

Three of Curt's many segmented and figured turnings



PHOTOGRAPH BY MEL SCHOCKNER

Complex creations

Steve and Anne Sinner meet segmented expert Curt Theobald, widely regarded as the best turner in his field

Driving west across Iowa and Nebraska, we gradually rose into the high plains. Just across the Nebraska border in Eastern Wyoming and barely within sight of the peaks of the Rocky Mountains, we exited I-80 at the mile-high small town of Pine Bluffs.

Seven miles south of the town is the farm home of Curt and Wanda Theobald. Curt is considered by many to be the world's finest figurative segmented woodturner. His great grandfather bought this farm in 1922, and Curt is the fourth generation Theobald to live there.

Today, Curt's father grows dry-land wheat on his own 2500 acres, plus another 500 rented acres, and Curt helps out during the planting and harvesting seasons.

As we opened our car doors we were met by Blake, an affable black labrador, soon followed by Curt stepping out of his studio. He welcomed us warmly, and we began our interview.

Curt found work in heavy construction after high school, but 10 years of this itinerant work failed to offer the future he wanted. He found a job in a production cabinet

shop in Cheyenne – not far from Pine Bluffs – and became the shop foreman. He planned to open his own cabinet shop on the farm so he could also concentrate on farming, but his father encouraged him to stick with the cabinets, declaring, “You can’t make any money farming!” One of the farm buildings became Curt’s cabinet shop, and is now his studio.

Studio

While working in that first cabinet shop, Curt was introduced to the wood lathe. Like many of us, he was



ABOVE Curt Theobald working on his latest piece

at first intrigued and soon hooked. After opening his cabinet shop, the lathe still beckoned. He would concentrate on cabinets for most of the year, and then turn for a couple of months to satisfy his addiction to turning. The time spent turning grew each year, and eventually won out over the cabinet business.

Curt's studio is spacious with a high ceiling, plenty of wood storage, and ample floor space. There is the usual complement of machine tools one would expect in a former cabinet shop, plus what appears at first to be a glut of disc sanders.

Three of these are intended for use by Curt's students. Aside from the sanders, machines devoted to Curt's segmented work include an overarm router, a DeWalt precision trim saw, a OneWay 2416 lathe, and a 16in Woodfast lathe that originally belonged to Rude Osolnik. The space is served by a large dust-collection system located outside the studio, and heated by an efficient overhead gas-fired radiator system.

Exemplary standards

Evidence of the complexity of Curt's work is hanging on hooks on the

BELOW One of Curt's oversized clipboards with the design for his piece Freedom is Never Free



Freedom's Never Free was the subject of several redesigns



wall. Large homemade clipboards bear sheets of squared paper filled with multicoloured drawings and calculations.

Each piece is planned in excruciating detail before any wood is cut. A prototype may even be made to assure the end result will meet Curt's exemplary standards. The eagle's head in one of his pieces required dozens of redesigns over many days until Curt felt it was ready for rendering in wood. Actual construction of 24 of the eagles took him three weeks of 12-hour days. The entire process of creating a piece >



