



Alain Mailland, 'Touch of Zen', 2000, locust burl, diam. 25 x 20 cm. Collection: Detroit Institute of Art, Michigan, US

TRANSCENDENT WOOD

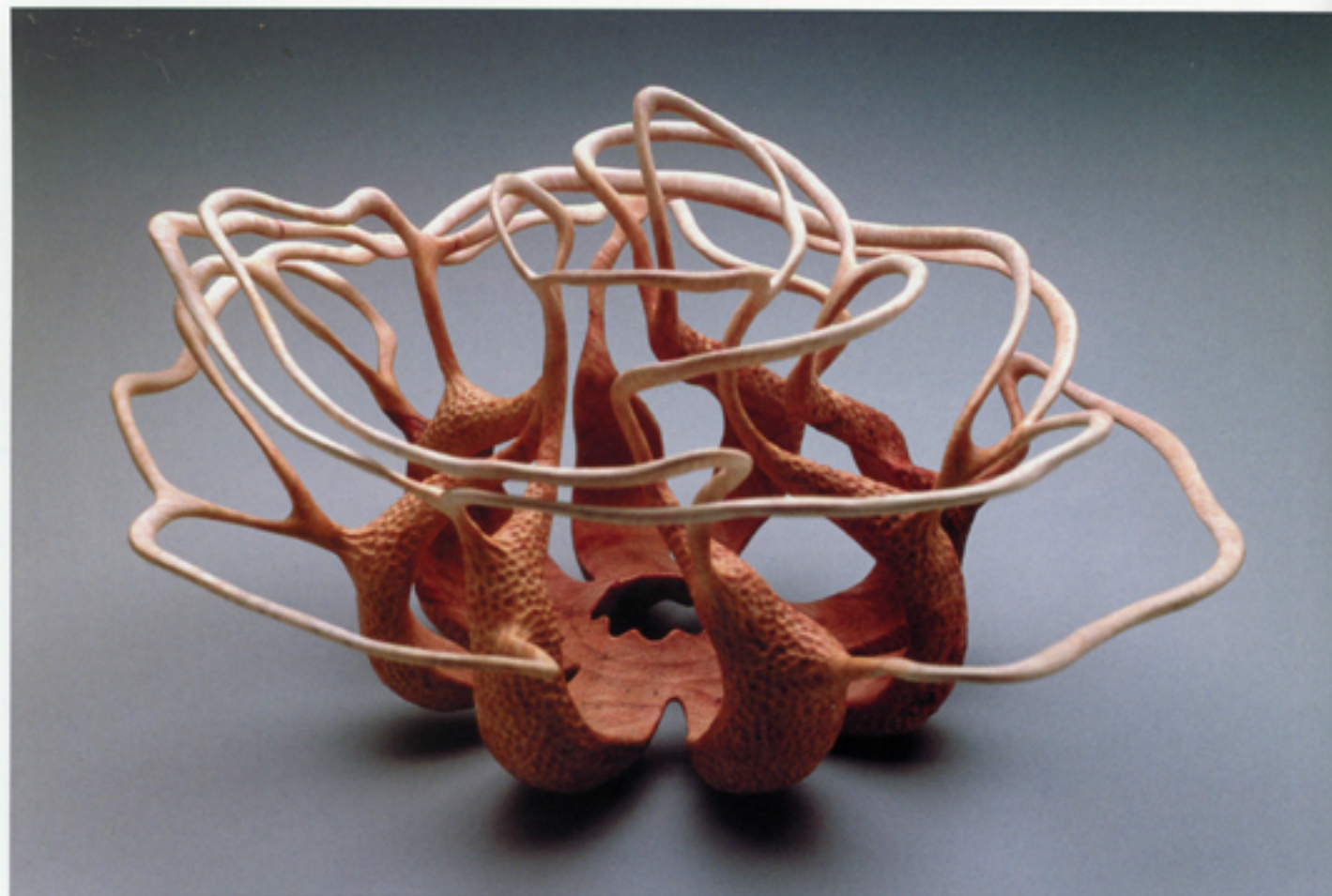
Alain Mailland is one of the most important wood sculptors working today, creating bold, incomparable work in wonderful regional timbers harvested near his home in Provence, France. Profile by Kevin V. Wallace.



