

A CONVERSATION WITH BOB STOCKSDALE

Merryll Saylan



photo by Ed Saylan

Bob Stocksdale

When I was a student a few years back, I kept hearing about Bob Stocksdale: A visiting artist at my school proudly showed us bowls he had made bragging that they were just like Stocksdale's. He told us that he had visited Stocksdale who taught him how to make them. Jerry Glaser, the tool maker, also visited the school; he demonstrated woodturning, introduced us to tool steel, and talked about his friend, Bob Stocksdale. I had heard that Stocksdale learned to turn during World War II while in a camp as a conscientious objector. I had friends who were in the Japanese internment camps and assumed that's where Bob

had been. I pictured him filling his time--lots of it--learning how to turn, which he then continued to do for forty years.

When I went to interview Bob Stocksdale, I found this early history interested me the most. How did he start turning? What motivated him, who else was turning at the time, and who was this man?

Bob told me he got a lathe when he was about fifteen years old, "a cheapie," which was powered by a gasoline engine because the farm where he grew up didn't have electricity. No bowls could be turned on this lathe, the shaft had no thread, he had no faceplate. He was doing reproduction and

refinishing work and sometimes needed to make a spindle or a table leg. I questioned him about this interest in woodwork while growing up on a farm and was told, "I always had a hankering to work with wood even when six or eight years old. We remodelled a house and I took all the lath scraps and tried to make a birdhouse--the first one being unsuccessful."

Before Bob was drafted he had worked in a couple different factories where he learned how to use all kinds of woodworking machinery, big machines. "I worked in two different factories: one built cedar chests and one I made cracker peels for a bakery. They're a wide paddle about two feet

wide and four feet long with a small handle, and tapered all the way for the four feet from 1/2 inch down to 1/16 inch. They are used on an endless belt picking up crackers as they come out of the oven. You can get a lot of crackers on a paddle that big. They had to be made as light as possible and were made of balsa wood which is too fragile for that thin an edge. The last five inches of the tip was made of two layers of airplane plywood, (three layers of laminated wood only 1/16-inch thick). We would take a sheet, cut it on a bias, put one piece on each side of the tip, shave it with hand planes, taking the very tip back down to 1/16 inch. I did the whole thing from start to finish, starting with a pile of rough wood. It was a whole lot of different operations, and I learned to use all kinds of tools. Right away, when I was drafted, I told them of my experience, and they put me in charge of their woodworking shop. I worked eight hours a day, five days a week in that woodshop."

The first conscientious objector (CO) camp Bob went to was in Michigan at the Forest Service Headquarters where there was a complete workshop for making signs, tool sheds, tool boxes for trucks, and whatever they needed. One time Bob made a "two-hole toilet, a big one, complete, portable, with a hardwood floor." The main project for this camp was to replant the trees that had been cut rebuilding Chicago after the big fire in the 1800s. "All the trees, wonderful, wonderful pine had been cut. There were still stumps, six and eight feet across there. We went through the forest and replanted pine trees--good pine, sugar pine, white pine."

The government decided that planting trees was not of enough national importance and sent the CO's out West to fight forest fires. Bob remained primarily in the woodshop but once in awhile by personal request, would go out into the forest and see what the others were doing. The CO's were paid nothing for their labor and in fact, Bob paid \$50 a month for his upkeep until his money ran out. He served three years and ten months before being released.

One day, a Forest Service man suggested turning a bowl on a lathe, a Delta 12 inch. "We hunted up a piece of cherry, some walnut, and made several bowls. My first customer was a Quaker woman from Columbus, Ohio. She visited the camp. She told me she liked what I was doing and told me she'd take most anything I wanted to make but, 'whatever you do, keep up the quality. I don't care what it costs--what I want is quality.' That was in 1944, and she was in business way before I met her. And I had a show there two years ago."