ABOVE A set of three nested hollow forms



ABOVE Coldwater Series, made of curly maple, Imbuya, holly and pau amurello

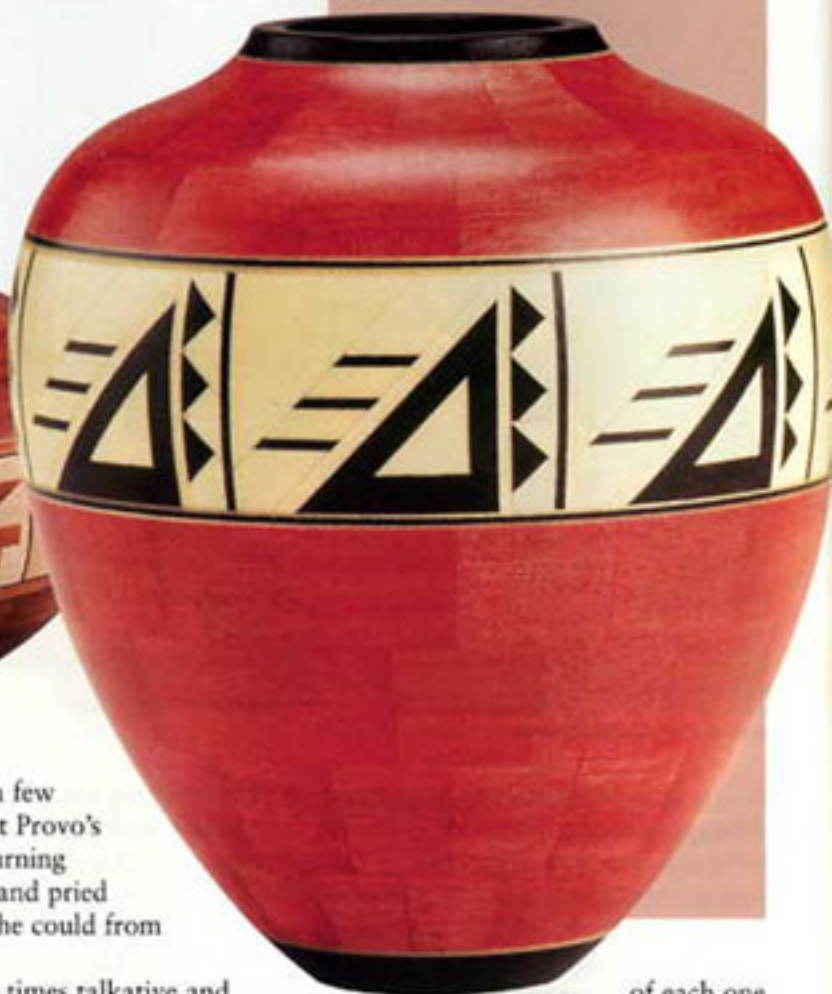


ABOVE Dragonfly, from the Petroglyph Series



RIGHT A piece from Curt's Keyatone Series

Devil's Thumb is made of 298 individual pieces of wood



from inspiration to finish may take from six weeks to a few months. Because of this tremendous investment in time, Curt will make several pieces of the same design at the same time, using different wood combinations for each.

Precision

Segmented work was Curt's focus from the beginning of his turning ventures. He feels that it was a natural extension of his cabinet-making experience. He met Ray Allen – who was considered the world's best segmented turner prior

to his death a few years ago – at Provo's Utah Woodturning Symposium, and pried what secrets he could from the master.

Ray was at times talkative and at times not, but Curt learned enough to strike out on his own and fill in the missing parts. One of the hard lessons he learned was that grain orientation is critical to the long-term stability of a piece.

He ensures that the grain of every segment not only runs in the same direction, but that the growth rings

of each one are curved in the same way. If any segment is flipped, it will reflect light differently from the others on the finished piece, creating an anomaly that Curt would consider an error.

Most of his works receive a finish coat of wipe-on polyurethane, except for oily woods, for which he



A 420-piece hollow form from the Wind River Series

uses Waterlox. He decries segmented turners who ignore the grain directions on their works, because he believes the pieces will eventually self-destruct, bringing an end to any possible future purchases of segmented work by the owner.

Precision is Curt's holy grail, and

he pursues it with selfless determination, although he knows that it is, ultimately, an impossible goal.

A prominent quotation handwritten on the white plastic dust-collector pipe high on one wall reads, "Let the excellence of your work be your protest." It is by Bill Lane, from the book *The Walk* by Michael Card.

Curt copied it here after viewing a prominent exhibition of wood art that included several pieces that were so poorly executed that many artists were chagrined by their inclusion.

This hollow form offers nice contrast

Awe-inspiring

On the subject of art versus craft, Curt is adamant about the need for craftsmanship to be evident before any work could be considered art, yet he tends to think of himself as a craftsman instead of an artist.

Native American motifs account for some of Curt's designs, and when they do, he tries to remain faithful to the original tribal designs.

He considers his use of these age-old patterns to be homage to the people who formerly occupied these lands. His original designs tend towards a level of complexity that is awe-inspiring. ▶



Dance of the Bison, made from holly, pernambuco and wenge



As far as the East is From the West, koa, maple, wenge and pernambuco



The Gold of Cibola, made with 515 pieces



Bearclaw Series



Lightning Snake from Curt's Petroglyph Series

◀ Curt sells his work at shows and through galleries, including del Mano in Los Angeles. He supplements his artistic income with sales of instructional videos and DVDs that he and Wanda have produced. Curt has also designed and sells a set of aluminium precision setup blocks and various aluminium cone centres for tailstocks.

Wanda spearheads this part of the business, and is Curt's 'tech expert' when it comes to computers and such. She maintains their website, which features the tools videos, and classes.

Curt offers segmented-turning

classes in his studio, usually three or four students at a time for three days, and includes three meals a day for the students. Curt feels that sharing his hard-earned knowledge of segmentation has proven to be a learning experience in itself. He thinks it has been far more beneficial to his success than guarding his secrets could have been.

Constructing intricate segmented vessels does not take up all of Curt's time. His other hobbies past and present have included collecting Hot Wheels toys, model rocketry and growing roses.

Curt has taught at the Utah Woodturning Symposium, the American Association of Woodturners Symposium, and various chapters and clubs. His work may be found in many prominent collections. ■

Website

You can find out more about Curt Theobald and his work by visiting his website at www.curttheobald.com