

Malcolm Zander in profile

Canadian woodturner Malcolm Zander swapped a career in science to become a respected woodturner. His work is intricate, artistic and elegant, writes **Kevin Wallace**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MALCOLM ZANDER

Delicate work:
Malcolm Zander
in his workshop

Every year, thousands of individuals discover woodturning across the globe. Very few of them arrive at a point where they exhibit at leading galleries and can call the legendary figures in the field their contemporaries. The meteoric rise of Canadian woodturner Malcolm Zander is due to many things – the assistance of mentors, an inquisitive mind, an embrace of the challenges in manifesting ideas, an ongoing study of art and his science background.

In his former scientific and academic career, Zander had little time available to develop his artistic interests. But with his retirement and the discovery of woodturning, he had the opportunity to explore his artistic side and develop a second career.

“Woodturning for me is a very rewarding pursuit because in a relatively short period of time, one can produce something of real beauty,” he says. Of course, Zander

is not one to take the path of limiting the amount of time he puts into a work. He can spend countless hours bringing a single work to fruition.

Learning the trade

For decades, Zander had enjoyed basic woodworking, creating cheese boards and other functional items, as a hobby. Retiring from his career teaching biochemistry in 1999, he saw the work of Jason Russell, the son of his wife’s colleague and a woodturner of international stature. Intrigued, Zander decided to give woodturning a try and Russell kindly assisted him in acquiring sufficient equipment, provided him with a range of quality wood and offered instruction in the craft.

A year later Zander exhibited at his first craft show, and after just two years working on the lathe, he entered the annual Ottawa Wood Show competition in the intermediate and senior categories. He found



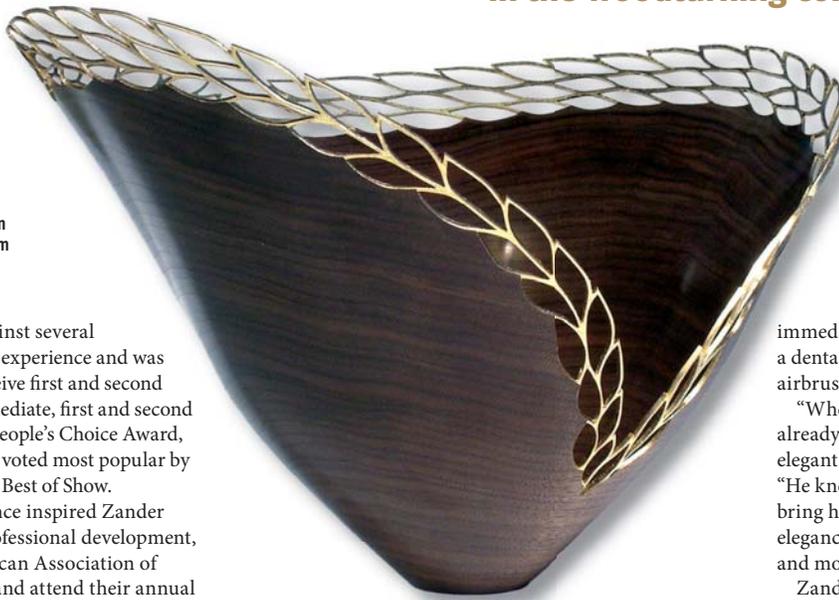
Heart of Hearts, Mother-Daughter, 2006, African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), polymerized tung oil, pink ivory, lacquer.
Black form: 90mm (3⁵/₁₆in) h x 90mm (3⁵/₁₆in) w x 85mm (3³/₁₆in) dia.
Pink form: 40mm (1⁵/₁₆in) h x 45mm (1³/₁₆in) w x 32mm (1¹/₁₆in) dia.

I Love Yew & I Love Yew Two, 2007, pacific coast yew (*Taxus*), 90mm (3½in) l x 70mm (2¾in) dia.



“In less than a decade, Malcolm Zander has emerged as a respected artist in the woodturning community”

Leaves in a Golden Wind, Black walnut (*Endiandra palmerstonii*), tung oil, gold leaf, 240mm (9½in) h x 390mm (15½in w x 290mm (11½in) dia.



himself up against several turners of long experience and was stunned to receive first and second place in Intermediate, first and second in Senior, the People's Choice Award, for the turning voted most popular by the public, and Best of Show.

The experience inspired Zander to invest in professional development, join the American Association of Woodturners and attend their annual symposium. He was exposed to a number of prominent woodturners, learning new skills. At the same time he was reading virtually every book on woodturning published. In finding his voice as an artist, Zander created a number of natural-edge African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*) vases from a blackwood log he had acquired from Russell.

“I turned these all cross-grain because I didn't know any other way,” Zander says. “I began to find the light brown sapwood rims boring to look at, and wondered what I might do to spice them up.”

Inspiration

Zander had read about turner Binh Pho and noted that he would be demonstrating at a symposium in New York. He decided to attend the symposium and learn techniques from him, thinking he might be able to do some piercing on the rims. For Zander, the experience was a revelation. Binh Pho demonstrated both his piercing and airbrushing techniques and spent time one-on-one with Zander, sharing a number of helpful tips. Returning home, Zander

immediately went out and bought a dental drill, a compressor and an airbrush, and then set to work.

