



Master of Illusion

Regional artist Louis Towell creates 'baskets' through woodturning



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In the right hands, by the right people, for the right reasons, illusion is a delightful thing. For instance, when it comes to a news story, illusion has no place. At All. But when it comes to a block of wood, illusion turns a bowl into a basket that isn't a basket at all.

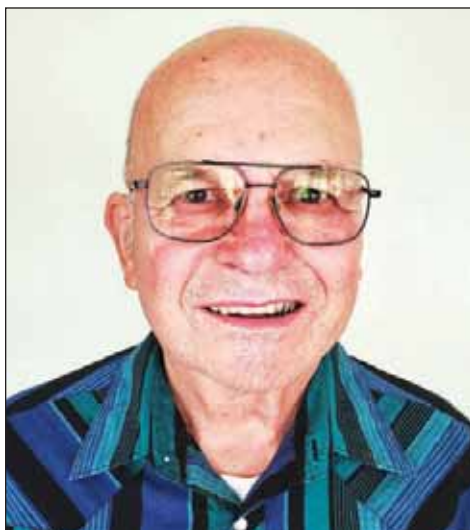
"They're called Basket Illusion Pieces," says Louis Towell, a woodworker who creates bowls, platters, vases, even pens turned on a wood lathe.

"They are wood-burned with a pyrography tool and embellished with acrylic paint. The results are single pieces of wood that appear to be woven, beaded baskets."

Highly complex and time consuming, basket illusion pieces start out as bowls turned on a wood lathe. While the piece rotates, Towell (whose name rhymes, appropriately, with bowl) shapes the horizontal grooves.

Afterwards, he burns on the vertical lines, one ridge at a time, by hand with the pyrography tool. What results is a series of squares or cells covering the entire surface of the bowl. He then maps out a design for the piece, using a software spreadsheet as a form of graph paper.

"I put in asterisks on the spreadsheet to mark the major elements of the design," the Yakima artist explains, "and from that I start painting the cells on the actual bowl. You have to know exactly how many cells surround the piece (usually it's 96), and then once you start painting, you have to be awful careful about counting — if you miss by one cell, you mess up everything. It's very ... well, the best word for that part of the process is trepidating. I don't think



Courtesy photos

"There are innumerable numbers of tree species to work with, and each piece has its own unique grain pattern and color," says woodworker Louis Towell. Across the page are several examples of his wood-turned "baskets."

that's an actual word, but it describes the feeling exactly."

Towell, who started seriously creating wood-turned art in 2000, had long been interested in illusion work but was daunted by the time required, as are many woodworkers, he adds.

"A lot of people are interested in it, but don't follow through because of that time factor," he says. "I myself started an illusion piece way back in 2009, but set it aside. Finally, in 2020, I pulled it out and finished it."

Pleased with the design and feel of

the finished piece, Towell put aside his misgivings about the time factor and leapt into basket illusion.

"It's very precise, but it's also a little by the seat of your pants," he observes.

A member of the Mid-Columbia Woodturners, Towell is receiving increasing requests from other woodworkers on the process. He is more than willing to share what he's learned, he says. The problem is distilling so much information and actual work into the three-hours or so allotted for a presentation.

"It really is time consuming," he says. "It's hard to condense and fit it all in."

The resulting artwork, however, is worth it — a wooden bowl that mimics the feeling and look of a woven basket, creating a fusion of medium that is unique, original and unexpected.

Sycamore, maple and walnut are three of Towell's favored woods with which to work, and while he does purchase material for his woodturning creations, he prefers to find someone who has a tree they are downing and glean from it.

"A friend of mine had a sycamore tree, and I have made bowls from that. I'll also use wood from my own yard. I'm always on the lookout for wood."

"It's serious challenge obtaining seasoned hardwood thick enough to make a piece of art. But wood is a great medium since it is so pleasant to touch and is very workable. It's fun to see what shapes can be made from each block of wood."

Growing up with a background in logging and road construction, Towell first used a wood lathe in high school wood shop in the early 1960s, but never used a lathe again until he bought an old one in the 1990s. He replaced it with a new model in 2000.

If You Go

Louis Towell is the featured Pacific Northwest Art Event artist at Wenaha Gallery, 219 E. Main St., Dayton, from April 26-May 23.

The gallery is open from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Information: 509-382-2124, art@wenaha.com and wenaha.com.

Upon retirement (he worked as an electrical engineer for Pacific Power and Light until 1992, then taught mathematics and business courses at various colleges as an adjunct faculty member until 2013) Towell immersed himself full time into woodworking art. He displays his work in various retail art galleries and at festivals, shows, and other sales events. Twice he has shown his art at the American Association of Woodturners national symposiums.

Each artwork, illusion piece or not, is as unique as the tree from which it derives, Towell says, and while the skill of the artist is a major factor in the finished artwork, the wood itself has say in what it eventually becomes.

"There are innumerable numbers of tree species to work with, and each piece has its own unique grain pattern and color: One never knows what pattern will be revealed while turning. The beauty of wood inspires me."

And, he hopes, inspires others as well.

• Carolyn Henderson is a freelance writer who co-owns Steve Henderson Fine Art and SteveHendersonCollections.com with her husband, Steve. She welcomes correspondence at Carolyn@stevhendersonfineart.com.

