. He credits Bud Latven for introducing the technical aspects of segmented turning and Ray Allen with the detail, yet considers David Ellsworth the 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."

Challenge and creation

Each work by Curt Theobald is extensively thought out on paper before he cuts a single piece of wood.

"The drawing defines my work the most, then I use whatever tools necessary to achieve the vision that I have on paper," he says.

"Usually I will go through several design changes before I enter the studio. Once I'm satisfied with the design I will construct a prototype. This process allows me to modify any aspects of the piece and work out any design challenges before I begin actual construction of my intended piece."

Creating a prototype can take as much as a week. "This consumption of time may seem like overkill, but I don't want any surprises when working with more valuable species of wood."

"The more technically challenging the project gets, the more passionate I become about it," Theobald says.

"Solving the challenge is where my passion lies. Some of these challenges include predicting what the grain will look like in its final form, dealing with the hygroscopic nature of wood, learning how to build the complex sculptures that I have drawn, and making my pieces technically precise by sawing and then sanding each segment. The easiest and fastest way to make a segmented turning is rarely the most enduring."



Narrow Gate series, 392 x 150 x 200mm (15½ x 6 x 8in), walnut, curly maple



Archeology series, 150 x 150 x 190mm (6 x 6 x 7½in), spalted maple, panga panga



Curt Theobald in the studio

◀ Theobald found success soon after, with his work presented in leading galleries and acquired by collectors.

"Unlike most woodturners utilising segmented techniques, Curt has been able to capture the sculptural form using this tedious but effective approach," notes Ray Leier, co-founder and director of del Mano Gallery. "The resulting forms create a mystery for the viewer and the question how did he do that?"

While woodturners have inspired his growth as an artist, Theobald also points to contemporary 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."

Love of wood

Yet, Theobald isn't likely to leave wood behind.

"Wood has variety, an endless palette of smells and textures and warmth," he offers when asked about his preference for working the material. "I like the emotion the grain can convey. Yet, as vast as the possibilities may be, wood does have boundaries. I



Narrow Gate series, 392 x 150 x 200mm (15½ x 6 x 8in), curly maple, curly imbuaya



The Needle, 180 x 70 x 100mm (7 x 2½ x 4in), wenge, holly

like 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 wood to have success. Wood makes you think. Wood is alive and always remains alive, no matter if it's a tree, a table, or a woodturning. The wood never stops changing. That in itself is exciting."

Although only 10% of Theobald's time is spent turning, he feels the lathe plays the role of defining the vision of the piece.

"The lathe is the means to the end; it's how I can convey my ideas," Theobald says. "A lathe is the fastest way to symmetrically remove material. The speed at which you can transform wood on a lathe is astounding. 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."

For Curt Theobald, creative challenges centre on design.

"It's the desire to portray, through an object, my emotions during its creation – inviting the viewer to share my world through a work of art," he explains. "The creative and technical challenges inspire my work by causing me to think more deeply in order to engage the viewer."



Eye of the Needle, 240 x 90 x 125mm (9½ x 3½ x 5in), wenge, holly, gold leaf

Many of the artist's recent works have openings in the front that suggest passageways, inviting the viewer on a journey within.

"It's my hope they will have a deeper, more contemplative experience," Theobald says. "As opposed to just giving the sculpture a passing glance." ■



The Gate, 95 x 35 x 50mm (3½ x 1½ x 2in), wenge, holly, gold leaf