When the men fought fires, sometimes they worked for a week, both day and night. Work time was counted as eight-hour days, each fire day becoming three work days. They received vacation time--the same as the army, two and one half days a month. Bob started accumulating a lot of furlough time, once as long as a month. He started coming down to the Berkeley, California, area and got work in a furniture store, Hudson Furniture. The owner would save up work for him. He also started making his timber contacts. At the camp, he had had his own tools shipped out from home and set up a workshop for the other CO's to use so they could make things for themselves such as footlockers. He would buy them wood on his trips to the Bay Area. If he hadn't had such a "cushy job, he might have gone AWOL." But he felt a responsibility to the other fellows and to the woodshop.

After release, he and two friends decided to move to Berkeley. None of them had much money, and Bob offered to help with a down-payment on a house if it had a place for a woodshop. They found the house Bob lives in now. The house is a duplex; one family moved into one side and the other on the other side, and Bob moved into a back bedroom. The first thing he did was to excavate the basement area about eighteen inches and put in a concrete floor. The furniture man sold him his tools at a very low price, "about \$100 for his lathe, a spindle shaper, a bandsaw."

"I started turning bowls right away. During my time in the camps, I established connections with lumber

companies, not only here but in Los Angeles also. I had good sources of supply for imported woods as well as local woods, so that was a big help to know just where to go to get wood. I had established connections with a joint called Gumps, in San Francisco, while in the camp. At that time, it was very difficult to get any craft work at all. Buyers from all over the country would go in there. Sometimes they would give them my address depending on the prestige of the place. I was selling to some pretty prestigious joints in the early '50s--George Jensen, Bonniers in New York. They specialized in imported things like Danish, Scandinavian things. That was the first time ever I had a chauffeured limousine pull up in front of the house. Everybody on the street got excited about that. The chauffeur sat out there while this guy came in. They're out of business now, but they bought several times. I never did sign an exclusive with anybody. Gumps wanted one, but I said no. I learned right at the beginning to say no once in awhile."

At this point in our conversation, I felt I needed to get to more serious questions about woodturning.

Merryll, Did you have contact with other turners like today?

Bob, No, there weren't any!

Merryll, Prestini?

Bob, I visited him in Chicago when he was still doing turning. He worked in a corner of a furniture factory and would get wood from them and have the factory throw the finish on. He was a full time teacher, taught at the Chicago Art Institute.

Merryll, Were you part of a craft guild of those days?

Bob, Yeah, the Designer/Craftsmen of California. It was a cross-media group; we had a retail shop located out in the Cliff House in San Francisco.

Merryll, Now, Bob, two much more serious questions--about "The One-Tool." Do you use only one tool for



bowl, tuhya burl, 4 1/2" x 7"

photo by Stone and Steccati Photographers

Bob, I started that way and never changed--stubborn. Glaser keeps sending me these new gouges that he makes, I try them, and keep going back to my old gouge. Maybe, he'll wean me away.

Merryll, The sandpaper issue: that Bob Stocksdale--he starts with 36 grit. He doesn't turn, he uses 36 grit sandpaper. We have to discuss that. I heard this, even while in England. Have you heard that yourself? Bob laughs through it all and interrupts.

Bob, I have 36 grit. I've used it. It depends on the wood, you know, and that with lignum vitae, I start with 36 grit on that, because it's so difficult to cut it with sandpaper, 36 grit takes it off real neat. So I use it on that. Any extremely hard wood, like African blackwood, I use it sometimes on the inside of the bowl. Most turning I start with 50 grit.

Merryll, What about the jokes about starting with 120, or 150, or 180?

Bob, Bragging.

Merryll, Has that always been a part of woodturning?

Bob, You can scrape it down with real sharp tools, razor sharp, but you can knock it off three or four times as fast with sandpaper. Shaping is better, the rotary disk works better on the outside of the bowl.

Merryll, Have you ever taught or taken in students?

Bob, No, just demonstrating. I don't like to teach. I'm allergic to teaching.

Merryll, How do you deal with the people who visit you? Is it a problem when you're trying to get out work?

