

*Wenge, Africa
dark brown and black
11-in., \$35*

Exotic Woods

Observations of a master turner

by Bob Stoksdale

[*Editor's note:* Early this summer, veteran woodturner Bob Stoksdale had an exhibit of some 120 bowls at Richard Kagan's gallery in Philadelphia. We were so taken by his extensive use of exotic woods that we asked him to tell us a little about some of those woods, as well as how he works. The bowls speak for themselves.]

I have three lathes—two Delta 12-inchers and a homemade big one that is built of steel I-beams and swings 31 inches inside the headstock. One of the Deltas has the headstock blocked up 3 inches so I can turn up to an 18-inch diameter inside. I do 90 percent of my turning on it as I have an exhaust fan just back of it to solve the dust problem. All three lathes have jackshafts for better speed selection. They also have reversing switches to aid in sanding.

Almost all of the decorative bowls, trays and smaller salad bowls are started on a single center screw or 6-inch faceplate. I use several different methods to do the inside job, sometimes even the single center screw, but more usually, for footed bowls, the three-jaw geared chuck. Trays usually have a block glued on the bottom, with newsprint between for easy removal.

I do most of my turning with two gouges, 1-inch and 1/2-inch standard tools of the kind also used for spindle work. The corners are ground back a long way so the tip is really a half-oval shape. I use a shearing cut. I never use the deep, long-and-strong style of gouge, because I don't need all that metal, and there's very little strain on the tool. In fact, I'd like to get some gouges made of steel that is only 1/8-inch thick, the ones I have are about 3/16.

Many, perhaps most of the deeper bowls have been roughed out first, dried in a heated room for about a month, then finished. The room is about 90 degrees, and I usually put a bowl on the floor for a week and then move it up onto the shelves for three weeks and it's dry. I have very little cracking and checking. When cracking does occur, I rough-sand the



Stocksdale

bowl and then repair it with a mixture of liquid epoxy and sawdust, as much sawdust as the epoxy will take. It sets overnight and you can turn right through it.

When the bowl is dry and back on the lathe, I finish the turning inside and out and then sand. I use a rubber disc sander on the outside with the lathe at its slowest speed, around 500 or 600 rpm. I start with 16-grit and move up through 36, 50, 100, 150 and 220. I go to a finer grit on some very hard woods, and occasionally use intermediate grits. The insides are sanded with the same grit sequence, after a final shearing cut with the small gouge from the rim as far as possible toward the bottom, a very light cut of 1/16-inch or less. This leaves the wood smooth. That disc sander is a real time-saver. On a large bowl, I sometimes use it with the lathe stationary to take all the tool marks off the inside.

Sometimes I oil bowls; some woods, like boxwood are better with no finish at all. But most of the decorative bowls have three coats of DuPont bar-top nitrocellulose lacquer, two coats of gloss, and after a little sanding, a flat satin coat.

I have a one-man shop and expect to keep it that way. I average about five bowls a day, fewer with difficult woods, up to 12 in walnut. It depends on the wood. My efficiency drops to about 50 percent when someone else is in the shop. I work a 35-hour week, 10 months a year.

I have about 20 tons of wood on hand to select from so I seldom make more than one or two of any particular wood at one time. I have many sources of supply. A lot of the exotic woods I get in log form from suppliers in London. I get teak from a source in Bangkok. When I get a new wood, I rough out a bowl and sit it on the bench and watch it. If it cracks, I put it in a plastic bag to slow it down for a few days then take it out again. I get to know what it will do by leaving it on the bench as long as I need to. I'm in no big rush to finish a bowl.



Canafistoula, Brazil, pinkish brown, 14-in. dia., \$35

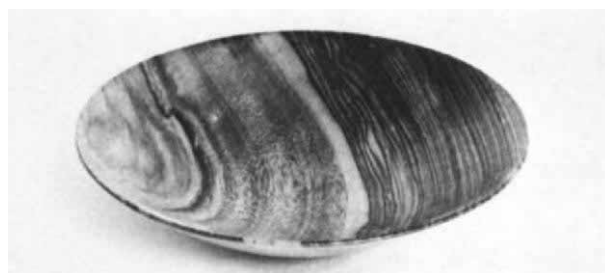
Canafistoula—I purchased several boards of this wood at White Bros. in Oakland. Unfortunately the boards were only 1 inch thick. It makes nice trays but I think it would look nice in a bowl too.

Wenge—This wood (photo opposite page) is fairly common in Europe. I know of two hotels that used it in their lobbies. Very little comes to this country. I got this from Penberthy. Rather hard to turn as the very coarse grain tears easily. The unusual grain pattern is so nice in some pieces that I do not use any finish as it would tend to kill the contrast.



Olivewood, Italy, cream and brown, 7-1/2-in., \$50

Olivewood—Another log from a dealer in London. Mediterranean olive is far superior to California olive for grain and workability. I enjoy the odor of the wood as I work it and it turns and sands very easily. The log is badly cracked but large enough to get some final bowls anyhow.



Paldoa, Philippines, brown and black, 8-in., \$40

Paldoa—One of the more beautiful woods to come from the Philippines. It is a little harder than walnut but in sanding it gets unusually smooth and silky to the touch. It must have silica in it.



