

ALAIN MAILLAND

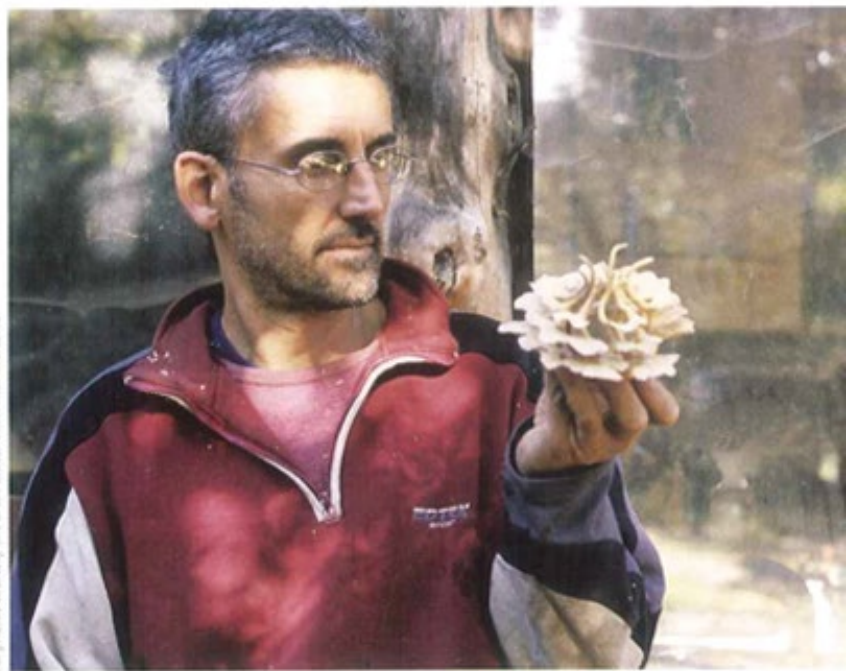
There Is No Limit to the Forms I Can Make

In a field where work is prized for its originality, most contemporary woodturners would agree the most difficult thing is to come up with new ideas about how to bend the limits of the lathe and create unique work. Of the artists who have developed new ways to use the lathe, no one is more creative than the French artist

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Alain Mailland. He manages to generate ideas faster than anyone else does and the only limits seem to be the time it takes to make them and the stress on his body that comes from long hours of intensive work. With a worldwide reputation as a creative wood artist, Mailland is not only a turning genius, but also a sculptor of rare talent. His works defy the imagination, because the forms he produces are largely created on the lathe using mounting and turning techniques unmatched anywhere in the world.

Mailland was born in Paris, but it was too grey for him, so now he lives near Uzès in the sunny south of France on two acres covered in natural bush. With the skills learned in an earlier life as a carpenter, mason, and roofer, he built his own house out of local stone. "I bought a ruin and built a home," he proudly states. Next, he dug his workshop into the rocky side of the hill, which keeps the partly underground space warmer in winter and cooler in the fierce summers. Light



All photos courtesy the artist unless otherwise indicated

ABOVE

Mailland enjoys a close look at one of his complex turnings.

OPPOSITE

Eureka, 2003. Hackberry, 21" high x 19½" diameter. It is easy to imagine Mailland struggling to solve the problem of how to make this piece. Its core explodes into flaring petal forms, just like the idea: "Eureka! I have it!"

RIGHT

Mailland dug his workshop into the side of a hill, so it's cool in summer and warm in winter.

BELOW

Mailland had this enormous lathe made to his specifications. It has an 8 hp motor and with four gears can run at between 150 and 1,306 rpm. Including the fabricated bed, the lathe weighs 1,320 pounds, which helps damp vibrations when he turns off-center pieces.

streams in through wide windows on one side and a skylight in the roof. Recently Mailland purchased a 10-acre property in the mountains with an old farmhouse, a spring, two rivers, chestnut trees, and wild boars, and he plans to move there in the near future.