Bob, No, no. I don't find it a problem at all. Chance to rest a little. I'm the only craftsman I know of that has always maintained regular hours right from the beginning. I never worked more than a forty-hour week, never worked on weekends, nights or anything like that. If I had worn myself out you know, grinding out bowls, night and day, it would have gotten to be such a drudgery. But as it is, I quit, quite often right in the middle of a bowl and I'd just dearly love to see what it

looks like finished but I quit--I just put a sack over it if it's wet and do it the next day. In fact, I've cut my time down now to twenty hours a week.

Merryll, The shapes of your bowls and forms? Are those forms you started with or?

Bob, More refined, and I'm always getting variations.

Merryll, Do you think that over the years and your sales, has the concentration been on salad bowls, functional items or the decorative things? Which sold better?

Bob, I could just devote my full time to making good salad bowls and sell them all. But I don't like to--I prefer making the decorative bowls because they're more of a challenge, and then a lot of the woods I get are too small for salad bowls.

Bob loves wood; at this point on two visits, he takes me in to see bowls made out of particular timbers and how he used them. How a particular shape could only be the way it is because of the wood. In an article in *American Craft Magazine*, by Richard La Trobe-Bateman, Dec/Jan 1987/88, he talks about Bob's "goal to discover unusual grains and colors in any wood that I work with." The article examines the philosophy and depth behind Bob's work. La Trobe-Bateman: "a man like Stocksdale . . . is so central to the vitality of applied arts. We are more in debt to the few creative people who plumb the limits of their art . . . It is depth that Bob Stocksdale has given us."

I feel a debt not only to the beautiful forms that Bob Stocksdale makes and that inspired me in my work, but to the philosophy and consistency of how he has lived his life. I am glad I got this chance to have this conversation with him.

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WORLD-CLASS TURNER

Richard La Trobe-Bateman

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Bob Stocksdale is 74. He has turned wood professionally for more than 40 of those years. His single-minded dedication has taken his work quite outside the changes in the field of craft and applied art that have occurred over that time. His own words are the best starting point in trying to judge why his work is so special:

I work with the rarest woods in the world as well as with many common types. My goal is to discover unusual grains and colors in any wood that I work with. I develop the forms on the lathe, for many times I have to change my initial design to eliminate flaws in a piece of wood. I do not turn bowls as thin as I could, for I try first to give the piece strength and durability and then thinness without fragility.

This statement is completely straightforward, exactly in keeping with the activity it is describing. Stocksdale is talking about turning wooden bowls--no more. If it seems modest, that is only by comparison with the high-sounding statements we are more used to hearing from creative people. There is no evidence in the field of applied art that lofty achievements need to be accompanied by lofty statements of intention. Stocksdale's reputation is dependent *solely* on the quality of the single turned bowl, not on any grand framework of ideas or on original, challenging concepts. His work speaks for itself.

My goal is to discover unusual grains and colors in any wood that I work with . . . Imagine working for almost half a century exploring wood as a material. Clearly his sources of that material become a crucial factor in the end product. Over the years an informal network has grown up around the world of individuals who are on the lookout for exceptional varieties for him. The longer he goes on working, the wider the net will be, and the richer and more diverse his supply. It would be misleading, however, to overemphasize this aspect; the material

only gives him a starting point--it's what he does with it that matters.

I develop the forms on the lathe, for many times I have to change my initial design to eliminate flaws in a piece of wood . . . Each species and each individual piece of wood can be made to yield a different result depending on the relationship between the direction and position of the axis of the tree relative to the axis of rotation on the lathe. An opportunity may be offered by the shape of the log, or by a grain pattern that flows sinuously with one particular form, or by the contrast between heartwood and sapwood that produces yet another form. Or there might be cracks or faults or rotten spots in the most beautiful material which then force him to discover new shapes in order to use the good material. Thus there is a constant need for *flexibility* that Stocksdale's creative aptitude obviously responds well to, and which means the longer he goes on, the more shapes he will discover.

