

École Escoulen Tournage sur Bois, Aiguines, Provence

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Perched on a hillside 100 miles NW of Nice in the south of France, lies the small village of Aiguines, overlooking the beautiful Lac de Sainte Croix, and the lavender fields of the Valensole plateau beyond. This village has a long history of association with woodturning and drivers approaching it are welcomed by the sign 'a village of turners from 16th to 21st centuries'.



In the 1700's, the village started to become well known for its turned wooden products, especially the studded balls for playing boules. Games similar to 'boules' (pétanque in France) have been played since Roman times, when the balls were made of stone, but later they were made of wood. Aiguines lies at the end of the impressive Gorges du Verdon, where the forests have provided a plentiful supply of boxwood for hundreds of years and this is the main reason why woodturning thrived in the village.

The boules were made from the root ball of the boxwood tree. After trimming the root, it was turned to a sphere on early foot-powered lathes, before being passed to the women to hammer in the several hundred nails needed to cover the surface completely. While making the boules was the mainstay of the turners work, the rest of the tree left plenty of wood for turning other products such as tool handles, spoons and bowls, not to mention other items made by carpenters. With the industrial revolution, steam and diesel were introduced and



productivity increased significantly; a re-created workshop in the museum is shown below. Later, many of the turners left to fight in the First World War, never to return. A further blow occurred a decade later, when 2 Frenchmen found a way to make the boules in metal from a bronze alloy, took out a patent and started mass producing them as the game of pétanque became ever more popular in France.



By the late 1900's, there were no turners left in the village. A few other craftsmen remained and the village became increasingly reliant on tourism. It was not until a few years ago that the mayor of the village looked to reviving the link with woodturning, the result included major additions. An unusual new 'Museum of Woodturning', opened last year in Aiguines, which only has 200 permanent residents, although visitors swell numbers significantly in summer. Much is made of the history of woodturning associated with turning the boules, including a fascinating old grainy film of the whole process. The museum includes recently turned items by a number of French and international turners, such as Eli Avisera,



Mark Sfirri, Jacques Vessery, Alain Mailland & Jean-François Escoulen, all of whom tutor some courses at the school.

There was a disused school building available in the village and following fruitful discussions between the mayor and Jean-François Escoulen, the 'École Escoulen Tournage sur Bois' (School of Woodturning), devoted to traditional and contemporary woodturning, opened its doors in 2012.



Facilities in the school are excellent. There is a large double room workshop, with 16 lathes, mostly substantial Oneway 1640's, also an adjacent machinery room and smaller rooms for carving or other courses. The ground floor also includes an extensive woodturning library, a large kitchen, dining room and office, whilst upstairs there are 12 rooms to accommodate guests. The school has a full programme of woodturning courses and events throughout the year, varying from a 6 month course with over 700 hrs of teaching to become a woodturner, to one week courses. There is even a separate studio workshop made available for a year to a trainee at the end of his training at the school. It seems there are various bodies in France that will assist financially with some of this training. Events include collaborative weeks when turners work together with those specialising in other crafts and art forms; a symposium also takes place earlier in the year.

When he was 16, Jean-François started an

apprenticeship with his cabinet maker father, who specialised in balustrades and table legs. Seven years later Jean-François branched out on his own and in 1982 he received the 'Best craftsman in France' award. New craft markets were opening around France and he turned hundreds of items of fruit, bowls and lidded boxes with finials, but he wanted to produce something different and started experimenting with eccentric turning and turning on several different axes. These ideas have been developing ever since and to extend possibilities further, he developed his own special multi-axis chuck, leading to many of his signature type pieces



that are often whimsical, weird and wonderful. He has won many prizes for his creations and has demonstrated in many countries of the world, including several trips to the US as well as instructing over 2,000 in the art of woodturning. His efforts are now concentrated on the woodturning school, where he is assisted by a number of other turners and craftsmen such as Yann Marot and Olivier Logerot plus other turners from around the world.

Eccentric or multi-axis turning is therefore his speciality and there is nobody in the world with more experience of this type of turning. He spent a long time developing his sophisticated eccentric chuck, and its Mk3 version is now made by Vicmarc in Australia. Some aspects relating to this Mk3 eccentric chuck are covered in his 2011 DVD. His other KTMP DVD is mainly about making trembleurs and the use of the bedan tool, which is very popular with most French turners, but less so in Britain.

