

Deformed to desirable

Wood lives and breathes, more so in the hands of a creative... Carel van der Merwe from Creative Turning describes how he brings wood to life in his artworks

I regard myself as an artistic woodturner and like to explore the natural beauty of wood and to create features from natural flaws in wood.

The ideal is to find wood with 'burl' growth, which is a tree growth in which the grain has grown in a deformed manner. It is commonly found in the form of a rounded outgrowth on a tree trunk or branch that is filled with small knots from dormant buds.

Burls attached to the roots of trees are of special interest owing to the effects that can be achieved by using these root burls. In some cases, other decorative effects like engraving, burning and colouring are added to enhance the natural beauty of the wood.

I enjoy making hollow forms and natural edge items which are normally non-functional and sold in art galleries and to interior decorators, to enhance a setting.

Type of wood used:

I mainly use indigenous South African woods which are normally remains from trees that were burnt or blown down in a storm.

My preference is to turn the wood before it is completely dry, as the movement of the wood during the drying process can also be used as a feature of the turned piece.

For some pieces I use wood that is generally available, like jacaranda, which can be coloured and decorated as it is a light-coloured wood, and oak, where the open grain can be exploited to its creative maximum.

For my artistic turnings I mainly use rare burls sourced in the Mpumalanga province. Some of them are not well known, in fact, they are quite scarce, but produce beautiful turned items:

- Skunkbush (*Premna mooiensis*)
- Hairy fingerleaf (*Vitex obovate*)
- Red Currant (*Rhus chirindensis*)
- Wild olive (*Olea europaea*) Specifically from dry areas where they grow very slow
- Sneezewood (*Ptaeroxylon obliquum*)

Tools used:

For harvesting the wood and cutting it to workable pieces, I use a Stihl MS381 chain saw. A big heavy wood lathe is required for the large items I design, for which I use an Australian Vicmarc VL300 lathe.

Turning tools are from Sheffield in the UK and mainly from Hamlet.

For the hollow forms I use equipment from the UK supplier, Simon Hope.

Samples of work

Painted Feathers was turned from Skunkbush (*Premna mooiensis*). The piece is in fact the roots with the burl growth on the roots and it stands on the stem where it came out of the ground.



In other words, the piece is upside down from the way it grew. Turning a piece like this is quite difficult as it is not the same as turning a solid bowl, in this case the wood is interrupted by gaps where you do not have any support for the turning tools.

Due to all the cracks it can also fly apart very easily. The diameter is 40cm with a height of 18cm. This piece was only finished recently and is still with me.

Burnt Remains was turned from Red Currant (*Rhus chirindensis*) burl. The orientation of this bowl was selected



to get the maximum effect from the natural edge of the tree which was damaged in a fire.

These burnt areas were used to enhance the natural edge of the bowl. The piece is about 30cm diameter and 15cm high. It was sold at my last exhibition.

The better half is also from Skunkbush (Premna mooiensis) burl. It is a form which was hollowed out through the hole at the top.



The orientation of the piece was done in a way that the side opened up during turning in order to see the inside of the hollow form. Size is 30cm diameter with 18cm high.

I include another piece which is also quite interesting,

Broken world from Hairy fingerleaf (Vitex obovate). It is a ball shape with natural holes that give it the shape of the earth.



It was also hollowed through a small hole at the top and needs to be turned very carefully to ensure that it does not come apart during turning. Size is 20cm diameter and was sold. ■



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