

SEVEN QUESTIONS

MICHAEL LEE



WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A WOOD ARTIST?

I really didn't strike out to be a wood artist. I was self-taught for about five years, reading books and watching videos on how to turn bowls. In Hawaii, we have a bowl style held in high esteem called the *umeke laau*, commonly known as the Hawaiian calabash. I became unhappy in my career in the computer field and wanted a change. At the same time, I had gotten good enough to sell my umeke at the local craft fairs and galleries. So since I was still young and dumb, I figured I would give woodturning a shot and if it didn't work out I could always go back to the computer field. I wanted to get formal training in woodturning so I could turn a faster calabash for my fledgling business. I knew from the books and magazines that a lot of the wood-turners I admired were teaching at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Tennessee. When I finally got to Arrowmont, I did gain the skills to turn efficiently and quickly but more importantly I learned how to slow down and look at what I was doing. Taking classes from Del Stubbs, David Ellsworth, Michael Peterson, Stoney Lamar, and John Jordan --just to name a few -- really taught me how to focus on my turning as more of an art form and find my own personal interpretation. I hesitantly started to carve on my turnings and sought my own "voice". Those classes changed my direction from being a production turner to a wood artist.

WHAT ARTIST OUTSIDE THE WOOD FIELD HAS MOST INFLUENCED YOUR WORK AND WHY?

It would definitely be the unknown artists that created the beautiful Chinese carvings made of jade, ivory, and bone that my mother brought with her when she immigrated from China. As a small child, I would admire, with awe and amazement, these treasures that graced our home. These formative years sparked my first interest in carving, long before I discovered woodturning.

WHAT MISTAKE DID YOU LEARN THE MOST FROM? WHAT WAS THE LESSON?

Traveling way too much and being away from my family. When I was just starting out I felt that getting out there was the most important thing. It knew it was important to demonstrate and teach to get my work visible to collectors and achieve a reputation in the field. I thought I was doing the right thing, but it was at the expense of my kids. I missed too many birthdays and special occasions

because I was on the road so much. Family is the most important thing. Now I'm much more content to stay home and spend time with my family. Taking my kids surfing, paddling or hiking is much more important while they still want to hang out with me.

WHAT GIVES YOU THE MOST PLEASURE FROM MAKING YOUR ART?

When all the dust has settled and the indecisiveness, sore fingers and aching shoulders are put to rest. Putting on that first coat of oil and watching the piece come to fruition is exhilarating to me. Will it be good or bad? Either way I always have an immense sense of satisfaction after completing a piece. I usually have a beer to celebrate, too.



WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WOOD AND WHY?

For carving, I like the exotics like ebony and rosewood, but my favorite has to be lignum vitae for its waxy feel as it's carved, as well as its color and density. Has a pleasant fragrance too. For turning, I like the Hawaiian hardwoods -- milo, kou, kamani, and especially a nice chunk of curly koa



WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR WOOD?

I get it mostly from trees. I also get most of my koa from the Big Island. Sometimes I'll get a call about a tree coming down and if it's a wood I like I'll sharpen the chainsaw and go get it. I also like to collect exotics when I travel.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE TOOL/EQUIPMENT AND WHY?

That would be my Foredom micro motor, it's my favorite tool for fine carving and detailing. It allows me to work at a good pace or really slow it down if need be with variable speed. Bur changes are a snap. Good for "power whittling" when I just feel like doodling on a piece of wood.

"Seven Questions" Editor: *Caroline Stevens*

