

How to turn wood into art

By Leon Louw

For woodturner Carel van der Merwe, every piece of wood tells a different story.

Carel was introduced to woodwork in school, and it has, since then, become a lifelong passion.

Carel, how did you become involved in woodturning and creating these fantastic pieces of art?

I am a trained electronic engineer and lived in Pretoria all my life. This is where I met At Smit who is one of the pioneers of woodturning in South Africa. My first training in woodturning was with At, who started to plant the seeds of artistic woodturning. I was fascinated by the natural beauty and flaws in the wood and by creating something unique and different every time. One of the highlights for me was certainly training with Nick Agar of the UK, who is one of the leading artistic woodturners in the world.

What role does wood play in your life and where did your passion for wood begin?

I grew up on a farm where I was introduced to, and learnt to, identify the different types of trees by my father. Another big influence in my life was the well-known woodturner Butch Smuts. He taught me to always look for the unique elements in pieces of wood, which may not be visible at first. These surprises that you find in wood, together with the possibilities of what you can create with these unique elements, almost became an addiction. Every piece of wood tells a story and can be used. I have even used firewood on the lathe before.

What is your favourite wood to use in turning and how and why does it differ from other types of wood and timber?

Wood with natural defects, or wood with 'burl' growth is what I normally look for. 'Burl' growth is when the grain of the wood has grown into a deformity. I prefer using indigenous South African trees, and normally use what is left after a fire or a big storm. Root 'burls' from burnt trees are of particular interest as they have natural defects, which can be used to create stunning pieces.

What is the big secret of turning deformed wood into a piece of art?

The defects in the wood all tell a story. The secret is to find a way to let the wood talk for itself. It sometimes takes weeks of exploring different options before putting a piece on the lathe. One has to be patient and at some stage the idea will take shape.

How many different techniques can one use on the lathe?

The great thing about woodturning is that there are so many possibilities that you will always find something that will interest you. Many woodturners prefer to make utilitarian items like pens, salad bowls, pepper mills, table legs and so on. Although these items can also be enhanced with artistic elements, it is normally not the main purpose.

Up to about ten or fifteen years ago, these were the main items produced on a lathe. In the past few years there has been a major drive towards creating non-functional artistic pieces and in many cases, it is substantially enhanced with carving, texturing, piercing, colouring and even resin and metal inlays.

How important is the lathe that you use, and what should potential buyers of lathes be aware of before buying a new piece of equipment?

Starting out, one should be aware that the lathe should suit the needs of what you want to turn, but a set of good quality chisels is also required. It is further important to be able to sharpen the chisels yourself. While turning an item, it may be necessary to sharpen your chisels a few times.

In many cases I turn large items which are also unbalanced when I start turning them. I therefore have a very heavy lathe with a large capacity and electronic variable speed. For safety reasons it is important to easily adjust the speed to suit the item that you are turning.

WHICH TECHNICAL ASPECTS of the lathe is important?

A cast iron lathe bed is heavier and more stable. The wood is fixed on the lathe by means of a self-centering chuck. A good quality chuck is therefore very important to ensure the wood will not come loose while turning. Electronic speed control is another





important factor to regulate the speed while turning and to ensure that a safe turning speed is not exceeded.

Where do you normally source your wood from?

Jacaranda is freely available in Pretoria, especially during the rainy season. I know a few tree-fellers who will contact me when they have cut down a unique tree. Scarce root burls like 'Hairy Fingerleaf' and 'Skunkbush', I mostly get from farmers. Because I am always looking for wood with defects, I normally do not buy wood from timber merchants.

What tools do you use for creating your art?

Several woodturning chisels are required when turning an item. The tools depend on the piece you are creating. For bowls and hollow forms, which I do mostly, bowl gouges and hollowing gouges are required. Good quality high speed steel tools, which are regularly sharpened, are necessary to obtain clean and safe cuts.

You have also become an expert on these tools, which brands of tools are available and which ones would you suggest using and why?

High quality turning tools will last a lifetime and I always recommend buying one of the brands manufactured in Sheffield, United Kingdom. The brands available in South Africa are, Hamlet, Crown, Simon Hope and Robert Sorby. They are all made of high quality high-speed-steel. Sharpened and used correctly, they are not only safe to use but will give an excellent cutting finish. Blunt tools need force to cut, which makes them inherently unsafe.

How do you go about turning a piece of wood into a bowl?

Turning bowls is my passion. You orientate the wood in the lathe to have a straight top (which is for example suitable for salad bowls) or the wood can be orientated to follow the natural profile of the trunk of the tree. This is called a live or natural edge.

I use the latter method as it creates better effects. You would first turn the outside profile of the bowl and then turn it around in the lathe to do the inside. Apart from mostly turning natural edge bowls, I prefer to turn the wood while it is still wet. It turns easier,

it is not as dusty, and one can predict the warping of the bowl while drying. This is then used as one of the artistic elements in creating my pieces.

What products do you have available for purchase?

I specialise in all the tools needed for woodturning. Based on experience I have sourced some tools that are hard to find but important for the woodturner. These can be found on my website (<https://www.creativeturning.co.za/index.html>).

I sell my artistic woodturnings mainly in galleries, but items can also be viewed in my shop.

You also present classes and woodturning courses?

It is extremely important to attend classes when you start with woodturning. Although woodturning is relatively safe, it is important to learn to use the tools and equipment correctly. The more you improve your skills, the more you will enjoy woodturning and your eyes will open to all the possibilities. During the classes you will also get advice as to what equipment is required to ensure

that you do not unnecessarily buy expensive equipment. It is possible to get some ideas on YouTube, but it is not a replacement for hands-on training and can also teach you wrong and dangerous habits. I offer three classes: Beginner, Bowl turning and an Advanced Course on hollow forms. With a limit of three students per class, it is possible to give sufficient attention to all the students. More details can be found on my website: <https://www.creativeturning.co.za/index.html>

What should aspiring woodturners be aware of, what are the challenges involved for someone who has just started, and how does one become a woodturner?

The biggest obstacle I find in my classes is impatience. Although it may only be a hobby, take time to develop your skills. Speak to experienced turners in your woodturning club, follow their advice. First get advice before you buy any equipment and do not try and create the ultimate masterpiece the first time you start a lathe.

Is there an association for people to join, that has information about the craft?

The best place to start is with the website of 'The Association of Woodturner of South Africa'. (<http://awsa.org.za/>). The website also has a list of the woodturning clubs in South Africa.

Are there any educational institutions or technical colleges where young people can learn a trade in woodturning?

Unfortunately, there is not a college or institute in South Africa where one can do a trade in turning wood, so my advice is to join a club near you. Woodturners are always keen to share their knowledge and experience. Many of the experienced members in the clubs also offer demonstrations and training sessions. 

