

Force of nature

Guest Editor Kurt Hertzog talks with world-renowned woodturner Mike Mahoney



There are only a handful of truly famous bowl turners. If I were to say Mike Mahoney, many would agree he is one of that handful. I selected Mike to be my featured turner not only because of his excellence in bowl turning, but because of his teaching abilities. Mike is one of the most talented turning instructors there is. His skills at teaching and his willingness to share everything he knows with anyone willing to learn is incredible. I treasure him as a friend and use this opportunity to showcase his work.

Main image 'This is my fire pit. Having a lot of forest to keep clear requires me to burn debris all winter. I burn from early November to early May. This stays hot at all times in the winter unless it is raining' **1** Eight-piece nested bowl set. Boxelder burl, 12 x 9in **2** Mormon poplar set, 23 x 8in



Tell us about your background and training

I learned to turn in college while pursuing a teacher's credential. I was making work to sell at local art/craft shows. I attended my first Utah Symposium in the '80s and met Dale Nish, Richard Raffan, Vic Wood, Allen Batty, Ray Key and others to give me inspiration and techniques. Eventually, the shows I attended were the elites of the Craft Business. I then ventured into a wholesale craft market called The Buyer's Market for American Craft. I attended this show for three years, which provided me with over a hundred buyers (galleries, catalogue companies and gift shops) that consistently bought my work for 25 years.

What led you to woodturning?

After getting my teacher's credential, I was far along with sales so I decided self-employment was best for me.

How do you like to work, what are your favourite tools and why?

In the early days I would work seven days a week to keep up with sales. Eventually, I made myself work a regular five-days a week schedule. I work with production in mind, doing many multiples of things and rarely a one-off object

Describe your workshop – what is the set-up and how long have you been there?

Twelve years. I currently work outdoors since I live in a very mild climate. That way I can let the dust blow in the wind. I use three lathes – a bowl production lathe, a vacuum lathe for removing tenons and a spindle lathe for smaller work.

How does your design process work?

I work with proportion foremost. Since I am wanting my buyers to use my work, I want the pieces to be easy to pick up and clean. For bowls I work in a 1/3rd, 2/3rds idea. 12in bowls would have 4in sides and bases. For hollow work I would design from cubes 12 x 12 x 12in, for instance.

Which woods do you most like working with and why?

I have always worked with trees that I can readily get from a local source. Since I live in Northern California, I use claro and English walnut, white oak, bay laurel, and my favourite coastal redwood. I buy boxwood and African blackwood for contrast woods to make threaded lids on my urns.

3 Six-piece madrone burl set, 8 x 7in 4 A double human urn. Redwood burl with African blackwood threaded lid 5 Mormon poplar end-grain kitchen set

6 24in white oak burl bowl Background 'Cedar barn built by timber on the farm also where I work'



What sort of finishes do you prefer and why?

For utility bowls, plates, and platters I would always use a penetrating oil (high acid crude walnut oil). This allows my customers to replenish the piece when warranted. For art work and urns I would use a polymerising oil (a blend of polyurethane, BLO, and mineral spirits). This is allowed to dry for a couple of days and then I spray a single coat of lacquer. Then the piece is scrubbed with #0000 steel wool and paste wax and buffed with a paper towel.

What inspires you and where do you get your ideas from?

Simplicity. I have always been attracted to figured wood. I think you must keep the form simple when working with figured wood. When I have wood that is relatively plain, I would make larger objects with it.

What is your favourite piece you have worked on and why?

I was asked to make a piece for a Smithsonian show that was themed The Great Barrier Reef. I made a nested set of bowls with madrone burl that resembled a giant clam.

What is the most challenging piece you have worked on, and why?

During a period in my career, I was pushing the limits with nesting bowls – not working bigger but smaller. I made a 12-piece nested set from a piece of jarrah burl that was 11 x 7in.

How have the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns affected your work, and do you think any of the impact will be long term?

I kept extremely busy during this time roughing bowls and doing remote demonstrations for clubs around the world. Sometimes twice a day I would do these remote demos. I think remote teaching will continue since it allows for a broader audience.

What are your aspirations for the future?

Less physical work and more recreation.

What do you do when you're not woodturning?

My farm requires a lot of my time – roughly four to five hours a day. I try to play tennis twice a week and play monthly in tournaments.

7 Mike pauses during his AAW demo to offer some key points on the McNaughton coring tools 8 Bringing in logs to be cut 9 Three types of bowl blanks ready to core – bastone, English, and California walnut 10 Living on opposite coasts of the US, Mike and Kurt usually only see each other at the major turning events 11 Mike's demos at the Chattanooga AAW Symposium were professionally recorded for online viewing 12 Prepping a white oak bowl

13 Commission burial urns – 'I typically like to have many on hand to give my buyers a choice. These will all be fitted with African blackwood lids' 14 Five-piece maple set, 22 x 9in Background 'Burn pile behind my barn burning forest scrap'



PHOTOGRAPHS 7, 10 & 11 KURT HERTZOG

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