Hard Wood -AND- Hot Steel

ROY HOLMBERG COMBINES TURNING AND BLACKSMITHING

Wells Shoemaker

Photos by Wells Shoemaker, except where noted.

Out of the Ashes, 2020, Forest-fire-salvaged redwood burl, copper, 2" × 11" (5cm × 28cm)

At the "dawn" of human civilization, people made crude tools of stone. By "morning," humans began to use fire to soften metals and beat them into utilitarian shapes. By the "noontime" of our evolution, Egyptians were spinning pieces of wood on a lathe. Roy Holmberg, a Santa Cruz, California, craftsman now working in the cultivated, bright "afternoon" of humanity, has mastered both of these ancient practices and creates novel forms that merge wood and metal.

Roy trained on the lathe with Dale Nish and at the forge with friends. Encouraged by his colleagues in Santa Cruz Woodturners, he has created composite structures that often feature clasped metallic belts and sculptural intrigue.

Early interests

Roy got his first taste of woodturning as a young lad. He watched an "older guy" (in reality, probably a 30-year-old) use a wood lathe and simple tools. With some encouragement, Roy completed his first turning project at age 10—a peace pipe.

He also learned woodcarving during America's "tiki phase," which helped pay the bills and foreshadowed a lot of later artistic endeavors.

Roy enrolled in the forestry program at Pasadena City College but perceived that that path was going to lead to a largely desk-bound life. He switched disciplines and earned his two-year associate's degree in production-tool ▸

Old-school metalworking

Roy hand-forges the clasp for a metal band that will fit the rim of a turned bowl.

Making a statement with steel

A groove turned in the rim of a curly maple bowl accepts a hand-forged band with steel clasp, 2" × 11" (5cm × 28cm)

engineering. That training built his confidence in the machine shop, but with increasing automation, Roy figured this career avenue could begin to resemble "supply clerk."

Roy then enrolled in California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) to study mechanical engineering but once again switched disciplines. Landscape architecture offered a persuasive pull of artistic applications—interaction of plants, space, structures, color, and texture. After graduating from Cal Poly in 1968, Roy enlisted in the Navy and spent a year off the coast of Vietnam and a second year working as a machinist on a submarine tender in the U.S. These deployments gave him plenty of experience with a metal lathe as well as a respect for teamwork, both of which would last a lifetime.

Returning to civilian life, Roy also returned to the wood lathe, but for practical reasons. It was the early 1970s, and his cable-spool tabletop needed legs. A Shopsmith was the machine for the job.

Roy spent close to thirty years working for Los Angeles, the State of California, and the County of Santa Cruz, working outside, designing and overseeing large landscaping projects, and supervising large crews. Meanwhile, his personal time leaned steadily toward artistry, and his curious nature led him toward diversity of materials in his craft work.

Of metal and wood

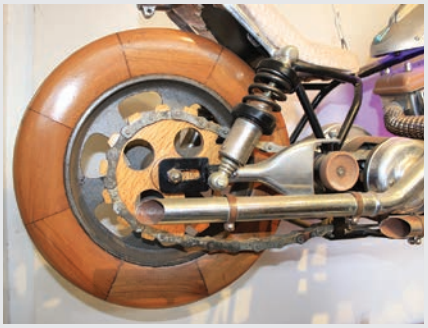
Blacksmithing emerged as one of those diversions. Roy took sculpture classes at Cabrillo Junior College, which naturally involved heating and shaping metal. The teacher recognized Roy's intrigue as well as his aptitude with fire, then nudged him into blacksmithing with a mentor, Vern Caron, from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Roy was hooked, and soon enough he bought his first forge and joined the California Blacksmith Association and the Artist-Blacksmith's Association of North America. Add to that his AAW membership, which began in the late 1990s, and we can begin to see his interests coalescing in an organized way.

Roy attended one of Dale Nish's legendary turning courses in Provo, Utah, in the mid-1990s. Roy mentions with a grin that the course brought some impressive attendees to Provo and to multiple Utah symposia. He rubbed shoulders with Mike Mahoney, Stuart Batty, and Richard Raffan—"Pretty amazing company," he quips.

I asked Roy how that course changed his approach to the lathe, and he answered quickly: "The goal was not perfection. The goal was learning. We cut our bowls in half to see where we could do better. Learning is more important than production. You can take that to places that aren't on the map."

The convergence of blacksmithing and the lathe came into focus soon afterwards. Roy contributed an

Hardly a Davidson



Hardly a Davidson, 2009, Oak, redwood, steel, vacuum cleaner parts, 31" × 73" × 20" (79cm × 185cm × 51cm)

Photo: Gary Luttringer

Shopmade turning tools

You can bet Roy makes his own custom tools to undercut the lip on his bowl forms.

> "Learning is more important than production. You can take that to places that aren't on the map.
> — Roy Holmberg

auction item to Santa Cruz's *Hearts for the Arts* benefit. This was his first effort to create a delicately undercut wooden bowl with a forged steel belt. He borrowed the concept of the clasp from an architectural feature from the Gamble House in Southern California. This multimedia bowl topped the auction with a $1,200 price, and apparently that was a persuasive validation.

Roy retired from government service shortly after the turn of the century and has been making artisan metalcraft commissions for municipalities as well as for private parties since then. In addition to merging woodturning and sculptural metal work, he also adds some ceramics on the side.

Roy sees "opportunities" hiding in stacks of discarded appliances, too. He fabricated his *Hardly a Davidson* from vintage vacuum cleaner parts with turned oak sprockets, segmented redwood wheels, and a custom-fabricated frame. This entry won the Best of Show "Golden Bear Award" at the California State Fair. Roy, who rides a real Harley on good days, cheerfully affirms that the *Hardly* is anatomically correct.

Roy now maintains a blacksmith shop in an industrial area of Santa Cruz and a woodshop in the coastal mountain home he built himself in Bonny Doon, California. He mentions that it's approaching time to downsize a bit, which is not going to be easy, considering the size of some of his machines.

Looking ahead

I asked Roy about his hopes for young people and the future of artisan crafts. He notes, "It's definitely harder now. There's less teaching opportunity—and you can't do this on a phone! School systems have dropped shop, and not just woodshop. Computer-controlled systems are taking over, and maybe there's less appeal to learn to do [craft work] with your hands. It's really hard to support a family with hand crafts."

However, Roy says he's encouraged that people in both of his craft disciplines—woodturning and blacksmithing—are making it a priority to pursue youth programs. We discussed the spectacular results seen in the AAW's Turning to the Future youth achievement awards and the youth turning program at AAW Symposia. "If we do not provide programs and encouragement for young people, many of these old-world crafts could become a thing of the past. The kids can learn just like they always did, but the mentors are getting older now," Roy says.

I asked Roy what he would do differently in his career if he had the chance. "Probably not much," he says. "You *can* do what you love. I love to make people smile." ■

For more on Roy, visit royholmberg.com.

Belted Burl, 2009, Redwood burl, steel, 2½" × 11" (6cm × 28cm)

Wells Shoemaker, MD, a retired pediatrician and healthcare quality improvement activist, is a past-president of the Santa Cruz Woodturners (2020-2021). He started turning in seventh-grade shop class and picked up steam, along with chucks and a better gouge, after reading Richard Raffan's books in 2000. He took a big leap forward in 2016, after taking multiple courses at Craft Supplies USA and now turns bowls for charity benefit.