



Alan Carter in profile

Alan Carter was a professional artist and furniture maker before he discovered woodturning, Tegan Foley finds out more about his contemporary sculptural forms

I recall first seeing Alan's work after Mark returned from last year's AAW Symposium with one of his business cards. I got in touch with Alan and quickly organised a 20 minute interview with him. I would describe Alan's work as reminiscent of the Art Deco period, as he uses a lot of classic shapes within his work, which is mainly sculptural, but this is also very much contemporary.

Alan's background concerns both furniture and painting, so I was interested to find out how he made the leap into turning. I started at the beginning and asked Alan to tell me about his background, which, according to Alan is a long story.

Background

He starts by explaining that he developed a strong interest in classical music and jazz while in high school and, unknown to me, he holds a music degree from Indiana University: "Upon graduation with no performing jobs to be found – the Chicago Symphony wasn't hiring just then – and with a wife and daughter in tow, I ended up in the management programme of K-Mart, about as far away from music as it could be. After seven years of unloading trucks and cleaning grease traps, and acquiring a son along the way, I decided to become an artist and spent the next 22 years painting landscapes and the urban environment in a highly realistic style." Alan goes on to explain that in 1999, he hit a sort of creative wall and shifted his attention to furniture design. He spent 10 years designing and building contemporary furniture and accessories, and in 2009, he discovered woodturning.

Alan explains that it was the making of handles, which needed to be turned, that introduced him to the turning element. He tells me that he had become somewhat disenchanted with the furniture business and started thinking about other creative

outlets: "Around mid 2009 I decided to give turning a try and if I was going to learn how to turn, I was going to really learn. I bought a decent lathe, some tools and sharpening equipment, and a bunch of turning blanks. As everyone who turns knows, that was it. I was hooked," he explains.

Inspiration

Alan describes his work as contemporary and he explains that he looks at things from an artist's point of view – a result of all those years painting and making furniture: "I'm interested in the visual impact of a piece as an artistic statement and think in those terms rather than its functionality. Most of my work involves support structures to elevate and emphasise the turning itself, so design is an essential part of my methodology."

When I asked Alan what inspires his turnings, he replies that just about anything can give his work impetus from almost everything he sees around him: "The amazing creative work being done in this field is a huge influence. I try to take something from almost every piece I see and throw it in with everything else. Architecture is a big magnet due to the years I spent photographing city scenes for my paintings. My furniture design years have had a lot to do with the way I construct pieces. I like Art Deco and Asian design, although my knowledge of either is sorely lacking," he tells me.

Changing styles

So, how has Alan's work changed over the years? From looking at items of furniture he made from 1999-2009, I can see the relationship between his pieces of work and the contemporary style is definitely incorporated into both of these mediums. Alan explains that at the beginning, he kept his work very simple and much more traditional: "I was influenced

and emulated the few names I was familiar with, mainly Cindy Drozda, and as a result, much of my early work was derivative and lacking a cohesive style. As I gained skill and confidence, I began to explore the spatial relationships between round and flat and started doing the suspended pieces. These let me explore the underside of a turning as well as the top. Now I'm experimenting with cut off parts of turnings, piercing, texturing and so on."

With this in mind, how does Alan describe his style now that he has progressed and developed? The three words that Alan uses to sum up his style are unique, timeless, and mesmerising: "The reality is that I consider my work contemporary sculpture with the turned elements the focal point," he finishes.

Workshop

This is one of my favourite areas to



LEFT: 'Long & Lean,' figured maple (*Acer campestre*), African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*), blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), 230mm (9in) wide x 735mm (29in) high x 150mm (6in) dia.



explore, as every turner has a different workshop, depending on the style of work they undertake and obviously, how much space they have. Given Alan's background in painting and furniture making, I wondered how this would dictate how he uses the space and which pieces of equipment he owns. Alan tells me that he has a good sized workshop due to his furniture making days, and in addition to his Powermatic lathe and requisite bandsaw, he has several of the standard woodworking machines – table saw, joiner, planer, etc. – that come in very handy for the work he does: "I have enough room that I can spread things out and have several projects going on at the same time. I also have a small spray booth with an explosion proof fan that lets me spray lacquer without the fumes melting my lungs. One of the nicer features is a plywood floor instead of concrete. I'm sure I've saved the cost of the floor many times over from dropping tools and things that didn't break on impact," he tells me.

I then asked Alan about the specific tools he uses, particularly those in his workshop which he couldn't do without. Alan says that since he's always trying out new ideas and experimenting with different techniques, he doesn't really have any must-have special tools: "I use a set of homemade callipers that can get into tight spaces to measure wall thickness and my workbench has a bunch of slots cut

"I have enough room that I can spread things out and have several projects going on at the same time"

LEFT: 'Fandango,' figured maple (*Acer campestre*), walnut (*Juglans nigra*), 280mm (11in) wide x 735mm (29in) high x 90mm (3½in) dia. This piece reminded Alan of the fans Flamenco dancers use

BELOW: 'Half Moon Bay,' figured maple (*Acer campestre*), jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*), wenge (*Millettia laurentii*), 405mm (16in) wide x 380mm (15in) high x 75mm (3in) dia.



in it to aid in clamping glue-ups. I also have a homemade jig to accurately drill holes in pieces still mounted on the lathe. This is important as my suspended vessels require precisely drilled holes for the supporting pins, he tells me. Other than that, he uses pretty much the standard assortment of tools, chucks, measuring devices, etc. that everyone else uses.