From an early age Mailland liked to paint and was influenced by the work of the Impressionist masters. For someone who appears to see the world differently than most of us, this was an important influence. Mailland explains: "They gave me the idea that your world is only as it is because of the way you look at it." He also was very influenced by the world of plants from an early age. "I used to study plants with my mother. We collected them and made a herbarium. I now see that this period of observation was really important for what I do, because I looked closely at the natural forms and their structures. Now I make these forms, so I can say nature is also my teacher."



A Wide Range of Skills

Mailland works intuitively from his observations of nature and through his own explorations as he draws. It is not always an easy path, as he explains: "I started to make my flower shapes in 1996. It was a real technical challenge. I had to learn blacksmithing, and I spent two weeks designing and making the tools I needed. Then I had to find the right wood. When all of that was done, I was able to make the flower shapes I produce now for my sculptures. These days, there is no limit to the forms I can make. When I need a new tool, I fire up my forge and make the tool."

Not satisfied with the complexity of the forms, Mailland has also developed a range of skills in carving, steam-bending, texturing, and other techniques. Perhaps his most spectacular innovations have been the remarkable chucking systems he has developed to create eccentric turnings. "I started to explore it in 1998 and have never stopped. With different technical challenges each time, I use different systems for holding the piece on the lathe—wooden chucks, wedges, screws, chains, straps—sometimes I've turned sixty centers on one piece."





LEFT

Solar Ship, 2007. Lignum vitae; 6" long x 5" diameter. The circular rims of *Solar Ship* supporting the central vessel were turned on the long axis and their centers were carved away. The piece was rotated 90 degrees and rechucked to turn the central vessel. The boat form under the vessel was wholly carved.

BELOW

Trio, 2004. Pistachio; 11" high x 7¾" diameter. Inverting what we might expect, Mailland makes the bird-mouthed vessels into the base of *Trio*. Are they wings or tails at the top? They can be anything you like. It's hard to believe such a complex form can be turned and carved from a single piece of wood.

Photo by Roland Souder

Usually Mailland does the preliminary work on a piece, and then leaves it to dry for some time. "First I do the woodturning and the carving, mostly in green wood. Then I let the piece dry. I have to keep an eye on it and control the distortions by slowing down

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the drying process if necessary. When the piece is dry, I do the final carving, sanding, texturing, sandblasting, bending, and so on. Sometimes a piece can wait several years before I finish it, although I occasionally get a great piece of wood from my friend the forester and I immediately see what I can do with it, so I start straight away."



The Universe Is Made of Circles

The actual turning accounts for only about 10 to 20 percent of the work Mailland does on a piece, while the carving is about 20 to 40 percent. The rest of the time is spent sanding, texturing, sandblasting, or finishing. However, Mailland is in no doubt about the importance of the lathe in his work. "Even if I spend so much more time carving and sanding, the lathe is the most important tool in my work, because, except for a few pieces, they all start with the turning. It is a magical process that gives a center to the piece and allows you to make hollow forms. Everything in the universe is made with circular elements, from cells and atoms to galaxies, so I keep close to nature by using the lathe."

Mailland's respect for nature extends to the wood itself and his respect for the material is intense. "It can take hundreds of years



ABOVE

Blob, 2001. Juniper burl; 10¾" high x 13½" diameter. It's difficult to imagine each one of these tiny vessels is hollowed on a different axis. The imagination required, first to conceive such a piece, then to make it possible, is extraordinary.

OPPOSITE

The Elegance of Pelagie, 2005. Pistachio; 11" high x 8" diameter. The extraordinary fluidity of Mailland's shapes seem particularly well suited to representing sea creatures.



I Had a Dream, 2006. Arbutus (madrone) root; 5½" diameter. Though it is difficult to determine which parts of the complex piece were turned and which were carved, Mailland maintains the lathe remains the essential center of his work.

to make a piece of wood. When you hold it in your hand, it is like you have received the past as a gift. What a gift! Sometimes it takes two hundred years of patience from the tree, waiting for the rain, growing in the sun, sleeping in the cold of winter, making fruit. ... I love the woods from my countryside, because they suffer from the droughts and the heat in summer. They are real treasures and feel I have to succeed with them as a sign of respect for their beauty."

