

CURT THEOBALD

Elements of a Balanced Life

Terry Martin

Curt Theobald will be a demonstrator at the 2016 AAW international symposium in Atlanta, Georgia, June 9-12, 2016. For more, visit woodturner.org.

The summer sky is crystal clear as I join the freeway traffic heading due north from Colorado to Wyoming. As I settle into the rhythm of mile-eating travel, the strip malls and warehouses gradually fall away and most of the heavy trucks bid the highway goodbye, following signs that echo frontier legends: Gold Hill, Fort Collins, Red Feather Lakes. I cross the state border into Wyoming and at Cheyenne I turn east, straight as an arrow toward Nebraska. Both land and sky open up, wider and wider, and at Pine Bluffs near the Nebraska border, I leave the highway to follow a narrow local road. I float on

a sea of grain that ripples in waves to the horizon. The neat white farmsteads are miles apart, while older farmhouses and silos lurch into decay, returning to the earth that nurtured them. For a country boy from flatland rural Australia, this is all so familiar. I slow down, open the window, and breathe my stress away.

I am still on my worldwide woodturning odyssey, and today I am visiting a friend, one of those good woodturners who so often generously share their lives. I am always drawn to sincerity, and the man I am visiting today, Curt Theobald, is among the most sincere I know. As I pull off the road to Curt's home, I can see the

homestead is substantial. Spreading out from the old farmhouse, a scattering of buildings tracks the history of the farm. Small wooden barns give way to enormous metal-framed machinery sheds, the bones of old harvesters fall into rust, and grain elevators reach into the sky. Curt and his wife Wanda come out to greet me.

When I first met Curt some years before, I was impressed with his thoughtful consideration of everything we talked about. Now, as we sit at the kitchen table, Curt tells me about his own life. Like most of us, his character was partly formed by where he grew up—the state with the lowest population and with a



Photo: Terry Martin

reputation for common decency. Curt was born in 1965 in Cheyenne, forty miles from the family farm where he now lives. His great-grandfather purchased the land in 1922 and it has been a wheat farm ever since. Curt describes how he used to help his father: “It was always work before play,” he says. “Farming is a tough way to live and every year is the same—plant in August, harvest the next July. It is an honorable profession, but I preferred helping my father with construction work, particularly the process of taking a pile of stuff and making something out of it.” I comment that it sounds like the work Curt is known for,

segmented turning. Curt always crafts his answers as carefully as he crafts his artwork, and he pauses before he replies: “It’s probably how I’m wired, but it also comes from watching my dad. When you are a farmer, you don’t pay somebody else to do something you can do. That’s just throwing money away.”

Beginnings

I was not surprised to hear that Curt’s interest in turning began in school woodshop, but the more I heard, the more I wondered why he persisted: “It wasn’t wonderful instruction. When I asked the instructor how to use the tools, he said, ‘Go try something and see what happens.’ It didn’t matter if it was a bowl gouge or a skew—it was used as a scraper. I used to scrape for two weeks and then sand for the rest of the semester! But I was inspired by a Dale Nish book, and I even made my first segmented bowl in high school.”

After high school, Curt went to college for two years. “At first, I thought I wanted to be a woodshop teacher,” he said. “I wanted to help students have a better experience than I had, but soon I started to think it wasn’t for me. I eventually realized college wasn’t providing the challenge I needed, so I left school and started construction work, building roads, bridges, anything involving concrete. It’s hard work,” he said, “and it took me all over the U.S. It’s a challenge taking simple pieces of two-by-four and plywood, then assembling them to withstand the pressures of concrete. You soon learn that no matter how many hundreds of thousands of yards of concrete you pour, the material still does what it wants to do and you can’t always predict how it will behave. That’s a challenge, but it’s also fun.”

Even though he became a foreman on major projects, after some years Curt decided the life of a wandering construction worker was not for him. Back in Cheyenne, he found work in a cabinet shop, building kitchen and commercial cabinets and even railroad

doors that were six feet wide and fourteen feet tall—“all kinds of assembly,” he notes. The urge to assemble was strong in Curt and his new job suited him well: “There was such satisfaction taking rough-cut lumber, planing it, milling it, running it through shapers, assembling with a variety of joints—all to *make something*. I worked there for several years and, just like on the construction work, I was always curious about why we were doing everything. I had learned to read blueprints for construction, so the transition to architectural blueprints was easy. The satisfaction for me still comes from either looking at a drawing or seeing something in my head and formulating plans.”

