

ED MOULTHROP

Masters video celebrates a woodturning pioneer **GARY C. DICKEY**



Moulthrop begins roughing a bowl for the camera during taping of a new *Masters Series* tape available now from the American Association of Woodturners.

ED MOULTHROP PURCHASED HIS first lathe from a mail order house through an advertisement in the back of a magazine when he was 15 years old.

"I remember that it came with no instructions and no tools," he recalls.

Having set up that first lathe, attached a motor, and fashioned some tools from scrap metal, Ed was hooked on turning. He has been making up his own instructions and blacksmithing his own tools ever since.

Long known for his giant bowls, some 40-in diameter or larger, Ed recently became the second woodturner to be featured in the American Association of Woodturners *Masters Video Series*, available now through the AAW office.

"Some of my earliest memories of woodturning center around an article I read that was written by Bob Stocksdale. It was almost 20 years before I saw another article on woodturning in a magazine. We simply did not

have the books, articles and videotapes that are available today," he said. There was very little interaction among American woodturners in those early years. We worked mostly in isolation on homebuilt lathes with handmade tools," he recalls.

"Finally, Albert LeCoff began a series of seminars in Philadelphia that brought many of us together for the first time. That was where I met Rude (Osolnik) and Bob Stocksdale."

As videographer Phil Pratt and I worked on the Moulthrop tape recently, we also had the opportunity and privilege of spending several days in Moulthrop's home and shop.

To visit the Atlanta home of Ed and Mae Moulthrop is to emerge oneself in an art environment accented heavily in wood.

A far cry from the original placid, white clapboard structure, the house today is a reflection of Ed's skills as an architect and Mae's natural interior design talents. The home and studio is as much a response to the tranquil

wooded setting as it is to the Moulthrops' personal tastes and personalities.

"When architects have nothing else to do, they sit around designing additions to their homes. My problem is that I tried to build every addition I designed," he quipped.

Having practiced actively as both an architect and a woodturner for more than half a century, it is difficult to pinpoint where one career leaves off and the other begins.

Suffice it to say that his training as an architect served him equally as well as a woodturner and as an artist.

A tour of his home and studio is like a visual who's who of woodturning and woodworking. Chairs designed by Frank Lloyd Wright share space with furniture built by Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle and George Nakashima.

As he ushered us into his shop, Ed pointed to a large bowl lathe in one corner.

"That's my roughing lathe," he said. "It's really just a bunch of junk. Come to think of it, all of my lathes are junk. We're really blessed to have a wonderful salvage yard nearby," he added.

Donald Pearce of Atlanta's High Museum noted that as Moulthrop began to advance as a turner, he faced the same problems that pioneers in any profession would face.

"The tools that Ed needed were not readily available so he created his own."

Even today Ed does not use the traditional tools that other turners have come to rely on. His consist of three main tools: the lance, the loop, and the cutoff tool.

The lance, used for exterior cutting and roughing, is never used as a scraping tool. In roughing out the shape of a bowl, the tool proves a

most efficient cutting tool with the blade on the tip held either at a 90 degree angle to the work for initial roughing, or at no less than 45 degrees for finer cuts. A pin inserted into the top edge of the tool rest serves as a fulcrum to gain leverage in cutting.

Ed's other main tool is the loop tool which he uses for interior hollowing. Even though he's attacking end grain primarily when hollowing his full-log vessels, the loop is actually a gouge profile used to hollow the grain from the side. Some of his loop tools weigh up to 100 pounds and are fully 9 feet long. Sharpened with a conical stone, the cutting edge is sometimes as much as three feet off the tool rest inside a bowl.

"I used to hang over the tool using my weight to hold it down. One day the tool caught in a knot in the bowl and lifted me off the floor and threw me about 10 feet across the room. Fortunately I landed on my back against the wall. I realized then that I needed help in holding the tool down, so I built a stand with added weight and I haven't had that problem anymore," he said.

"I try to exploit the inherent beauty in the grain. I don't think you can do that using only half the log. That's why I use the full diameter of the log to show the full radiating pattern of the piece," he said.

To reduce chances of wood cracking, his vessels are submerged in Polyethylene Glycol (PEG) and soaked for various lengths of time. In periods of full production, he has had up to a dozen large vats filled with wood.

Some of his workpieces have weighed in excess of a ton and a half and require an electric hoist to lift them to be mounted onto the lathe.

For the most part I don't use any foreign woods and by that I mean I use nothing from West of the Mississippi or North of the Mason-Dixon

line," he said. Among his favorites are ash leaf maple, persimmon, tulip poplar, sweet gum, magnolia and long leaf pine.

"Notice this piece turned from a Georgia long leaf pine. It has as many as 50 annual rings per inch. They grow very slowly," he noted holding a small donut-shaped piece.

Moulthrop is well known for the pictures of his grandchildren peeking out from the top of some of his larger vessels. The idea came from having caught them playing hide and seek using the bowls for hiding places. He decided that it would make a good photo to illustrate the scale of the bowls.

"Since they've grown up and are bigger than I am now, I tell them they're lousy grandchildren for having grown up because now I can't use them as models anymore," he said, smiling.

Carr McCuiston, owner of the Signature Shop and Gallery which has featured Moulthrop's work since the early 1960s, recalls that Moulthrop was among the first to have a solo show at the gallery.

"From that initial show, the Moulthrop craze began. In that first

show, we ended up with collectors playing tug-of-war with Ed's pieces. This led to our actually locking the doors in subsequent shows and only allowing one patron at a time to enter," she said.

"From then on, Ed worked hand-in-hand with the gallery in pioneering the acceptance of woodturning as art," she added.

The High Museum acquired a Moulthrop bowl in 1970, marking the beginning of the museum's collection of turned wood.

But Moulthrop had predicted almost 40 years ago that wood would be the next material to be recognized by museums, galleries and collectors of fine art.

"Even 20 years ago wood had not gained popularity. Almost no museum ever showed wood unless it was period furniture. They now show wood all the time," he said.

Moulthrop is the second turning pioneer to be chosen for the AAW Masters Video Series which began with Rude Osolnik last year.

Gary Dickey is assistant editor of American Woodturner and president of the Palmetto Woodturners in Lexington, SC



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