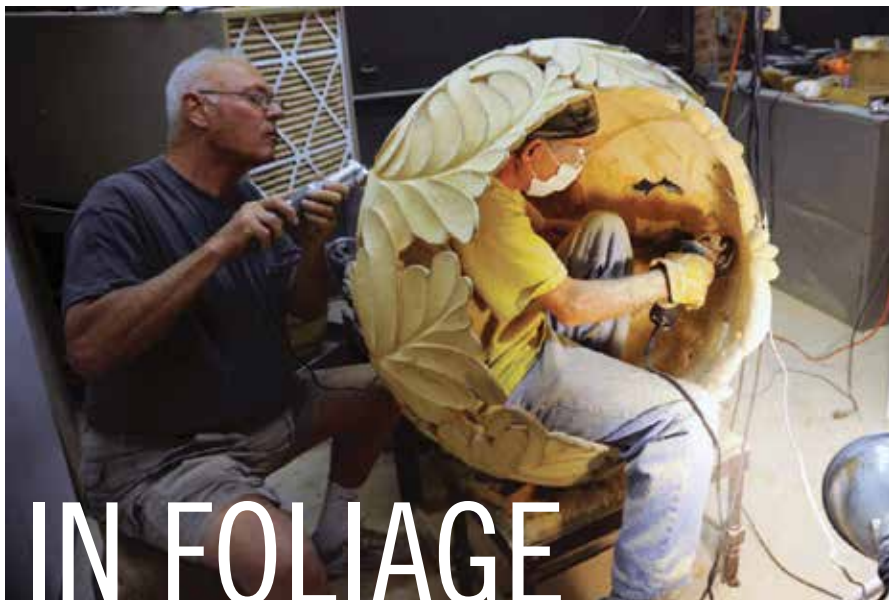


RON FLEMING IMMERSSED IN FOLIAGE

David M. Fry



The AAW's Professional Outreach Program, or POP, has selected veteran artist Ron Fleming of Tulsa, Oklahoma, to receive its Merit Award for 2017. The honor reflects his generous contributions to woodturning artistry, technical mastery, teaching, collections worldwide, and

promotion of the field. A founding member of the AAW and seventeen-year board member of The Center for Art in Wood, he ranks among the elite late-twentieth-century turners who galvanized the revolution in expressive work that continues to this day.

(Above) Studio photos fail to convey the massive scale at which Ron Fleming often works. Here he tools the inside of a vessel, while Guy Timmons carves the outside.

Although not the first to introduce color to woodturnings (Merryll Saylan and Giles Gilson had already broken that barrier), Ron still numbered among the pioneers who applied pigment to vessels. After years of air-brushing commercial illustrations, he was primed to supplement his naturally finished pieces with both subtle and bold chromatic work.

Today it is easy to overlook Ron's role as a pathfinder within the field of accomplished botanical turner-carvers like Andi Wolfe, Dixie Biggs, and Jacques Vesery. The foliage-covered vessel has indeed become commonplace among not only turners, but also gourd carvers, whose "folk art" sometimes rivals the *trompe l'oeil* virtuosity of woodworkers. Even hobby stores sell kits of real autumnal leaves that can be decoupled luminously around a balloon into surprisingly strong gossamer bowls. But a Fleming-turned and -carved wood bowl still remains instantly recognizable as museum worthy.

Gathering the leaves

Although Ron has practiced a wide variety of woodturning styles, including multiaxis and architectural work, he rose to prominence largely because of his carved foliage vessels. He was perhaps the first American turner to render signature vessels partly, then entirely, as overlapping leaves. Although revolutionary within woodturning, his bas-relief foliage echoed centuries of decorative botanical carvings in wood, including the embellished panels and furnishings of renowned Englishman Grinley Gibbons (c. 1700), Art Nouveau (c. 1900), and, most importantly, Art Deco (c. 1930). It was the deployment of leaves as a core vessel component that set Ron's work apart in the 1980s and 1990s, with only occasional competition from sculptor-turner Michelle Holzapfel.



Primarily known for his foliage carvings, such as the large foreground piece, Ron Fleming has also rendered many other subjects from nature, such as the sunflower design next to his head. The latter's central aperture focuses light inside the vessel, suggesting an eclipse. Portrait, 2005.

Roots

Ron grew up in rural Oklahoma within a family of practical woodworkers who also valued his artistic aptitude. He notes, “I have fond memories of working in my grandfather’s shop, and he always encouraged my desire to become an artist.” Six years after taking his first art lesson in rural Oklahoma, Ron wrapped up his first commercial art job at age fourteen. By that time, he had not only developed his drawing and painting skills, but also spent many days roaming the wilds of the North Canadian River basin, collecting bones, feathers, snake-skins, and hides for his growing backwoods collection. With an older friend, he learned to make moccasins and belts and decorate them with beads and feathers. He once observed, “Life in the woods introduced me to nature and opened my eyes to beauty.” So did the acquisition of a 35-mm camera to capture “the diverse shapes of plants and flowers, the myriad textures of tree bark...and the thousands of shades of green on just one leaf.” These images have lingered long in his memory and continue to inform his creative imagination today.

