

THE STEPS OF A *DANCE*

Inspiration and Process
Lead to Organic Forms

Alain Mailland



Ancestors' Home, 2018, Japanese pagoda tree, acrylic paint, colored pencils, 22½" x 11" (57cm x 28cm)

How do ideas form? What makes a wood artist give life to a new work of art?

Inspiration? Concentration? Technique? A little bit of each, probably. Here is the story of my inspiration for and making of *Shell Dance*, which was featured on the front cover of the December 2018 issue of *American Woodturner* (vol 33, no 6). Several months after making *Shell Dance*, I made a similar piece, called *Ancestors' Home*, in the same style but with color.

Inspiration

From the time I was young, I have been inspired by natural forms and structures. Everywhere and every day, there are wonders you can observe, especially if you live in or near a natural setting. Among my favorites of these wonders are seashells, so it seemed inevitable I would create art works inspired by these natural objects.

I have collected many seashells while walking along the beach. I find myself looking to the ground more than to the sky or the sea, and I can't help but pick up interesting things. During my travels, I often return home with my pockets full of natural wonders. I keep them in drawers and pick them up again when I am looking for inspiration. I also buy lots of books about seeds, plants, sea creatures, microscopic structures, insects, animals, and of course, shells. They are a resource in my workshop, so I can easily find lots of inspiration for forms and textures. I also take many photos and refer to them when needed. When I am ready with an idea, I draw a quick sketch of the project (Photos 1–3).

Then I have to wait for the right piece of wood to present itself. One of my favorite woods is hackberry. We have very large hackberry trees

Inspiration



1 Collected seashells and other found items serve as inspiration, which leads to an initial sketch.



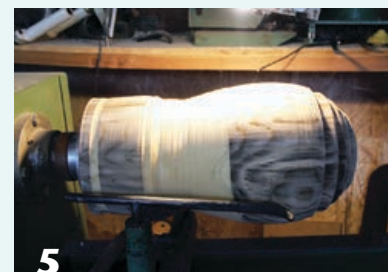
in the South of France, and the wood is fantastic—one of the best available for bending, as it is both hard and flexible. Plus, it offers a beautiful white grain that is revealed by sandblasting.

Process

When making *Shell Dance*, I chose a log of green hackberry with the grain as straight as possible, which would be essential for bending the filaments without breaking them. The log was quickly roughed out at the lathe, fixed on a large faceplate, shaped, and hollowed (Photos 4, 5). I kept the walls thick near the top of the piece to accommodate the flowing filaments, or spines, I would create there. In the endgrain, I turned grooves that formed “rings” (Photo 6). I turned these rings using a special tool that I forged and ground myself. I use a lot of custom scrapers like this to make my flower shapes; the tools are made from carbon or high-speed steel, like the one shown in Photo 7, which was crafted from an old bowl gouge.

Then I started carving the individual filaments, with the piece still on the lathe—a very good holding device. You can orient the ►

Rough-turning the form



5 *Shell Dance* began as a large hackberry log. It was hoisted onto the lathe, rough-turned between centers, re-mounted on a faceplate, and shaped.

Forming grooves in endgrain



6



7

The author used a shopmade tool to cut into the endgrain, forming grooves, or rings.

Rough-carving the filaments



8



9



10

An electric chainsaw was used to rough out first the filaments, then the grooves that spiral toward the form's apex.

Refining the filaments



11



12



13

With the workpiece held in a custom-made frame, a combination of rotary tools and hand-sanding refined the form's filaments. Rubber bands bent the spines to allow temporary access.

Refining the end, or apex



14



15

With the piece mounted upside down, the author could continue the spiraling grooves to the end.

piece by rotating it to the best position. I carved first with an electric chainsaw, carefully plunging into the endgrain (*Photos 8, 9*).

When all the spines were roughed out, I carved spiral grooves all the way to the base of the piece, as shown in *Photo 10*. With the piece still mounted on the lathe, I was able to turn and carve alternately. Then I removed the piece from the lathe and finished carving the spiral.