As is often the case, woodturning crept back into his life through the back door: “In the corner of the cabinet shop, there was an accumulation of unused machinery. I found a Shopsmith, bought it for \$75, and took it home—then smoked the motor that very night. I replaced the motor and began staying in the cabinet shop at the end of the day to glue pieces of wood together to take home and turn.” I asked Curt if he had ever tried turning solid wood: “I tried it and I just didn’t find it as interesting. I like the assembly process—gluing pieces of wood together to make different patterns.”

Curt left the cabinet shop in 1996 and started his own one-person, custom-cabinetry business: “I had more work than I could keep up with, so I worked like a madman for ten-and-a-half months a year, then I’d glue wood together and turn it to give myself a steady fix of that assembly process I enjoyed so much. I always thought it would be great to do it more than just six weeks a year.”

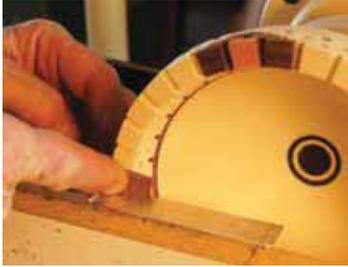
For years, Curt turned in isolation, scraping his work and unaware that turners across the country were developing and sharing skills. When he finally joined the Front Range Woodturners in Denver, it was an eye-opening experience: “When I first saw someone make a fifteen-foot shaving from wet wood, I sat with my jaw on my chest and wondered ▶

Curt's focus is always intense.

Photo: Terry Martin

"If a join is not as accurate as I can make it, I won't glue it together."

Photo: Terry Martin



Eye of the Storm, 2013, Various woods,
3½" x 16" (9cm x 41cm)

Collection of Ivins Memorial Hospital



Tablets of Stone, 2014, Italian
alabaster, wood, resin 2" x 4"
(5cm x 10cm)

how it was possible. Eventually, through watching and experimenting, I taught myself to be a proficient turner, and I still like to watch other people to learn."

During this time, Curt was renting a house in the country, and he used an unheated garage as a workshop: "It can get pretty cold in the winter, with temperatures reaching -20°." However, in 1996, when Curt's grandfather passed away, he moved to the family farm, and the extra space changed many things for him: "It's a perfect place for a segmented turner. I can have joiners, planers, table saws, miter saws, sanders—if I was still in a one-car garage, it would be very difficult." Curt was also able to dedicate a large, bright room entirely to photography.

Settling on a new life

Behind most of the successful wood artists, there is a supportive spouse, and Curt is quick to credit his wife: "Wanda is a schoolteacher and, as a supportive spouse, believed we could find a way for me to do what I loved to do. I started to think about making what inspired me, something that was artistic instead of functional and that people would pay me for. I began doing local craft shows in Cheyenne and I liked that a lot. I took the plunge into full-time turning work in 2002 after I got an EOG grant from the AAW for a weekend at David Ellsworth's. His willingness to share his experience made me think it might be possible for me."

Curt knew from the start it would be difficult to sustain a career just by selling objects, so as well as making and selling art, he teaches workshops at home, at craft schools, and at woodturning clubs. And he even has his own line of tools. "You have to diversify," he says. "I always thought it would have been nice if I'd had some instruction as a segmented turner, so I produced my own tutorial videos. The people who come to learn segmented turning are typically motivated by problem-solving—retired engineers, people with drafting backgrounds, and so on. It's fun to share the formulas and techniques

I use to solve segmenting problems. They may know more about math than I do, but I have the ability to apply my knowledge to the project at hand.”

At work

In the workshop, Curt is calm, methodical, and highly skilled. Much of his skill comes from the thousands of times an action is repeated, just like the master crafters of the past—the practiced flick of the wrist that comes from the body finding the best way to lighten the day’s work. He applies precise care to every step and has learned much over the years. He explained, for example, that a lot of segmented turners just glue up wood without thinking about grain orientation. “When things start to come apart, they don’t know why,” he says. “I soon figured out that you have to always align the grain in the same direction, never sidegrain to endgrain. I glue endgrain to endgrain, which is the weakest joint you can make—until you glue another layer of wood over the joint, like a brick wall, and then it becomes really strong. Precision is really important to me. If a join is not as accurate as I can make it, I won’t glue it together. I tell my students, ‘If you strive for perfection, it will be close enough; if you strive for close enough, it won’t be.’”

There is no doubting the quality of the workmanship and design of Curt’s early work, but in many ways it is not so different from what most segmenters make. Curt explains how he progressed from complex patterns to increasingly simple designs: “I think, early on, segmenters try to put in as many different species of wood as they can, with as many different tones and shades as possible. It’s easy in segmented turning to get too busy, but I think you have to go through that to get it out of your system.”