Pen and airbrush

While still a young student, an art instructor told Ron to play around with an airbrush that was on hand, but which no one quite knew how to use. Ron is left-handed, and the tool was designed for right-hand use. Adapting to the awkwardness, he eventually added the airbrush to his toolkit for a career in professional illustration. By the time he reached college, however, Ron found himself studying engineering. After school, he got a job doing complex mechanical drawings for industry. At one point, a superior remarked that although Ron was a hard worker, he would never make it as a commercial artist. Stunned, Ron quit on the spot, determined to avenge the slight. He soon found agents in New York and San Francisco to market his

“
It is never my
intention to copy
nature exactly, but to
give my interpretation
of what I see.

— Ron Fleming

services and eventually was directing a staff of fourteen to keep up with demand for artwork in advertising and corporate reports. His wife, Patti, joined the enterprise as a skilled illustrator in her own right. For fourteen years, including an eight-month stint with no days off, Ron produced enough graphics to master figurative composition and the airbrush. In the process, he won a host of awards for his nationally circulated illustrations and saved enough money to bankroll a vocational change looming in the distance.

With the rise of digital art and photography, Ron could see that the visual effects of airbrushed artwork failed to win over young art directors schooled in the possibilities of computer-generated



Ron airbrushing a 36" (91cm) vessel.

graphics. As commercial demand slowed, Ron renewed his early interest in wood-working by carving and learning to turn on a small lathe purchased a decade earlier. He had been recently inspired by *The Art of Turned Wood Bowls* on the Jacobson Collection, as had other makers and collectors.

Writing for this journal in the summer of 2001 (*AW* vol 16, no 2), Ron recalls, “One day I was working on an illustration using a rose. As I was painting it, I kept looking at the bud and thought the image would make a wonderful vase. I turned the shape and carved it similar to what I had painted. It was then that I realized I wanted to create more images like this one. It was a big step going from two- to three-dimensional work. I began to see things in nature as images on different vessels—along with different textures, shapes, and colors. I found that the asymmetric composition of leaves, flowers, and so on was a design idea that one side of a leaf varies slightly from the other. In short, one may think all leaves are just green and look alike—but look again, and closer! Objects of nature are both incredible in their composition and uniqueness and surprising in their complexity and diversity. It always catches me off guard: The mystery of why something forms in such a manner—contrary to order and consistency. I find it almost as extraordinary as nature’s combination of colors.”

Ornamentation

Ron’s initial forays into botanical carvings focused on floral embellishment of classical forms, usually limited to the vessel’s mouth. His approach combined naturalistic and interpretive features, often fine-tuned over time in his head or on paper. He notes, “I never let my ‘doodle’ decide the final criteria on a piece. The material has an influence on the final shape.” When ready to carve a turning, Ron would sketch the contours freehand “to allow the floral design to follow the lines and voids of the wood, thereby giving the ornamentation a more natural ▶



(Clockwise from top left)
Jewel of the Nile, 2000, Maple burl, 22" x 14"
(56cm x 36cm)

An early piece where Ron let the natural edge of the wood dictate the leaf form. The title came from a bark inclusion that showed up in the body of the piece.

Earth Offering, 1992, Buckeye burl, 9" x 23" x 20"
(23cm x 58cm x 51cm)

Art Deco leaves sweep along an arc suggested by a bridge design that Ron once worked on during his engineering days.



Out of Alignment, 2016, Buckeye burl, acrylics,
20" x 5" x 3" (51cm x 13cm x 8cm)

This turning is part of a new science fiction series using hieroglyphs as a theme.

Spongula, 2002, Madrone burl, acrylics, bleach,
20" x 11" (51cm x 28cm)

A TV program showing divers swimming around giant sponges on the ocean floor inspired this vessel.

Passion, 2003, Pink ivory, 13" x 7" (33cm x 18cm)

Closely overlapping leaves of the imagination focus the light show inside.



feeling. The floral design was carved in as much relief as possible, while trying to maintain strength as well as beauty."

Some of the apex ornamentation evolved into extensive foliage crowns dominating the symmetrical vessels below, overcoming serious technical challenges. The natural-edge protrusions of *Jewel of the Nile*, for instance, seem to approach the limits of structural overhang during blind turning through a small opening. And *Earth Offering* transforms an uncarved open bowl into an appendage of an extended sculpted spray.