'Blob', 2001, juniper burl, diam. 35 x 15 cm. Bohlen Collection, US



'Ecllosion', 2001, elm, diam. 35 x 35 cm



Alain Mailland, 'Heather's Fragrance', 1999, heather root, diam. 18 cm. Collection: University of Michigan Museum of Art, US

A leading figure in the new wave of French artists who build upon tradition while formulating a bold new language, Alain Mailland has gained a reputation for his visionary approach to aesthetics and technique.

'My sculptures are, for me, a way of celebrating life and the secret wonders of burls and roots of the south of France,' Mailland offers, and he does indeed celebrate the natural beauty of these woods, while imbuing them with his observations of life. Although his work is progressive and original, the influence of vegetable and marine forms is obvious in most of his sculptures, as are the currents of modern art, from impressionism to surrealism.

Born in Africa in 1959, Mailland lived in the suburbs of Paris until the completion of his studies at the National Art School of Cergy-Pontoise, after which he worked as a mason and carpenter. Following a woodturning course with Philippe Bourgeat in 1987, he moved to Uzès, a beautiful medieval town in the south of France.

Specialising in green wood hollowing techniques, he initially produced domestic items such as vases, dishes, salad bowls, lamps and lampshades, which led to his exploration of unique vessels and sculptural forms with incredibly thin walls. Determined to refine both his technical and aesthetic approaches, Mailland began studying with an international array of artists, including André Martel and Michaël Hosaluk from Canada, Australia's Terry Martin and US woodturners Mark Sfirri and John Jordan. Once he reached a point where he was making his living from woodturning, he endeavoured to spend more and more time dedicated to the creation of one-of-a-kind pieces and experimenting with unknown wood species from the hot and dry Mediterranean environment in which he lived.

'In France, the life of a woodturner is good, but it's not easy financially,' says Mailland. 'I have to lead a simple

'The Elegance of Pelagie', 2005, pistachio, diam. 35 cm x 40 cm





PHOTO: TERRY BLAKE

'Babel', 2001, arbutus tree root, diam. 26 x 13 cm

life, but I chose it because I can do whatever I like.'

Having been a carpenter, mason and roofer, Mailland used his skills to turn the ruins on his property into his home and studio, which is partly underground, having been dug into the side of a hill as a means of stabilising the temperature. A skylight fills the studio with light and it is in this environment that the artist manifests his visionary forms.

Mailland initially exhibited his sculptural work in France alongside his utilitarian forms during craft shows and other exhibitions. At the time he was involved in the Board of the French Association of Woodturners which sought to create an organisation to promote the field and increase opportunities for exhibiting work. In 1996, he won first prize in two major competitions in France and the following year he was conducting demonstrations on his unique approach to the medium. Although this provided excellent exposure for the artist's new work, he felt the market remained limited in France.

In 1998 he was invited to demonstrate at the American Association of Woodturners Symposium in Akron, Ohio and participate in the International Turning Exchange program organised by the Wood Turning Center in Philadelphia. Featured in the subsequent exhibition "all-TURNatives: Form and Spirit", along with his fellow residents, Mailland's career was set on an upward course.

The years spent working with green wood, making production work allowed Mailland to create forms destined for carving and texturing and found that he was able to utilise the natural movement of the material as it dries out. His first major sculptural work, *The Messenger*, was a technical *tour de force* and was featured in del Mano Gallery's 1999 Turned and Sculpted Wood exhibition, bringing the work to the attention of leading collectors.

'The Stone-Eater', 2000, elm burl, ht 45 x 16.5 cm. University of Michigan Museum of Art



PHOTO: GEMMA GALLAGHER



'The Escape', 2002, hackberry, diam. 50 x 65 cm. Musée des Pays de l'Ain

He was immediately recognised as an important artist and has been represented by the gallery ever since.

Although the artist claims that he became a woodturner because it did not require him to plan works, he has since come to be known for works that obviously require meticulous planning and execution. While developing his craft, the artist had begun making single abstract flower forms. Moving into larger sculptural statements, he sought a way to group them as a single work. He spent two weeks in the workshop creating the tools that made this possible. The curved scrapers that resulted

were used to create *Flowers*, a work in pistachio, heather, arbutus-tree and juniper burl. The tools proved a major breakthrough and have allowed him to create the sculptural works that followed.