Sources of inspiration

Eye of the Storm grew out of the powerful environment of Curt’s homeland: “Living on the high prairie, it is easy to see the building thunderstorms a hundred miles off. You can see the transformation of colors and shapes as the storm builds. It’s

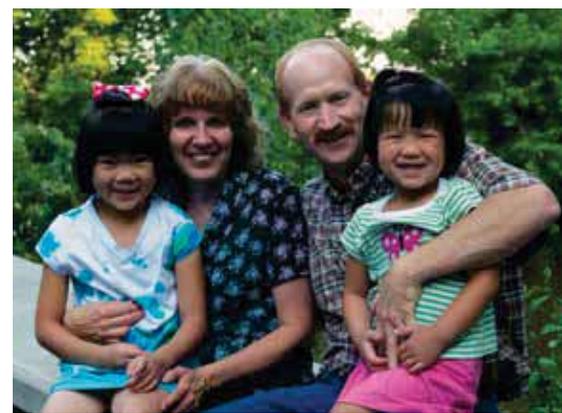
eerie, knowing the destruction that can be produced by the storm, yet strangely beautiful at the same time.”

Curt has always drawn on his deepest thoughts, and as a religious man, he often finds inspiration from the Bible: “I’ve often thought about Moses smashing the tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments when he returned from Mount Sinai. When I read that he was commanded to hew replacement tablets, I thought it would have been nice if he had some way to glue the broken pieces of stone back together.” *Tablets of Stone* is Curt’s response to this notion. “I’ve always turned stone,” he says. “In the early 1990s, David Nittmann gave me a piece of stone and said, ‘Epoxy it to a piece of wood and turn it to see what happens.’ The translucence of the stone was intriguing, and I continue to explore it.”

Like a lot of farmers’ boys, Curt had a pretty hard-nosed upbringing, but there is a deep well of gentleness in him. He takes in all the stray cats in the area, and when he walks around the farm, they all follow him. While

we sit and talk, the farm dog wanders in and sniffs Curt’s hand, and I am reminded of the other reason I traveled so far to visit Curt in his home. We have a shared experience far deeper than woodturning: Twenty-seven years ago, my wife and I adopted a Korean girl, and more recently Curt and Wanda adopted two girls from China. I understand the wonderfully complex and rewarding journey these two devoted parents are on, and most of Curt’s recent work has been inspired by this experience. Because Curt is a stay-at-home father, he has been very close to his daughters. “I spend the school year with the kids, and Wanda takes over in the summer during her time away from the classroom. I am wired for evenings and late nights, so after the kids are in bed I go back to the studio to get some work done.”

Curt’s *Family Series* reflects the complexity of his family life: “These pieces are based on the interlocking lattice-work found on doors and windows in China. The interlocking boxes in ▶



The Theobald family

Photo: Terry Martin

Family, 2009, Dyed wood, metal leaf, 10" x 5½" x 3½" (25cm x 14cm x 9cm)

The Chinese character signifies “family.”

Collection of John and Patti Quinn Hill



A Long Time Coming, 2012, Wood, glass, 42" x 22" x 18" (107cm x 56cm x 46cm)



(Top to bottom)
My Mothers, 2009, Dyed wood, largest piece is 6" (15cm) tall
Collection of Richard and Elizabeth Hogue

Father Daughter, 2008, Wenge, 6" (15cm) and 2 1/4" (6cm) tall
Collection of Dr. William and Susan Miller

Sisters, 2013, Wood, dichroic glass, 7" (18cm) diameter

these pieces show that although every family member is a separate person, our lives interlock and shape us all.”

“*My Mothers* is me sorting out the adoption process,” Curt explains, “and that includes the love that both mothers give our daughters. The tallest piece depicts my wife because she will have a daily influence on our daughters’ lives. The middle piece represents our daughters’ birth mothers. Even though they are on the other side of the world, without them we may not have been a family. The small piece representing our daughters has colors of both, just as their character will continue to be shaped and influenced by both of their mothers.”

I began working on *A Long Time Coming* during the wait for our second daughter, which at times seemed overwhelming. It was nearly three years of challenges, setbacks, and waiting. The scale of the piece presented immense challenges and echoes the magnitude of the adoption. The inside of the piece focuses on the ultimate goals—finish the piece and bring home the girl.”