Full enclosure

Perhaps no other form of Ron's has achieved the iconic status of his

full-foliage vessel. Most of these begin as hollow forms, but a few assume a shallow profile, like his fern displays. As he once observed, “Doing pencil studies [along with clay modeling] is the best way for me to make decisions on what the next piece will be. ... It is never my intention to copy nature exactly, but to give my interpretation of what I see”—that is, reveal the spirit of the object. The stemless leaves in *Passion*, for example, do not mimic a certain species of foliage, but simply assume a stylized (elongated and overlapped) form conducive to a tight, artfully irregular enclosure. This approach differs noticeably from that of others who create delicate leafy structures of finely rendered, well-known species.

As the carving progresses, Ron will walk around a piece, “checking the balance of the design directly on the turned form. It takes several times around, making small adjustments and effecting the asymmetry (an extra leaf here, a smaller one there) so no matter the angle from which it is viewed, it will always have a good composition and flow. I am always conscious of the way light and shadows interact with the carving. I also consider the shadows the pattern will cast. It is as if I am composing my own version of something from nature—an orchestrated carved form which in some way represents a vision or perception from within myself.”

Tooling up

In 1984, Ron and Patti left downtown Tulsa for a home and studio nearby that they reconstructed from an abandoned municipal incinerator, renamed Hearthstone. An enormous custom Thompson lathe outfitted with a sturdy boring rig now dominates the work space. Adjusting the massive support fixtures sometimes calls for an extra pair or two of hands. A face-plate may span three feet (0.9m). Once

a piece is roughed out on the lathe and dried, the carving may require a variety of tools, including an angle grinder, Foredom rotary tool, and hand chisels and rasps, followed by sanding. Many are then airbrushed before final finishing.

Woodworking as a livelihood

In many ways, Ron’s transition from 2D commercial illustration to 3D woodturning in the late 1980s and early 1990s raised hopes for a profitable career in a field he loved. He landed a piece in the White House Craft Collection and four works in the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery, and won a number of awards. Meanwhile, a commercial art rep in New York expressed interest in the carved turnings and before long was selling them as fast as they could be made. Having observed Ron demonstrate at countless venues, Patti also took an interest in the emerging market demand. She had picked up a lot of the technique when she accompanied Ron on the demo circuit. She proved to be so adept at carving that Ron was prepared to cede her the role so he could concentrate more on turning. Sales continued apace, even when the two of them hit the road for teaching, with Patti sanding pieces while Ron drove.

In the end, the extended traveling proved draining, not leaving enough time to complete new work at the studio. Ron also felt constrained by market preferences for similar types of vessels, especially the foliage variety. Refusing to be type-cast, he turned and painted enormous flower vessels, dragon

bowls, and a wildlife series featuring different kinds of birds. Each likeness varied from one to the other. With encouragement and technical management from multimedia artist Hugh McKay, some of these experimental pieces were cast in glass. Despite some initial commercial interest, Ron still retains most of these sculptures. Likewise, he remembers comparing notes with woodturning spiral-master William Hunter at a large Chicago show. Bill was in disbelief that he himself had sold out, whereas none of Ron’s equally virtuosic pieces had moved. In the long run, “I couldn’t ▶



Isopod, 2002, Maple, mahogany, acrylics, gold leaf, 22" × 11" × 5½" (56cm × 28cm × 14cm)

The idea for this piece came from tube worms around warm air vents deep in the ocean.



have continued,” muses Ron, “if I hadn’t made a good living earlier as an illustrator.”

After Patti’s death in 2003, Ron withdrew from much of the woodturning scene for over a decade. At the invitation of Albert LeCoff, however, Ron agreed to provide work for a retrospective exhibition in 2015. It became an important point of reengagement for him. He says, “I’ll never quit making art while my hands still work.”

Looking back on his career several years ago, he reflected, “I think I’ve been successful in a lot of ways except one, and that is making a living from what I do. I only hope to inspire others’ feelings for my work. If I can do that, it would be my greatest achievement.” ■

David M. Fry turns wood and writes near Washington, D.C.

(Clockwise from top left)

Brown Pelican, 2012, Bleached hackberry, acrylics, mixed media, 48" x 12" (122cm x 30cm)

This Gulf Coast native perched on the vessel is part of a series on birds. The realistic rendering stands apart from Ron’s more interpretive work.

Dragon Dance, 2000, Redwood burl, 17" x 19" (43cm x 48cm)

Eight dragons dance around the vessel in the water; each is different.

Echinacea, 2000, Dogwood burl, airbrushed maple toothpicks, 16" x 8" (41cm x 20cm)

The artist takes license with the purple cone flower, reimagined upside down in different proportions and colors.

Shells (Knobbed Cerith, Radula, Pineapple Frog), 2002, Madrone burl, acrylics, largest is 16" x 6½" (41cm x 17cm)

A collaboration between Patti and Ron Fleming. Patti did the carving, and Ron did the turning and airbrushing.

Ron’s heavy-metal studio belies the delicacy of the work coming out of it.