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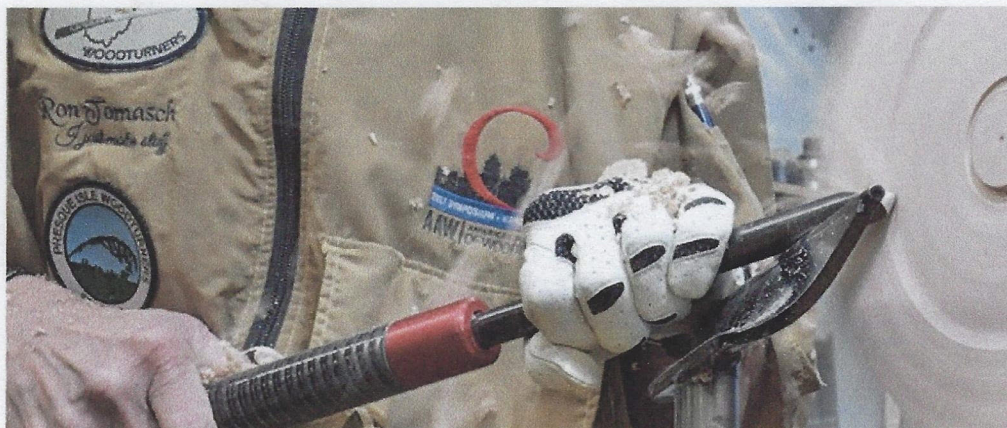
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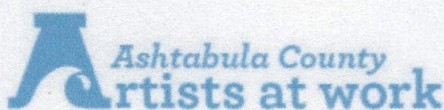
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Chipping away at retirement

Posted on February 13, 2018 by Carl in Arts & Culture, Ashtabula County People, Featured story // 1 Comment



For the artist, the road to perfection is littered with tests, failures and near-perfect pieces that admiring eyes never see.



Had you been in the Geneva workshop of woodturning artist **Ron Tomasch** the evening of February 7, you would have seen in the trash bin one half of a wooden cowboy hat with a broken top. The prior day, after Ron invested six hours of

lathe work into the piece, the hat's top suddenly snapped off as it spun on the lathe, sending the hat

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The Ashtabula Wave is a placemaking website for Ashtabula County, Ohio. We highlight the authentic stories of people, places, traditions and events that make our northeast Ohio, Lake Erie communities among the best places to live and work in the Midwest United States. Want to know more? Suggest a story? Help grow The Wave? Send an email.

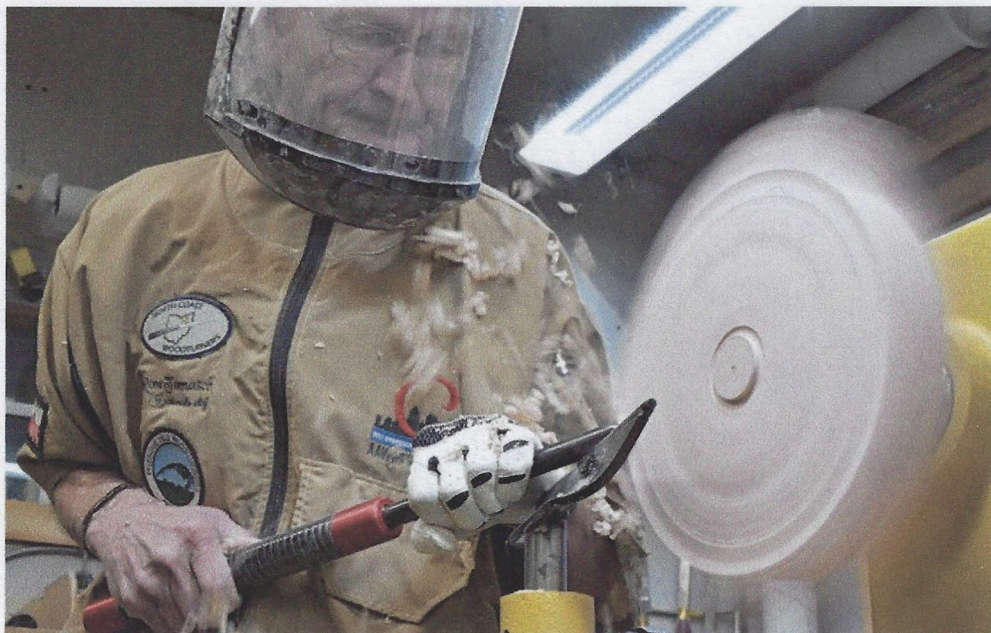
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flying toward Ron. The artist's chisel had removed a critical layer of wood around the top, the piece was ruined.

Ron took the "failure" in stride, walked across the workshop, flipped the switch on the band saw and made a longitudinal cut through the hat. The postmortem examination revealed that he still had a ways to go in hollowing out the object, but had misjudged the amount of material remaining at the top.

"Sometimes 'oops' things happen," Ron says. "I've had a couple of them where I punched through (the rotating wood with the chisel)."



