

MAKING *the* CUT





JOHN NOFFSINGER

BY JOE MOTHERAL

Taking a block of rough wood and transforming it into a piece of exquisite art lies well within the province of John Noffsinger, whose passion for art, and especially woodturning, began when he was eight years old. “Or was it nine?” his father, veterinarian Glenn Noffsinger, muses. “He made a sign for some property we bought up in Nova Scotia.” John lives in Annandale but devotes two or three days a week in his woodworking studio on his parents’ farm near Upperville.

“I bought a spindle lathe for him to play around with,” says Dr. Noffsinger. “John got to using it pretty handy, then went out and bought the large bowl lathe, which he calls ‘The Cadillac.’ He out-classed me, so I had to give up.”

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John’s pyrographic portrait of a baseball bat-swinging Babe Ruth was part of this summer’s Step Up to the Plate exhibition at the Louisville Slugger Museum in Kentucky.
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John, an auto mechanic by day, occasionally incorporates metal in his sculptural works. For “Made in the Shade,” he fashioned tree roots and a trunk from hand-forged metal rods and shaped the canopy-like foliage from maple burl. “I decided to make the sculpture

while I was working in a blacksmith shop, making tools,” he says. “Woodturning, the vehicle of my artistic expression, has led me to explore extreme skills as part of the field. These include blacksmithing and the harvesting and curing of green woods.”

John’s time in the blacksmith shop also enables him to design and forge his own unique turning tools. And indeed, his woodworking shop boasts a whole rack filled with tools he made himself.

Preferring maple or cherry as his medium, John obtains most of his raw materials from construction sites or places where the power company has had to cut limbs. He coats the end of a typical piece with wax to keep the wood from cracking.

FACING PAGE: “BLUEGRASS DREAMER,” 14 IN. PLATTER TURNED OUT OF A PIECE OF QUILTED MAPLE



Working on 10 or so pieces at one time, John allows the spark of inspiration to suggest specific imagery in his designs. After turning a block into a vessel or tray, he sometimes etches an image onto the wood with a heated stylus (a process known as pyrography). One of these pieces depicts a colt, impressive with its shadowing and line work. Another piece, featuring a soaring eagle, gives the viewer a sense of motion. John's pyrographic portrait of a baseball bat-swinging Babe Ruth was part of this summer's *Step Up to the Plate* exhibition at the Louisville Slugger Museum in Kentucky.



Figures of people and animals make up only about 20 percent of his art, says John, who sometimes borrows from ancient designs for inspiration. He embellished one of his platters with the interlaced, seemingly endless, lines of the Celtic Knot. Rather than confining himself to a strict interpretation, he uses such designs as departure points for his own patterns.

John's latest theme has evolved into what he calls his *Brick House* series. These vessels, embroidered with staggered rows of bricklike patterns, serve as "frames" for whatever the user wishes—fruit or flowers, for example.



Pointing to a work in progress, John activates his lathe and demonstrates his shaping technique. Curled shavings and bits of dust drop to the floor as he carefully brushes the spinning bowl with a gouging chisel. Less than a minute later, the rough textured surface of the bowl's center is completely smooth.


"Green wood, freshly cut, will warp into an egg shape," says John. "In order for a piece to hold its symmetrical shape, it has to be dried to a moisture level of ideally about seven to 10 percent." During that process, which usually takes about five months, John periodically checks a turned piece with a moisture meter. He later applies Danish oil, shellac or varnish as a finish, depending on the item's intended use.

John exhibits and sells his work regionally and nationally. Five of his pieces have been juried in to this month's *Art at the Mill* show in Millwood (see Calendar). His work is also available at The Blue Peach in The Plains, Arts Afire in Alexandria and the Artisans Center of Virginia in Waynesboro. A recipient of more than 20 woodturning



awards during the past eight years, John holds professional membership in nine associations and clubs, including The American Association of Woodturners. He has taught and demonstrated woodturning at a number of venues, including the Smithsonian Institution Crafts Show.

While much of his skill is self-taught, John notes that he did soak up art courses at the Corcoran School of Art, the Torpedo Factory Art Center and Northern Virginia Community College. Eventually, he hopes to be able to pursue woodturning full-time.

For more information about John's turned wood pieces, visit www.johnnoffsinger.com, or contact him at 703-876-9580. 

FACING PAGE, TOP: PIECES FROM THE BRICKHOUSE AND GRASSHOUSE SERIES (LARGE PLATTER IS 18" IN DIAMETER; SMALLEST IS 3 1/2" IN DIAMETER); AND "ODE TO THE WOOD: MADE IN THE SHADE," HAND-FORGED METAL RODS, MAPLE BURL; THIS PAGE, TOP: "ODE TO THE BABE: OVER THE GRANDSTANDS," MAPLE PLATTER, 16" DIAMETER; COURTESY RUTH ESTATE; AND CELTIC SCROLL EMBELLISHMENT, 11"H X 4 1/2"W