While there are one or two other eccentric chucks on the market, such as those made by Axminster and



Robert Sorby, none of them are as versatile; his chuck even has its own in-built moveable counterweights to offset the out-of-balance of the piece being turned.

A variety of multi-axis pieces can of course be achieved without any bought chucks. A shell I made



last year, was turned on 15 different centres using a special homemade chucking arrangement, as described by Mike Darlow in his 'Woodturning Methods' book.

Barbara Dill in the USA has spent a long time trying to make sense of multi-axis turning and how to describe it. In a recent small book 'Multi-axis turning: spindles and other things' she has simplified it down to:- a) there are only 2 outcomes for a cut, either in solid wood forming a circular section or in wood/air creating an arc. b) there are only 2 ways that a new axis can be moved relative to the centre axis, parallel or non-parallel. Many different forms are then explained in terms of these 4 variables and most of her items are made without any special chucks

As well as teaching all aspects of woodturning and his multi-axis speciality, Jean-François also likes to teach how to make trembleurs and the school workshop has a large number of homemade string



steadies, photo below shows two of them in use, made to his own design to support on the lathe the very delicate trembleurs that can be well over a metre long, yet have a main shaft of only 2 mm in diameter. A trembleur is made from a single piece of wood, alternating small turned elements with lengths of very thin stem. They were originally used as a test for apprentice turners.

The school offers only one course per year in English, entitled 'Perfectionnement a la carte a destination Anglophone' and it was this that I joined in late July, hoping to learn more about off-centre turning from the master. The school's website, www.escoulen.com, does little to clarify the content of the course, when it says in English that the training includes 'All public initiation. Improvement all subjects - digging, working green wood, turning eccentric, finesse, turning woodworking...', so I was not completely sure of what I was in for!

There were Americans Scott McGowan and Carl Cummings, plus Jack who has been living in Paris for 10 years, making 4 of us on the course, although a couple of Frenchman, Axel and Renee, occasionally joined in. The 37 hr course was all about eccentric/multi-axis turning. We started by making 2 simple off-centre items turned between centres, a corkscrew with dimensions to fit our own hands and then a candlestick (right).



To start with, a centre plus 2 extreme points are marked on each end of the spindle blank and then it is a question of turning with several different axes, based on the different end points. For safety, ring centres are used both ends and special care is required, because so much of the cutting is intermittent, part air part wood. When the eccentricity is substantial, the tool overhang may have to be very large and the control of the gouge can then be difficult, especially for the intermittent cuts, so definitely not for beginners.

On the second day, after making the third item with 3 axes, we were introduced to the sophisticated Escoulen chuck. To start with he made it easier for us by only using the cup chuck part of the system, involving 2 main variables: the angle of the wood in the chuck and the indexed rotation within the chuck. There are a lot of moving parts within the overall chuck system, so rather than having the further mechanisms of a scroll chuck to clamp the wood; a strong metal ball ring socket is used into which an accurately produced tapered spigot on the blank is squeezed very tightly using pressure from the tailstock. Turning can be carried out at different angles by moving the ball as required within the cup chuck and locking in place; importantly, turning can then proceed without the need for tailstock support.

After making a simple hedgehog snout, we

progressed to an off-centre goblet, and a small spoon, using several changes of angle for the axes. It is often not clear what the resulting shape will be as you cut away with the spindle gouge, so the initial demos by Jean-Francois were invaluable, even if we did not always get things right. Making a 3 axis 3 sided goblet made us appreciate the ease of twisting the piece around by several indexed notches while maintaining the skewed axis; the resulting slightly scalloped rim shape was not something that one could easily predict.



He then introduced us to the main chuck, which enables the offset to be varied by up to 30mm



transversely and has the facility to largely compensate for the out of balance forces by re-setting the 3 integral peripheral balance weights at the rear of the chuck. 3



of my relatively simple exercise pieces in photo, show just a few of the chucks capabilities. Twisting of an offset piece within the chuck can make simple but effective decorations for items such as box lids, which also shows part of the Escoulen chuck. There are endless possibilities for producing strange and unexpected shapes, but extensive time consuming experimentation is required.

Jean-François was an excellent instructor and he introduced us to just a few of the myriad of possibilities with multi-axis turning and in particular using his clever eccentric chuck, which is an expensive piece of kit that us participants have to decide whether to purchase.

For all of us the week went far too quickly, but we agreed it had been very enjoyable and instructive. A beautiful setting too, overlooking an old pepper pot towered chateau and the beautiful lake below. The warm weather helped to provide a relaxing atmosphere.