As Curt describes, the intensity of the adoption process continues through into his developing relationship with his daughters: “The father-daughter relationship is ever-changing, just as a slight rotation of the two pieces in *Father Daughter* drastically changes the emotional feeling of the sculpture. Closeness may change to conflict. Endearment, unhappiness, adoration, and disrespect are a few of the feelings that are evoked when the viewer rearranges the sculpture.”

Curt is also a great observer of how his two children relate to each other, and he uses the Chinese concept of yin and yang, wherein opposites balance and create harmony. “My *Sisters* series represents our two daughters. Their personalities are very different, and each stretches the other, but, as different as they are, they can exist in harmony.”

Curt’s latest piece is worthy of a story all on its own. I suspect there has never been a piece of wood art like it. When I first saw it, I started to wonder just how it was made, but soon I realized that was irrelevant. I was looking at that increasingly rare thing in our field—a completely original work. Curt explains it as follows: “As we travel through life, we pass through many different stages: birth, growth, graduation, marriage, middle age, death. Each phase of life, each ceremony we attend, each emotion we feel, each tear we shed, is part of the *Circle of Life*. The teardrop opening in the sculpture symbolizes the emotions we all face, and the different cutouts let us look inside the sculpture, just as we are often forced to look within ourselves. I want people to try to see what my intent was, what is unique to me as a maker.”

A balanced life

Curt and his wife have built a uniquely balanced life and Curt finds so much to be thankful for: “My days are often filled with fun and learning with my children,” he says. “We color and paint, look at bugs, see shapes in clouds, fly kites, glue bits of wood together. Looking at the world from the perspective of a kid is an eye-opening exercise that all of us need to do from time to time. We soon discover that we are capable of doing much more than we give ourselves credit for.”

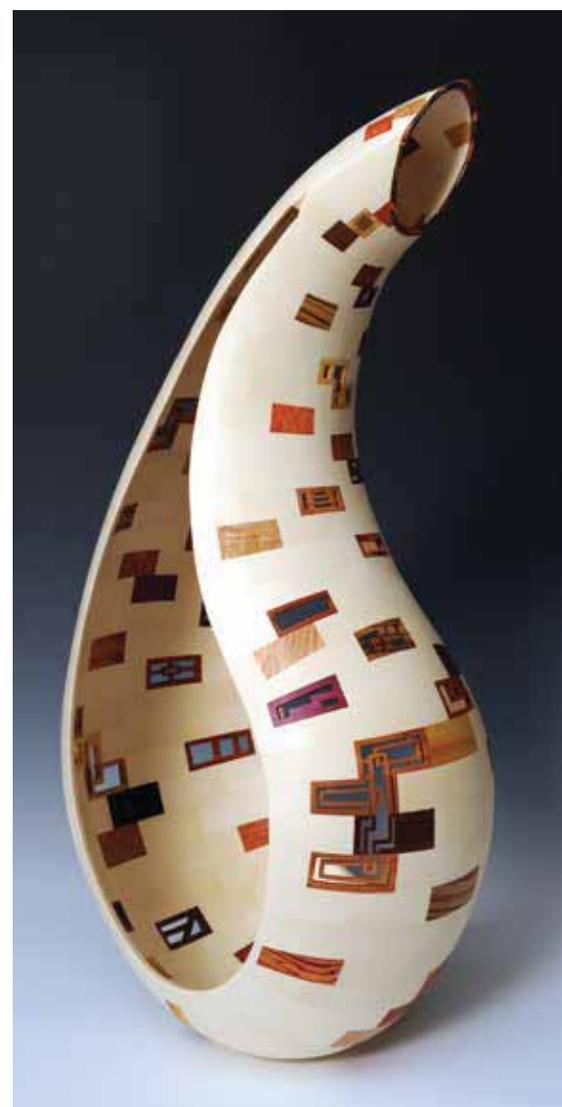
Curt looks toward the future with optimism and energy: “I’m in my prime,” he says. “The possibilities are limitless. The assembly process is always going to be there because I need to assemble stuff. But I think my work is becoming more sculptural, so there will be less turning and maybe even no turning. It’s not that I dislike turning, but it’s not always necessary.”

Back at the Theobalds’ kitchen table on my last evening, we sit sharing

dinner and conversation. I am grateful to have been invited into their loving family circle and am moved by Curt’s openness to his own creative journey, which for him always begins and ends at home. His coming journey is one to watch closely. ■

For more, visit curtttheobald.com.

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Circle of Life, 2014, Wood, 25" x 9" x 12"
(64cm x 23cm x 30cm)

Collection of Richard and Elizabeth Hogue