Shedua, Africa, olive green, 15-1/2-in., \$50

Shedua—I got this wood from Penberthy and have had pieces much larger. The plank was 16 inches wide and 16 feet long. I have had some 30 inches wide and 24 feet long. It is harder than walnut and tends to tear a bit, but is very stable so I have no warping problem on large trays. It makes a good furniture wood and is readily available here.



Para Kingwood, Brazil, purple, 6-in., \$85

Para Kingwood—A friend found this wood in London for me and I think it the most beautiful wood I have worked. I promptly ordered the rest of the supply—five logs about eight feet long. Forest Products Lab says it is no different from regular kingwood but the grain and color are far superior. Being in the rosewood family, it turns beautifully and is so easy to finish.



Pernambuco, Brazil, red, 9-in., \$100

Pernambuco—I got the wood for this piece from a log purchased in London. It is the wood used for violin bows and the shavings make a brilliant red dye for wool. I spend extra time collecting the shavings and sell them for \$3.00 a pound. It is not an easy wood to work because it takes care to get all the sanding marks out.



Cortezwood, Guatemala, olive green, 7-in., \$50

Cortezwood—This is the hardest wood I have come across, with the possible exception of African blackwood. I feel sure it would turn the edge of any carbon steel gouge. It is sometimes sold to novices as lignum. It is sometimes called "bastard lignum vitae". It is easy to sand but hard to turn smooth as it tends to chip and tear.



Black Yokewood, Africa, brown, 6-in., \$40

Black Yokewood—This is from another huge log that I bought on speculation in London. The dealer said it was quite similar to African blackwood but he does not know his woods very well. Forest Products Lab says it is related to shedua, which is available at several dealers here. I am fascinated by the black line between the sap and heartwood. I am afraid this is another one that will darken quickly. This was the first bowl off the log so I don't know.



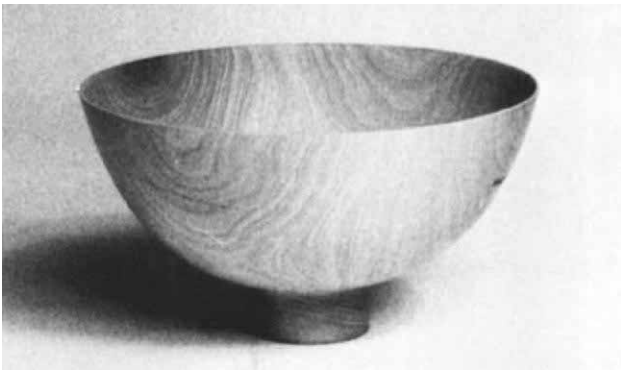
Desert Ironwood, Arizona, red-black, 6-1/2-in., \$60

Desert Ironwood—Some hippies got me almost a ton of this wood from the Arizona desert. There are great quantities of scraps and trimmings because the logs are so irregular and full of flaws. These have been dead for years and many cracks are full of sand, so it is not a wood to make a big profit on. It is almost as hard as lignum but sands well as it is not stringy or oily.



Padauk, Africa, red, 8-1/2-in., \$40

Padauk—Padauk is another dye wood but I do not work it very much because of the rapid change of color that most pieces go through. I bought several pieces in London but this one came from a wood collector in Louisiana. Easy to work, but like rosewood it should not be oiled as oiling hastens the darkening.



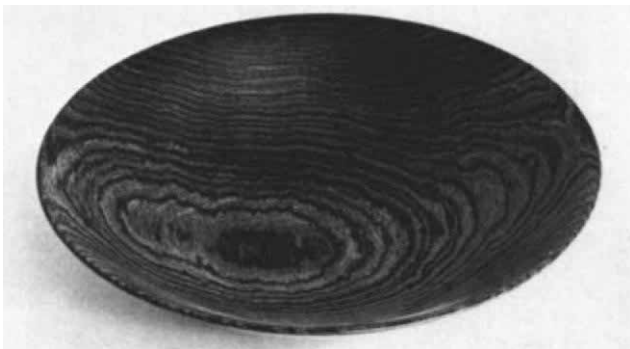
Boxwood, Cambodia, white, 6-in., \$40

Boxwood—Penberthy Lumber Co. supplies me with boxwood. It is one of the nicest woods to work because it cuts so cleanly and has a sheen from the tools before it is sanded. It reminds me of an eggshell and I have not found a finish for it that doesn't kill the beauty of the wood so I leave it bare, knowing that people with oily hands and peanuts will leave marks on it.



Silkwood, Australia, light brown, 11-1/2-in., \$100

Silkwood—A wood collector in Australia sent me this piece of wood. It is the most lustrous wood I have had. It is in the maple family but is not very common. This piece is from near the stump. It works nicely but the highly figured area does not cut smoothly so my gouges have to be sharpened several times.



Canalete, Venezuela, brown, 8-1/2-in., \$45

Canalete—This is a very oily wood of the cordia family and is quite common in Mexico. It goes by many different names. For some reason it is very hard to get. I got this piece from a wood collector. It is easy to work, does not clog up sandpaper, and has a strong, pleasant odor.