Ron Tomash works on his new 38-inch lathe in his Geneva shop. The woodturner especially enjoys the challenge of hollow objects, such as hats and urns. Here, he's starting to hollow out what will be a shallow bowl.

He doesn't give up. Within minutes of having his day's work destroyed, Ron was in his truck headed to the tree trimmer's lot where he'd found the piece of ambrosia maple that he reduced to shavings and a topless hat. Working in hand-numbing cold, he cut two more chunks from the log of the freshly felled tree and prepared one of them for his lathe. The next morning, he was back in the shop, a wiser, more skilled woodturner determined to make a hat.



Ron Tomasch with one of the cowboy hats he turned on his lathes. He made this hat to fit him and uses it as a conversation starter when he goes out in public.

Turning heads with his work

Determination and a passion for challenge keep Ron on track as an artist. Although the 69-year-old woodturner has been turning since he was 8 years old, he neither tires of the hobby nor has learned all its tricks and intricacies.

As vice-president of the **North Coast Woodturners Association**, Ron has the pleasure of booking into the club's learning events top talent from the profession. Four to five times a year, he gets to meet and learn from professional turners, who sometimes visit his shop or allow him to turn in their shops.

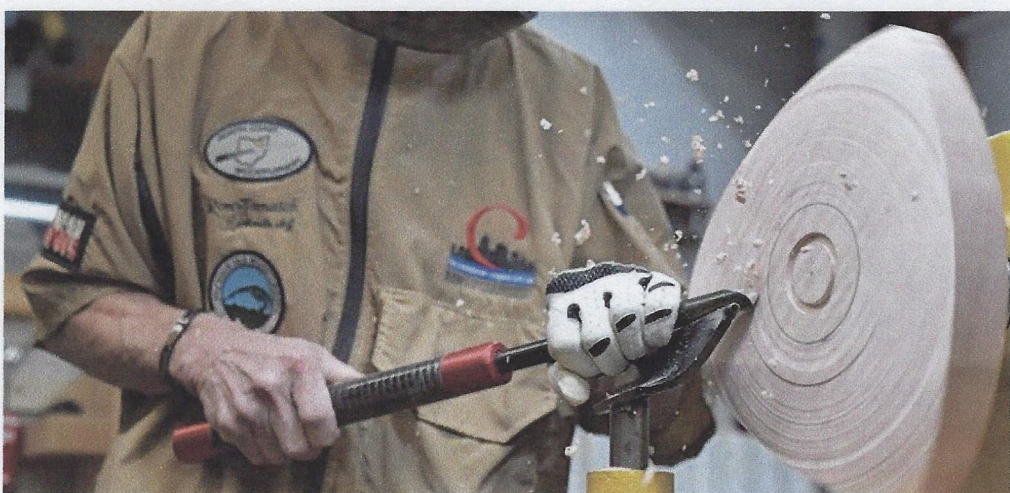
"I'm the one who gets to talk to all these guys," says Ron, who has lived in Geneva for the past four years.



Anchor, bevel and cut are the ABCs of the woodturner. Ron uses Thompson tools handmade by a woodturner friend, Doug Thompson, of North Olmsted and keeps them very sharp using metal grinding wheels.

The Olmsted Falls native came east following a chance meeting with Isabell Quayle, a retired teacher and licensed drug and alcohol rehabilitation counselor who lives in Geneva. Ron calls Isabell his "girlfriend." They met at Geneva-on-the-Lake, a place Ron once frequented as a young man, but had not been back to for many years when he decided to revisit one summer day several years ago. He and Isabell struck up a conversation, exchanged cell phone numbers and parted ways. A short distance west of Geneva, Isabell called Ron and asked if he'd like to meet her mother. He turned around, came back for introductions, and the conversation continues.

"We decided we'd get together, and I knocked down her garage and built this," Ron says of the 850-square-foot workshop he built behind Isabell's house on Geneva's east side. The shop is equipped with a dust collection system and all the comforts of home, right down to a large freezer. But the freezer does not store food; it has been cleverly repurposed as a drying kiln for the lumber Ron turns on the three lathes in his shop.



Chips fly as Ron turns the base of what will become a bowl.

"A woodworker can never have enough tools," says Ron, a statement reinforced by the plethora of power tools, many of which run on 220-volt current, and neatly arranged hand tools strategically placed, neatly ordered, throughout the shop. The attention to safety, lighting, convenience and efficiency evident

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throughout the shop bear witness to Ron's penchant for perfectionism and professionalism in all he creates here.

Turning since childhood

Ron credits his late father for introducing him to wood turning.

"I grew up with three sisters, so my Dad made a lathe out of wood and I would go the basement and make a few things on it," he says. "But I wasn't very good at it."

Ron devoured mechanical arts classes in junior high school and honed his lathe skills in senior high. Marriage, children and the responsibilities that come with those commitments kept him away from lathes for many years. His journey back began when he was a truck driver; Ron made a delivery to a store that sold lathes, and when he learned that the inventory on the delivery dock was for an upcoming sale, he purchased one of the lathes before it even entered the store.