'It's interesting to see that sometimes ideas and techniques play together,' notes Mailland. 'I had the idea, developed the technique, and the technique allowed me to realise new ideas.'

Babel grew out of the artist's floral forms, yet features an architectural form within it. The work was a technical challenge to turn and the viewer can see how the wings have moved after turning and cutting the piece.

'I store my wood in water to keep it fresh so that it's wet when placed on the lathe,' explains Mailland, who prefers to work with the woods that are found near his home, many of them being timbers that are not used by other artists and some being rediscovered as potential materials. 'In Provence the trees are relatively small because of the low rainfall during the hot summer months, but they develop interesting and very fine burls to store the water during this period,' he says. *Heather's Fragrance*, a work that is turned, carved and textured from a piece of heather root, is such a work.

The artist, who is in constant demand in international circles for turning demonstrations and speaking engagements, has also become known for his sense of humour. Australian artist and writer, Terry Martin, thinks that Mailland's jesting hides a passionate commitment to woodturning and its connection with history. 'It would be hard to find a more distinguished history of turning than in France. If Europe nurtured the turning which was reinvented in the New World as the trendy art of today, the French can claim much credit for its historical evolution.' Martin places Mailland firmly within the main thrust of the turning revival that came from newcomers who had not served apprenticeships and were not inhibited by preconceived notions of what is acceptable.

In exploring the wood medium, Mailland expresses a tremendous love of nature. During his youth botany was a consuming interest and he spent several summers at nature camps. Through his sculptural work, he offers an interpretation of the various natural forms that create such a sense of wonder in him. Although his pieces present a bold new approach to sculpture, many of his fans come from the field of woodturning, where collectors and artists alike marvel at what he is able to accomplish



'The Guide', 2004, African blackwood, diam. 23 x 39 x 16 cm



'Seven Wisemen Dancing', 2006, hackberry, diam. 23 x 53 cm



'The Soul Sisters', 1998, hackberry, ht 35 cm. Musée des Pays de l'Ain



'Fire Spirit', 2005, Alatorne, diam. 10 x 88 cm. Collection: Louis Marchand

PHOTO: SIMON BAILLON



'The Source', 2002, cherry, diam. 49 x 64 cm. Collection: Randy Antik

using such a traditional process with technical mastery. Of course, in the case of Mailland, it goes way beyond being technically proficient. He turns most of his pieces green and must therefore orient the work in such a way that, as it dries, it undulates and moves in a predictable fashion consistent with the intended result. Mailland regards the deformation of the wood as a crucial aspect of his work because it gives "living" form to the pieces. An interest in Eastern thought and the desire to reflect a spiritual essence led Mailland to create *Touch of Zen*. Mailland comments: 'I'm not religious, but I've studied the spirituality of the Orient and Zen Buddhism. I know that emptiness is more important than material and that the hollow form is the incarnation of the soul and body.'



PHOTO: ERIC BARANKE



'Catalan Fertility', 2005, pistachio root, ht 51 x 26 cm

When I look at a piece I observe the emptiness that the piece can express more than the material, or what the material can suggest about the space around it.'

These interests have led to the mutual respect and friendship of Vietnamese-American artist Binh Pho, who, from the moment he saw Mailland's work, was immediately intrigued by its fragility and elegance. 'What he achieves through the use of negative space is mind-boggling – with its complexity and his imagination, it's as though he creates something out of his dreams,' says Pho. 'In my opinion, he is one of the best artists who knows how to utilise the contrast of sap and heart wood, and he makes them sing together in works such as *Storms*, created in African blackwood, where the contrast between the blond sap wood and black heartwood is most marked.'

Following his International Turning Exchange residency in 1998, Mailland devised a system of off-centre, multi-axis, turning which has proven important to the artist's creative output. Initially inspired by the work of Hugh McKay, a pioneering artist in this approach, Mailland went on to develop his own approach. The new process resulted in central vessel-forms, as seen in *Mother Fish and Her Babies* and *The Stone-Eater*, that are concentric with up to 40 additional centres.