With the initial steps and shaping completed, there was still so much more to do. I let the piece dry for several months, until it was dry enough for final working of the filaments. The refining process required a series of power rotary tools used to rough out the shapes and save time, and hand tools used to perfect the shapes and give them the soul of the form. Among the hand tools I use are chisels, French hand-stitched rasps, self-forged carving knives, scrapers, and abrasives. The power tools include spherical rasps, flap sanders, and a flexible shaft with burrs (*Photo 11*). When I was finish-sanding by hand, I applied rubber bands to the spines to create access. I often say I am not an artistic woodturner, but an artistic woodsander (*Photos 12, 13*).

I must emphasize a very important point in this process: always pay attention to the grain. I had to respect the wood grain if I didn't want the filaments to break when I bent them.

When all the filaments were formed and sanded, I used a custom stand to hold the piece upside down, so I could carve the base. I began by shaping a point at the bottom and then carving the grooves smaller and smaller to the end (*Photos 14, 15*). Working outside in the summer was wonderful and allowed me to see the

details and perfect the fine aspects of this work.

Of steam, sand, and color

Now it was time to bend the filaments. I brought the form to my kitchen, where I heated some water in my French pressure cooker, which has a plastic pipe to direct the steam. Each filament was steamed and bent one after the other. I held the pipe over each filament for approximately one minute—long enough to make it supple and easy to bend (*Photo 16*). Then I removed the pipe, put it on the next filament, and bent it with my hand, using rubber gloves to hold the filament until it was cool and dry. Once cooled, the filaments stayed bent in their new position (*Photo 17*). This is the magic of steam bending. On *Shell Dance*, the process was long and tough, as it was on a large scale: I had 159 filaments to bend. You can observe that they are all bent to the left, so as to give the impression of dynamic movement, or rotation, as if the shell dances. I then let the piece dry for at least one day. ►

Steam bending the filaments



16



17

A small hose connected to a pressure cooker provided steam, which allowed the filaments to be bent without breaking.

Shell Dance completed



18

Shell Dance,
2018,
Hackberry,
23½" × 12¼"
(60cm × 31cm)

Adding color gradients



The author used colored pencils to create a gradient effect on the sandblasted wood surface of *Ancestors' Home*. He notes, "I feel like a child spending hours coloring my pieces this way."

After bending all of the spines, I sandblasted the entire piece to reveal the delicate grain of the hackberry. I used a natural sand that I collected in an old quarry.

Then I bleached the piece several times with a solution of peroxide and ammonia to lighten the wood. After the bleaching process, I rinsed the piece with water to neutralize the peroxide and let it dry. *Shell Dance* was simply sprayed with celulosic matte lacquer (Photo 18), but

I decided to add color to *Ancestors' Home*. For several years, I have been coloring some of my pieces, re-connecting me to my past as a young artistic painter.

Ancestors' Home was not made from hackberry, but from Japanese pagoda tree (*Sophora japonica*), a wood with an irregular grain good for sandblasting. This time I did not bend the filaments, as the wood is not fine enough to bend without significant risk of breakage.

When the sanding of *Ancestors' Home* was completed, I painted a background with different dark blue colors, using an airbrush and fine acrylic paints. Since the surface was sandblasted, the airbrush drove the color everywhere on the irregular surface. Next, I used colored pencils, applying them lightly so they would color only the top of the surface and give a feeling of depth with the dark background (Photo 19). Using very good quality pencils (Caran d'Ache, from Switzerland, Photo 20), I could easily create gradients with several grey and light blue pencils. With this technique, I can also use my thumb to improve the gradient effect. It is very easy for anyone to do; I feel like a child spending hours coloring my pieces this way. Finally, a top coat of lacquer fixed the colors in place.

Such was the birth of *Shell Dance* and *Ancestors' Home*. With color used on the sandblasted surface, I revealed the real structure of the wood so it was not hidden, but revealed in a creative way. ■

Alain Mailland is a wood artist living and working in the South of France. He started his career as a carpenter and then converted to woodturning. He was one of the first to turn green rather than dry wood. For twenty-five years now, Alain has explored and pushed the limits of technique to invent new forms. He also teaches and demonstrates his techniques around the world. Many of his works are in worldwide collections, museums, and galleries. For more, visit mailland.fr.