The tool remained boxed in his basement for three years before he finally had time to delve into it. He joined the North Coast Woodturners group 10 years ago and began accumulating the tools, skills and friendships that would enrich his retirement years. In the process, the basement workshop of his house in Cleveland became very cramped.

Fate seemed to be at work for Ron in meeting Isabell, who just happened to have the old garage that needed to be razed. Isabell introduced him to the community during a Grape Jamboree, where decided to get a booth and attempt to sell some of his creations.

Ron says the most common question he heard was "what do you make?" And after hearing it perhaps one too many times, Isabell just blurted out "He just makes stuff."

"And I thought, 'That's a pretty catchy title,'" Ron says.



Ron with his booth at Bridge Street Art Works, where he sells his hats, urns, bowls, pepper mills and other turned work.

I Just Make Stuff—especially hats

And so it is that the license plate on Ron's pickup is "I J M S" and "I Just Make Stuff" is on his T-shirt and business card.

He makes items that challenge and enlarge his skills as a woodturner, items that beg to be released from a block of potential firewood, and functional items, like pet urns, pepper mills and, yes, wood cowboy hats.

He makes the hats in both miniature and full-size incarnations, like the one Kentucky woodturner made for President George W. Bush, NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt Jr. and singer Charlie Daniels.

Ron credits JoHannes Michelsen, a Manchester, Vt., wood turning professional, with originating the process of transforming an 80-pound chunk of wood into a hat that weighs less than a pound and is 3/32s of an inch thick in most places. Ron discovered the project about a year ago, purchased an instructional DVD made by Michelsen and got hands-on instruction from Columbus, Ohio, woodturner/firefighter Mike Trucco. Ron says Trucco told him to expect lots of failures if he was serious about learning the techniques and skills demanded by the project.



Ron Tomasch deep into the most challenging part of making a cowboy hat from wood: hollowing out the inside of the hat to 3/32-inch thickness. Alas, this particular hat broke during this delicate stage of the work.

On a scale of 1-10 in difficulty, the cowboy hat rates a 10, says Ron. He has no idea how many woodturners are regularly turning out hats, but this much he knows: Any turner who is successful at the project also has a string of failures behind the finished product.

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In the year he's been turning the projects, Ron has turned 15 successfully. "But 12 of them failed. Most of them kept cracking," he says.

Conventional, very sharp carving chisels are used to chip away at the wood block from which the hat is released. Ron prefers Thompson tools (<http://thompsonlathetools.com/>), both for their quality and the fact they are "made by a woodturner for woodturners" in North Olmsted. Ron sharpens the tools numerous times throughout the six to seven hours of turning that are required to reduce the block to a hat.

In the process of turning a hat, several garbage bags full of wood shavings are produced. The shavings pile up to knee-high and coat the hand tools on the walls with aromatic streamers. Because the wood must be carved when wet to take advantage of its pliable nature in that state, water drops fly off the log and Ron wears a face mask to protect his vision. Although it has its hazards, Ron prefers to work with freshly harvested wood, as in within 24 hours of being felled, in order to have the higher moisture content in the wood.

There comes a point when Ron must hollow out the inside of the hat to a depth of 3/32nds of an inch. Many things can go wrong at this point and reduce the unfinished piece to firewood. While he can and does use calipers to gauge his progress, Ron finds that shining a bright light source through the translucent wood provides a good visual guide.

Once the hat is successfully turned, the round opening must be compressed to an oval and the flat brim pulled upward to create the characteristic form of a cowboy hat. The wet hat is placed into a custom-built jig that allows Ron to slowly add compression to the side and flex the brim using strong rubber bands. The process continues over 24-36 hours, during which time the wood can suddenly crack. Ron's been known to sleep with the jig next to his bed so he can get up every so often and add more pressure to the piece.

"Once it is dry, completely dry, it will never lose its shape," Ron says.

Ashtabula County Artists at Work: Ron Tomasch



Finishing takes days because Ron is as meticulous about the smoothness, uniformity and quality of every piece he produces.

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"Most people get to the point where they don't like to do the sanding. I don't mind it. I want my finishes to be perfect," he says.

Time is perfection's currency. Ron says it will take him 40 to 50 hours of work to produce one hat, which he sells at Bridge Street Art Works for \$250.00. The artist doesn't even want to do the math to figure out his hourly wage.

"I do not make a profit," he says. "What I make from selling this stuff, I use to buy more stuff to turn things with."

"This is a hobby for me," he adds. "It's not to make a living. It's a hobby I've done my whole life."

Ron's work is for sale at Bridge Street Art Works, 1009 Bridge St., Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio.

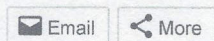
Reach him by email at ron@ijustmakestuff.com, or 216-438-1003.



Ron makes full-size hats, as well as these "miniature" versions.

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