'It was important to discover that it was possible,' notes Mailland of McKay's impact. This distinctive approach is utilised in numerous works including *Blob* and *Back to the Sea* – both works that are filled with interrelationships between the connected forms.

Frequently, it is the material itself that inspires Mailland. When his friend Pascal, a wood supplier and forester, brought him a huge piece of cade, a beautiful, aromatic juniper from the south of France, which had wonderful burls, Mailland started working with it immediately.

'*Mother Fish and Her Babies*', 1999, locust burl, diam. 30 cm. Bohlen Collection, US

'I didn't stop until it was finished,' says Mailland of the resulting work, titled *Blob*.

A piece that exemplifies the artist's embrace of concept is *The Escape*, which was acquired by France's Musée des Pays de l'Ain. This work represents a soul imprisoned in the body and trying to escape. The tower represents the prison, with the dark texture at the bottom contrasting with the whiteness of the "soul". The technical difficulty of creating shapes that cross each other challenged the artist and the resulting work is fascinating.

Eureka, also in the permanent collection of Musée des Pays de l'Ain, makes reference to Archimede when he discovered something new. The artist had created several small works along the lines of "temple-trees" with circular "wings" attached on branches to the base. He had never mustered the courage to cut these circles, convinced that the piece would be too fragile. Once he attempted this, he found that it worked very well.

'I think that many woodturners do good work, but Alain's pieces are far beyond what I have ever seen,' says Hans Wiessflog, a German woodturner who is considered a master of form and technique. 'It's not only good craftsmanship, but also an understanding of design that makes his work unique. He lives in one of the most beautiful places I know and uses wonderful regional timbers, and you can see this in his work.'

One of the artist's most impressive works, *The Source*, was born of a desire to win a major prize in France for excellence in art-craft. It is a political statement calling for a respect for the earth and the tree and an end to the logging of old-growth forests.

Although Mailland is considered a master woodturner, some works are entirely carved to take advantage of the dark heartwood and the wonderful yellow sapwood. He often creates works that can be reversed or displayed in different positions. In taking one of his *Eureka* works and placing it upside down, he saw that it could be a new opportunity to create works suggestive of jellyfish, creatures he loves due to their forms, lightness and transparency. In French *pelagique* means from the wide sea, and Pelagie is also a first name, so the artist titled one of the works *The Elegance of Pelagie*.

Mailland is among the newer generation of artists who utilise materials and processes related to craft, but are heavily influenced by modern art and sculpture. The paintings of Van Gogh, Monet, Derain, Pissaro and the Impressionists offer inspiration through their interpretation of nature and their philosophy of contemplation. The surrealism of Salvador Dali is also an obvious influence. The artist also looks to sculptors such as Gaudi and Giacometti and their expansive embrace of form and dynamic. Mailland's knowledge of modern art history is evident in works such as *Catalan Fertility*, that pays tribute to the Catalan artists of the 20th century, including Dali, Gaudi, Miro and Picasso and what he refers to as their "surrealistic fertility" symbolised by the spermatozoid-like fissures on the piece.

Another major influence on the artist's work is music. Mailland has played drums since he was a teenager and has played in two orchestras, and this manifests itself in his sculptural balance of structure and improvisation. His most recent sculpture, *Seven Wisemen Dancing*, is a technically complex work consisting of seven concentric vases hollowed into one piece of hackberry, joined around a hollowed centre to resemble a group of people dancing together or whirling dervishes.

Alain Mailland became a woodturner before seeing any work created by artistic woodturners. A former carpenter

'Maryline', 2003, hackberry, diam. 50 x 50 cm



'Eureka', 2003, hackberry, diam. 50 x 55 cm. Collection: Musée des Pays de l'Ain

and furniture maker, he was knowledgeable about woodwork and the tools and traditional ways of working with timber. But it was while viewing the collections in the US that he glimpsed what was possible to achieve with the lathe. Since that time many vistas have opened before him in the field of wood art. 'I am still exploring the possibilities of what the lathe can offer and I feel I won't have enough time in my entire life to exhaust this field.'

Kevin V. Wallace