Placing the work he did 10 years ago alongside his current piece shows how his work now has greater freedom and a less predictable geometry. It has greater life to it. It is more relaxed and more taut at the same time. Where the work of other leading turners often seems to have started with a fixed idea, Stocksdale's forms seem to have evolved as they were being made. We can sense this quality, this spontaneity, without knowing exactly where it comes from. The difference is a slight variation of profile and changes of curve--but it is crucial to the end result. At this level, a craft like turning becomes comparable to a sport; few are gifted with an instinctive execution that separates the world-class player from other top-class players.

Some design theory may be helpful here, as many people do not have a framework of ideas from which to look at objects. One key idea in "seeing" a turned bowl is to know (in an intuitive rather than an analytical way) the constraints that have generated the form. In turning, the system (not the operator) produces a circular cross section in one direction but does not entail anything else. It is possible to set up a secondary system that

predetermines the shape in every other direction (as is done constantly in engineering by the lead screw and cross slide).

Our eye is intuitively sensitive to whether a shape has been generated by mechanically predetermined means, or is a "free" form, or is a free but geometrically "fair" form. It is reasonable to say that there is little satisfaction to be had from a turned work that is wholly haphazard or that clearly fails to achieve the form implicit in its overall shape.

It is also reasonable to say that when the eye detects that a shape has been mechanically predetermined, it commands attention only up to a certain level--probably because we grasp it too easily. The writer David Pye's idea of the workmanship of risk and its attendant skills is central to turning (which is probably where he got it from anyway, being a turner himself). What makes a turned section so "alive" is that tension between mechanical predictability and its opposite--no perceived form at all.

Stated simply, the central reason a Stocksdale bowl is so "beautiful" is that those two poles are brought into perfect balance with one another. The shape is neither so mechanical that it goes rigid nor so free that it goes soggy. There is maximum tension between an underlying sense of geometrical inevitability and an underlying urge to be free of any predetermined shape.

Stocksdale's work is becoming more alive--the longer he goes on, the more underlying discipline he absorbs, so the freer he can become. Some of his work truly "sings," or has the wings of a bird or seems to inhabit another more rarified world than our everyday one. The oft-quoted story, in various versions, of his having "discovered" that Oriental potters had been copying his shapes for thousands of years is memorable rather than just plain silly because underlying it is a strong idea--the tendency for turned and thrown objects to evolve toward certain forms irrespective of the point in history or the culture that produced them.

I do not turn bowls as thin as I could, for I try first to give the piece strength and durability and then thinness without fragility . . . Here is a



photo by Stone and Steccati Photographers

bowl, para kingwood (violetwood) from Brazil, 2 3/4" x 6 3/4"; 1983

strength and durability and then thinness without fragility . . . Here is a practical man speaking and giving a gentle reprimand to the exponents of wood turner machismo, roughly expressed as "the-thinner-the-wall, the-cooler-the-guy." Stocksdale's bowls gain their loftier qualities precisely by being practical. However we may feel about them as objects of contemplation, we will always have a useful bowl at the end of the day.

Stocksdale's childhood and early years on a farm in Huntington County, Indiana, where he taught himself to turn, seem to have given him a totally down-to-earth attitude toward work. We can imagine that world as one in which a man could talk about "beauty" in a shape, in an uncomplicated, unself-conscious way. We can safely guess that as his confidence and his achievements increased over the years, only then did this bring in its wake more sophisticated ideas about "art"--a very different situation from that facing anyone setting out in the field today.

He also absorbed from his background the artisan's discipline of pacing himself, always working regular hours and conserving effort for continued output. These characteristics are, to say the least, uncommon in our field, but they augur well for

Stocksdale's work in the future. How many of us can honestly say we are likely to be working with creative vigor when (and if) we reach our 80s and beyond?

Stocksdale was a conscientious objector in World War II. The right or wrong of the action itself is of no particular relevance to his work, but what it shows about his relationship to the world around him is. First, he clearly knows his own mind and is not easily swayed by prevailing attitudes. Second, the reasons he gives for that decision are typical of him. These are not religious, or philosophical or any high-sounding stuff--but straight down to earth: "I simply believed that war never solved anything and the best way to stop war was not to participate."

