

20 minutes with Alan Carter

Alan Carter used to be a contemporary furniture maker, he now makes beautiful sculptural forms, Tegan Foley spends 20 minutes finding out more about this talent

You originally built custom contemporary furniture and accessories, what made you decide to explore woodturning?

Prior to my years as a furniture designer, I was an artist painting urban landscapes in a highly realistic style. Although I had experienced success with the furniture, I was looking for a way to get back to my artistic roots, making pieces that were based on a more sculptural aesthetic and less on functionality.

Your work is very sculptural with clean lines and colours, where does your inspiration come from?

Not to sound like a cliché, but my inspiration comes from pretty much everywhere. My years painting and studying the urban environment have had a big influence and many of my pieces have an architectural feel to them. Painting informed my sense of colour, composition, balance, focal points etc. Designing furniture taught me a lot about the importance of spatial relationships and how different parts of a piece interact. Turning is very organic by default, so elements derived from natural forms find their way into the work.

Generally, what is your favourite timber or material to work with?

I don't really have a favourite. I tend to go with more highly figured woods for the turning itself, using

simpler, straight-grained pieces for the support structures, thus emphasizing the turning. Sometimes, though, a plain looking piece of wood with great colour will be my choice.

There is quite a variation in size between the various pieces you turn – what is your favourite vessel to make?

Again, I don't have a favourite. The pieces are driven by either a rough sketch or by a particular chunk of wood. I do a lot of hollow forms and for some reason I do a lot of pieces that are wide and fairly short. That shape seems to lend itself to a number of different design possibilities.

What do you see yourself doing in 5 years' time?

Who knows? I'm doing things differently now than I did two years ago and despite a sort of long term vision of the future, it keeps changing. I think I know where it's all headed and then it changes direction. I try to keep it all very open-ended and let it lead me where it wants.

You sell your work through an online studio, does this method work well for you?

It's been a little slow, but then everything in the arts is right now. This is still a fairly new venture for me and it takes time to get the word out. I did quite well marketing my furniture online,

so I think it'll eventually catch up with the turning. I've been networking a lot with other artists, publications, groups like the AAW etc. to get my name spread around. I'm also working with several galleries.

How long, typically, does it take you to finish one of your sculptural pieces?

I usually have an overlap with two or three pieces going on at the same time, depending on how involved they are. A major piece, one with several supporting element, finials, hidden containers etc. can take 2-3 weeks of actual working time. Smaller, simpler ones a day or two.

In your opinion, which three pieces of equipment in your workshop could you not live without?

I'm tempted to say a first aid kit but so far, I've not had a real need for one. Safety is rule No.1 after all. Of course the lathe is top of the list. I use a bandsaw quite a bit, as much for shaping support pieces as for rounding off turning blanks. I also use a mitre saw extensively.

What is your favourite woodturning tool?

I rely heavily on Easy Wood Tools for both rough and some finish turning.

BELOW: 'The Burl Triumphant,' boxelder (*Acer negundo*) burl, wenge (*Millettia laurentii*), brass rod, 610mm (24in) high x 255mm (10in) wide x 125mm (5in) dia.



What book and what music are you currently into?

I was a music major in college – bass trombone – so I listen to a lot of classical and jazz. I like the big orchestral works of Mahler, Strauss, Vaughn Williams, of course etc. and the “cool” jazz school of Kenton and Brubeck, as well as several dozen others.

What do you think the future holds for turning?

It's very exciting. When you look at what's being done by so many creative people, it's just mind boggling. As more people become involved, I think it'll become even more amazing.

Which woodturners do you most admire?

I'm a big fan of Binh Pho, Allain Mailland, Joey Richardson, Cindy Drozda, Malcolm Tibbetts;



LEFT: 'Coming Full Circle' figured maple (*Acer campestre*), jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*), Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*), brass pins, 330mm (13in) high x 305mm (12in) wide x 180mm (7in) dia.

really anyone who pushes the envelope and moves woodturning forward. It has to have artistic as well as technical merit and the aforementioned artists definitely achieve that end. I could add a lot more, but space doesn't allow for it.

Tell us about the piece you are currently working on.

I'm working on a triangular shaped vessel that'll be suspended between two diagonal supports. It has a very strong Art Deco design and was inspired by an Art Deco lamp I saw on a website somewhere.

If you could give one bit of advice to someone starting out turning, what would it be, and why?

Don't be afraid to experiment. Once you're comfortable with the tools and the turning process take some classes and join a local woodturning club, and keep your tools sharp! Try some new ideas out of your comfort zone. The worse that can happen is you'll end up with a “design opportunity” because you mis-cut something, but you'll learn from it and it'll make the next piece that much better. ●

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ABOVE: 'The Secrets Within,' eucalyptus burl, ebony (*Diospyros spp.*), Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*), maple (*Acer campestre*), 230mm (9in) high x 255mm (10in) wide x 255mm (10in) dia.