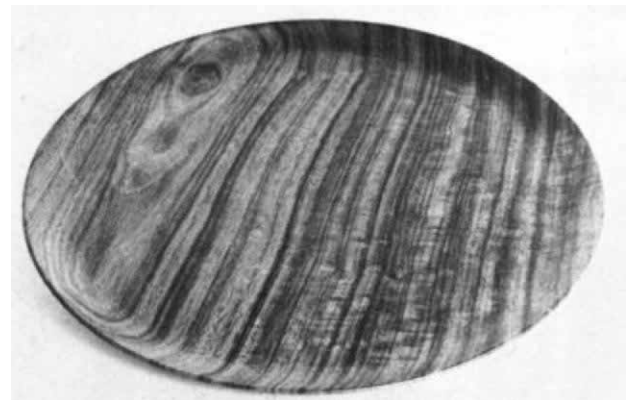
Tulipwood, Brazil, red, 6-1/2-in., \$50

Tulipwood—Here is another wood used by the French in their old furniture for decorative bandings and veneers. It is another member of the rosewood family and not available in this country. It's easy to work but the logs are badly checked so a lot of repairs are necessary to get a good bowl.



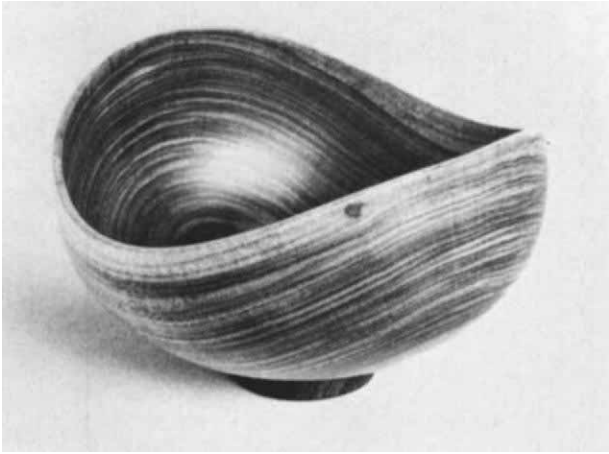
Goncalo Alves, Brazil, reddish tan and deep brown, 11-1/4-in., \$50

Goncalo Alves—This fine turning wood is another that has an unusual silky feel as it is sanded. Very easy to turn but many of the planks and boards twist and contort in the dry kiln and many surface checks show up. Recently I was offered a huge log that is in Le Havre, France. It weighs a couple of tons and would cost around 50 cents a pound. Too much to buy sight unseen.



Laurel, India, brown, blacky 12-1/2-in., \$37.50

Laurel—Most Indian Laurel that I have is not exciting enough to work but this is a dog board from a veneer company and it has almost a bee's wing pattern. So I had to make a tray from it even though it was only 5/8-inch thick when I got it.



Blackwood Acacia, California, light brown, 7-1/2-in., \$75

Blackwood Acacia—This bowl is made of local acacia and did not cost me anything. It is a difficult wood to work because the sanding and tool marks are hard to remove. This shape is a hard one to do too. When I roughed it out the top of the bowl followed the curvature of the log, as it does now. I enjoy the final result because the wood has so much luster and depth.



Coralline, India, red, 11-1/2-in., \$100

Coralline—I bought this log (15 inches in diameter, 17 feet long) on pure speculation. It grew in India and I selected it in London, but had never heard of the wood and the dealer was no help at all and charged extra because I would not take four logs. It is very difficult to work and takes a long time to sand as it is tough and stringy. The end result is worth the effort and after I had used 80% of the log I found it a very good dye wood—now I save all the shavings.



Ebony, Nigeria, black, 10-in., \$200

Ebony—This exceptional piece of Nigerian ebony came to me from Penberthy Lumber Co. in Los Angeles. It is not easy

to come by such a fine example of this wood as much of it has lots of flaws. The log was sort of diamond-shaped on cross section so I cut it in two with a big bandsaw and got two bowls out of each section. This one was near the center of the tree and had much nicer grain than the other. This ebony is not real hard and it turns and sands without problems. Any cracks that might be in the wood can be repaired with epoxy and lampblack and they will not show at all.



Kingwood, Brazil, purple, 5-in., \$60

Kingwood—This is the only bowl in those photographed that is turned on end grain so the center of the log is in the bottom of the bowl. The logs of this wood are quite small and round so it lends itself nicely to this shape and style. This wood was used for inlay bandings on old French Provincial furniture.



Cocobolo, Nicaragua, orange, red, black, brown, cream, 10-in., \$350

Cocobolo—This ranks among the top five pieces that I have made. It must be a freak piece of cocobolo because it does not change color like all the other cocobolo I have had. Most of it will change overnight and gradually darken until the grain patterns disappear. This piece did not change with two months exposure near a window. I designed it to get a few touches of sapwood and as much as possible of the fantastic grain patterns that appeared just under the sapwood. An easy wood to work in spite of its hardness. Many people are allergic to it but luckily I am not one of them.