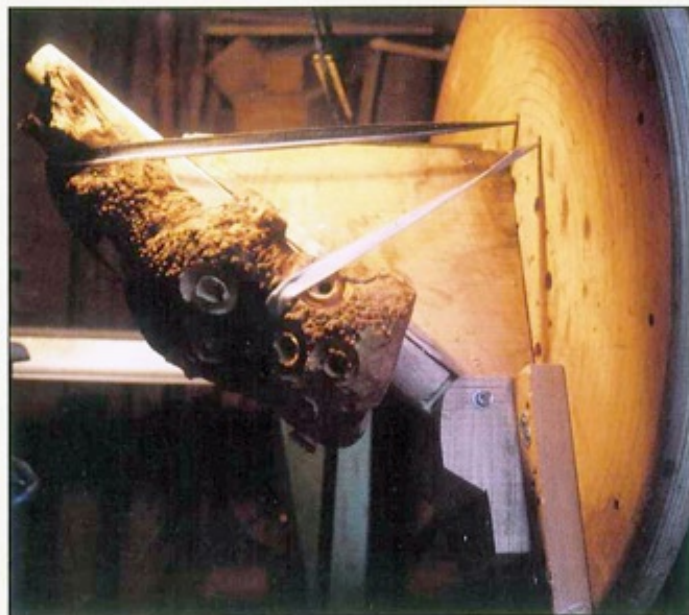
It is impossible not to be moved by Mailland's sincerity. Everything he does is a heartfelt expression of his beliefs and he has little patience with those who do not respect the world as he does. Certainly he deserves our full respect and gratitude for his extraordinary contribution.

www.mailland.fr

HOW MAILLAND WORKS: TURNING ON MULTIPLE CENTERS



Back to the Sea, 2006. Arbutus (madrone) root, 19¾" high x 9" diameter. To make *Back to the Sea*, Mailland had to remount the burl root on the lathe to turn each of the small vase shapes. Each one requires changing the orientation of the wood in relation to the axis of rotation and to its position on the chucking system.



Mailland uses an ingenious system of wedges and straps to mount the irregular burl that will become *Back to the Sea* on the lathe.



The lathe helps Mailland complete



Using a variety of hand and power tools, Mailland extensively carves *Back to the Sea*, to

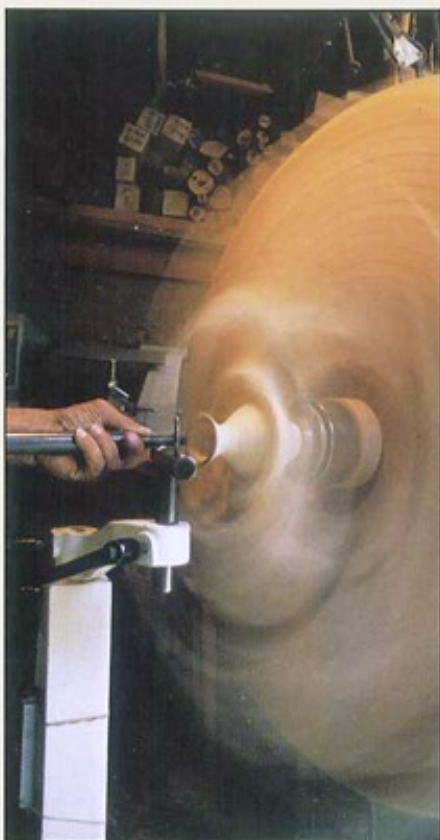
HOW MAILLAND WORKS: MANY TECHNIQUES COMBINED



Rainbowls, 2005. Hackberry, 36" x 4" x 9". To make *Rainbowls*, Mailland had to combine multicenter turning, carving, and wood bending.



Starting with a long and thick chunk of wood, Mailland band saws a blank and mounts it outboard to turn five chucking spigots and vase bases; three of them have been completed.



Mailland reverses the blank so he can mount each of the five spigots in the lathe chuck. Now he can hollow the insides of the five vessels, and turn the exterior of their mouths.



With the carving mostly completed, Mailland steams the wood and bends it over a curved form. After bending, he will carve the surface textures that enliven the completed piece.