“When I met Malcolm, he was already a great woodturner creating elegant forms,” Binh Pho recalls. “He knew what he was after – to bring his turned forms greater elegance, making them lighter and more appealing.”

Zander soon found he could create an open lacy effect by piercing a series of small fused hexagons. This came easily to him, as he had spent many years as a researcher in steroid chemistry, and steroid molecules have a series of fused hexagons and pentagons in their structure. He explored lace patterns, finding a number of reference books at the local library, only to discover that lace consisted basically of a series of fused hexagons.

Standing out

Zander submitted some work to an exhibition, making an impression

FEATURE

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upon Jacques Vesery, who was one of the jurors. Zander was invited to exhibit and his piece, Pink Lingerie, sold immediately.

"In this day and age of turning as art, we see less new ideas," Vesery says. "Malcolm's pieces stand out, as his work has a new voice and a quality which is not achieved by many other woodturners."

The next breakthrough in Zander's career was an invitation from the del Mano Gallery to submit work for an upcoming exhibition.

"I usually don't accept an artist into the gallery upon first seeing their work," Ray Leier, co-founder and director of del Mano Gallery notes. "I like to watch them for a while to see how their work develops and make sure they have a commitment to the field. Malcolm Zander was an exception. He was turning vessel

forms as thin and elegant as anyone in the field and his approach to piercing was exceptional."

The artist at work

Setting out to create 'Heart of Stone', Zander found an internal area of sapwood during the hollowing process which was completely hidden by an overgrowth of black heartwood. Extending from a small sapwood triangle near the top, the tube-shaped area sapwood ran down through the base of the piece and was filled with grit and stone, which blunted the hollowing tool instantly.

"The hollowing was a six hour fight and exercise in masochism," Zander says. "I tried taking it off the lathe and attacking it with a ruby burr in a Foredom, which killed the burr. I then used a diamond ball, which was too slow. I finally put it back on

Lacemouse, 2005, pink ivory wood (*Berchemia zeyheri*); glass fibre whiskers, 165mm (6½in) l x 100mm (4in) h x 85mm (3¼in) w

the lathe and resorted to brute force, eventually getting rid of all the rocks."

Zander incorporated the sapwood triangle into the design, and a hole immediately below it filled with blackwood dust.

"In accord with the title, I did think of filling the bottom of the piece with cement but decided I liked it the way it is – this irregularity is part of the history of this particular piece of wood. Who says natural edges have to be at the top only?"

Challenges

The initial technical challenge in creating Zander's work is turning the walls of the vessel very thin without losing concentration. "One little patience lapse and you can go through the wall," he says. "I try to pace myself and take breaks, and endeavor to finish the thin-wall turning within the space of one day."

The post-turning piercing and filing can take as much as a month, depending on the complexity of the piece. "The creative idea is paramount," he says. "You cannot overcome a technical challenge without firstly having the creative concept. Once I have decided what I want to make, then the onus is simply on me to find a way to do it. There is always a way."

Zander is always working to improve his skills in post-turning activities such as airbrushing, lacquering, gilding and carving. "In future, these will come to take a significant percentage of the time spent in making a piece," he reveals.

In less than a decade, Malcolm



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Out of Africa, 2006, African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), polymerized tung oil, 110mm (4¼in) h x 85mm (3¼in) w x 95mm (3¼in) dia.

Blackwood Form, 2006, African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*), tung oil finish, 65mm (2½in) h x 120mm (4¾in) dia.

Zander has emerged as a respected artist in the woodturning community, and he continues to grow as an artist. ●

RIGHT: Quilted maple (*Acer*) platter, tung oil, 38mm (1½in) h x 420mm (16½in) dia.



LEFT: Elizabethan Lace, 2007: pink ivory wood, cultured freshwater pearls, 125mm (5in) length x 110mm (4¼in) dia.



MALCOLM'S HEALTH AND SAFETY TIPS

Workshop safety is paramount. You only have only one pair of lungs and one pair of eyes and they are not replaceable.

Woodturning has two main hazards. The first is the respiratory hazard, which is wood dust entering one's lungs. The second is the mechanical hazard, which relates to work flying off the lathe and striking one in the face. These are serious issues. I know of people who have been badly damaged by these hazards, and I have adopted two solutions to minimise any risk.

POLYETHYLENE SHEET

A polyethylene sheet tent hung around the lathe is an inexpensive and effective way to control shavings, dust and spray. It is attached to the ceiling with six rare-earth magnets to sandwich the sheet against washers screwed to the ceiling, then sealed with masking tape.

The key to this system is the blue dust extractor hose inside the tent, which creates a negative pressure inside the tent. No dust escapes into the room and it expels the air outside to the dust collector. The entrance slit is a few feet towards the tailstock end. When the sheet becomes dirty, it is easily replaced in a few minutes.



POWER RESPIRATOR

I removed the tent temporarily (see right) so you can see the personal protection system I use. It is a modified Triton power respirator – the battery pack is replaced with a connection to a 125mm (5in) duct which runs to a 200cfm centrifugal fan in a separate

part of the house, blowing clean, noise-free air directly into the helmet. When sanding, I am unaffected by the dust cloud inside the tent.

The respirator is comfortable and quiet and I wear it virtually all the time when turning. One additional advantage to this setup is that when my wife is baking brownies in the kitchen, I can tell within seconds!