The parallel between his approach to a social issue like this and his approach to his own work is clear. This self-sure attitude means that he has never been diverted either from the outside by fashionable ideas or from the inside by indulging his ego in the luxury of lofty claims. He makes wooden bowls, and whatever fancy ideas others might have, he has never lost sight of what he is doing.

Stocksdale's work raises a number of issues central to the world of applied art and can doubtless be used as ammunition in those discussions. One

issue is the polarity between traditional and progressive art. We should acknowledge that to many of us involved in art as consumers and makers, the *idea* of progressive work is itself so attractive that we unintentionally blind ourselves to objects that we need to see in a more contemplative way. It is also obvious that genuinely traditional nonprogressive work--i.e., work that makes no attempt to develop but merely reproduces--is of secondary significance, however well executed, when compared to new work. The problem lies in our perceptions of what is "new." To contrast Stocksdale's turned wood with that of the Canadian Stephen Hogbin, for example, will help illustrate this point. Hogbin's work affects us most strongly by the innovative way he exploits his turned components rather than by the detailed character of each piece. This is not to say that he does not give great consideration to the individual turnings before he reemploys them in his overall design, but our response to the newness of these strategies will always dominate any other response we might have. The effect of Stocksdale's work on us is just the opposite.

But we are in an era of art in which innovation has ousted refinement as a legitimate measure of progress. It is



bowl, Brazilian rosewood, 3 1/2" x 6 1/2"

our loss. Perhaps the skilled handcrafts which are by their very nature processes of refinement can lead us back from this lopsided vision, bringing a new depth to our use of history. Not history as a source of pastiche and comment (as is so common now, under the respectable sounding title of "eclecticism" or its trendy manifestation, postmodernism), but as a model to work on and improve.

Today, the word "tradition" has been robbed of its true meaning and had come to stand for imitation, a debased form of creativity. But the essence of tradition is change (a cliché**, but true), and Stocksdale actually has changed the traditional form and our expectations of turned wood bowls. Yet, because it is easier to see in his work what has gone before rather than what is different--how he has developed the tradition--there is a danger that his work will be dismissed as nonprogressive and, even worse for the field, that it will be cited as critical justification for genuinely nonprogressive work by others.

There ought to be no need for most conventional bowl turners to assume an elevated critical stance. If they use a material as beautiful a wood, learn to

cut it cleanly, have an eye for line and a feel for mass and volume, the work will speak for itself. It need not speak of "new or "big" or "important" things. It can speak in a gentle, ordinary voice of the universal feelings we have around objects. Turned and thrown forms act on our senses in a particular, almost magical way that has not been altered significantly by the passage of history or by altered artistic styles, including modernism.

Another issue raised by Stocksdale's work is the status of utility in the applied arts today. If we take away reasonable use from a utilitarian object and then devalue (by implication or overt intention) those objects that still retain utility, we are making a strong statement, possibly more than we realize and different from what we intend. Observing craftsmen in all fields turning more and more to the "art object" as a vehicle, I detect three attitudes, conscious or unconscious. The first is a pragmatic acknowledgment of the marketplace, in which "art" commands higher prestige and sells for more than craft. The second seems to be saying, "There is nothing we can do; the ship is sinking, so let's at least go down posing in

style." The third is a desperate need to create an object that makes a *personal* statement: "This is *mine*. It is different from anyone else's and not just another bowl."

I see nothing admirable in any of these responses. Quite the contrary, which is why a man like Stocksdale, who stands out against all three, is so interesting to me, so *central* to the vitality of applied arts. We are more in debt to the few creative people who plumb the limits of their art than we are to the greater number of artists who extend the means that art employs. It is depth that Bob Stocksdale has given us, not novelty. ☺

Richard La Trobe-Bateman is an English furniture maker whose work was recently exhibited at the Contemporary Applied Arts gallery, London (October 15-November 14, 1987). During 1986-87 he was visiting professor of furniture design at San Diego State University, California. Reprinted from AmericanCraft magazine, December 1987/January 1988.