Now that I had a better idea of what tools Alan uses to make his pieces, I wanted to ask him typically, how long one of his pieces take to complete. All of Alan's pieces look incredibly intricate with texturing and piercing detail, and he explains that he usually works on more than one piece

at a time, or at least starts a new one before the previous one's done due to final details, applying the finish, etc. "Larger, more involved pieces can take two to three weeks or more, small ones maybe a day or two spread out over several days. It's really the degree of detail and the extent of the supporting structures that drive the time frames," he tells me.

Work ethos

When I asked Alan about his typical work routine, he explains that he has a fairly consistent routine of a few hours in the morning, lunch, and several hours in the afternoon: "Nights are usually spent online surfing turning sites, working on my website, marketing my work (or at least trying to) and networking in the turning world. I've begun doing demonstrations and classes at woodturning clubs around the country and also at some retail outlets. It's a great learning experience when you try to show others what you know," he says.

With these learning experiences in mind, I was intrigued to ask Alan where he sees his career heading. Does he have any master plans or is he happy with how his career is panning out? He tells me that he's very

excited about taking his work in new directions, bumping up to the next level both technically and artistically: "As my skills and confidence grow, I start exploring different ways to express myself. I don't know how the work will evolve, but I'm looking forward to finding out.

In terms of highs and lows, Alan explains that thankfully, he hasn't experienced too many of these in his turning career so far: "I've been learning so much in the past couple of years that sheer momentum is keeping me pumped up. I've been fortunate to have my work well received by other turners, tough critics all, and receive exposure in the woodturning press, such as *Woodturning* magazine. I'm getting offers to do demos and classes at woodturning clubs around the country. My biggest high to date is being invited to demo at the AAW Symposium in St. Paul this year." Of course, every time a piece fails to live up to expectations or decides it's had enough and jumps off the lathe, this brings Alan down a bit. He tells me that he gets frustrated when his ideas don't pan out or when his skill level isn't sufficient to make them work. Thankfully, he recognises that this is temporary, though.

I wanted to ask Alan how turning



ABOVE: 'Split bowl vessel,' African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*), maple (*Acer campestre*), holly (*Ilex spp*), 180mm (7in) wide x 63mm (2½in) dia. This is Alan's entry in the 'Turning 25' exhibit at the AAW symposium in June, 2011. The top lifts off to reveal a couple of little surprises

LEFT: 'Proud Mary,' figured maple (*Acer campestre*), bubinga (*Guibourtia demeusei*), blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), ebonised oak (*Quercus robur*), 280mm (11in) wide x 735mm (29in) high x 90mm (3½in) dia. For some reason, the song Proud Mary kept running through Alan's head when he made this piece. Something about "rollin' on the river"



compares to the other creative endeavours he has tried. Many turners can't claim to have the luxury of being gifted both artistically in terms of their painting ability as well as that of being creative on the lathe.

He explains that the best thing for him is the thrill he gets when a piece comes out better than he envisioned, or when a new idea takes hold and he's able to translate that vision into reality: "I also get excited when I look at a piece of raw wood and get a little epiphany about its future."

In terms of promotion, I know that Alan has his own website, which I have perused extensively, but how else does he get his name out there? He tells me that, in his own words, he's been shamelessly sticking his nose in wherever he can. He recently revamped his website to make it easier to navigate and show the work better, and he's constantly networking and contacting woodturning clubs to do demos and classes and that's starting to pay off: "I have work in several galleries and am always on the lookout for more. I also send ideas for articles and features to the woodturning press, and am having some success with that. I'm trying to work out an overseas demo and workshop trip, but that'll take some time to materialise. And I tell anyone within earshot how cool woodturning really is," he explains.

The future

The one thing that strikes me about Alan is his attitude towards turning

and the pieces he creates. I am struck by his positivity and the way in which he actively puts himself out there – he doesn't just sit there and wait for people to come to him. He is also clearly passionate about what he does and wants to further himself. All in all, these elements are all great ingredients for success. So, what are Alan's aims and aspirations for the future? "Beyond supreme domination of the woodturning world, I just want to create interesting dynamic works of art. Pieces that will cause people to stop and think and see woodturning in a new and different way. It may be an unobtainable goal, but it's definitely worth reaching for." ●

1. Use a contour gauge to see what the inside of a bowl shape really looks like

2. Wipe on some mineral spirits to see what a piece will look like with a finish on it. You can also wipe it on raw wood to see if two or more different species will work together

3. Small delicate pieces are easier to finish on the lathe before parting off. If you use a wipe on finish, use a paper towel, not a cloth that can get caught and break the piece or something more valuable



LIKES & DISLIKES

Likes:

- Variable-speed on a lathe is essential for me
- Discovering a potential design idea by just looking at a new piece of wood
- The way technology is advancing woodturning at an astounding rate

Dislikes:

- Sweeping up all the shavings and cleaning them off everything within 5ft of the lathe
- The way technology is making too many new tools and gadgets available that keep draining my bank account. No will power, I guess

CONTACT DETAILS

Email: apcarter@sbcglobal.net Website: www.alancarterstudio.com