

● **THE FRENCH CONNECTION**

ROBIN (OF THE GREENWOOD) STRENGTHENS THE ENTENTE CORDIALE AND BEGINS HIS SEARCH FOR SUITABLE MATERIAL

● **VOLUNTEER STILL NEEDED! SEE INSIDE**



Turning and Carving with Alain Mailland

By Robin Goodman

One of the most creative and original woodturners is the Frenchman Alain Mailland, who now has a worldwide reputation, **photo 1**. Not surprisingly he has featured in several books about contemporary turners, such as 'Masters: Woodturning' and 'New Masters of Woodturning'.

He started off working as a carpenter, but in the early



1



2

1990's he took up turning and has been full time at it ever since. He was very interested in plants and natural forms and these have been the inspiration for most of his turned and carved sculptural pieces.

*He started making flower shapes in the mid 1990's and found he needed to develop special techniques and tools. He often makes one off cutting tools to enable him to turn particular shapes and forms that he has in mind; some of his common homemade cutters that fit into long handles are shown in **photo 2**. Using blacksmith methods, he makes them from 10mm carbon steel and they usually cut on both sides. His straight very pointed cutter is being used for hollowing in **photo 3**.*



3

He specialises in turning green wood, especially root burls, from his local trees such as madrone, pistachio, hack berry, juniper and heather that are common in the dry part of southern France, where he lives in the Cevennes hills. The heartwood is often a different colour to the sapwood and he plans his piece around this to great effect. After sketching out his ideas for a piece, he turns and carves the wood, before letting it dry and because parts of the pieces are often so thin, during the drying period they tend to distort to enhance the pieces further. When dry he will then finish them by final carving, sanding, (sometimes using sand blasting) texturing and bending, typically using steam from a wall paper stripper. It is often difficult to work out how he creates some of his wonderful pieces, which I have admired for some years. Some of his pieces are shown here, **photos 4-1 to 4-6**.



4-1



6

4-2

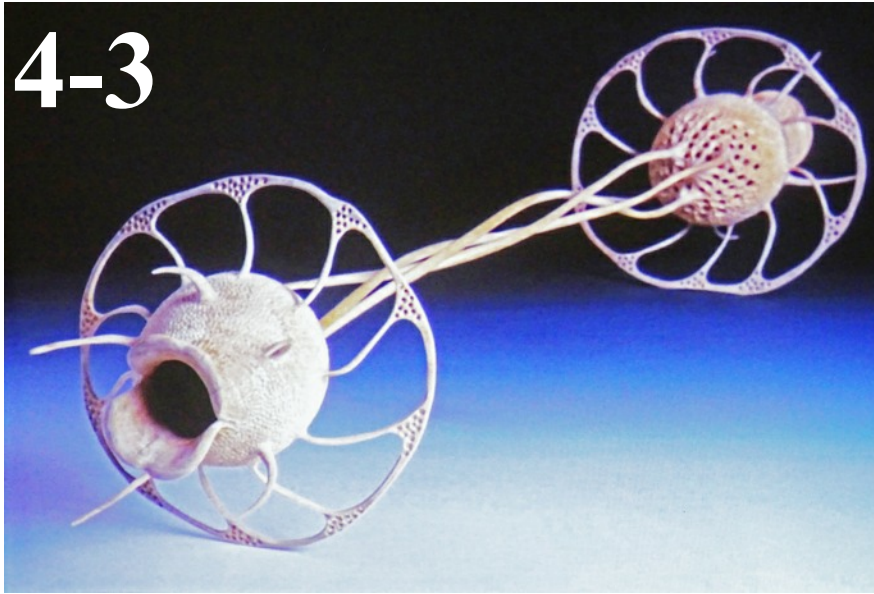


He has developed his skills in multi and off centre turning using special chucks, such as Escoulen's, and special ways of fixing odd shaped wood or root burls on the lathe as he demonstrated to us using chains and wedges, **photo 5**. When I saw that he was running a week's workshop at the Escoulen School of Woodturning in Provence in May, I decided this was an opportunity not to be missed. The translated title of the course was 'Marine and Plant inspired sculptures.' I was aware that the course was to be in French and my schoolboy French is much too basic, but I

had seen Alain on video and knew that his English was not bad - see the interesting short video on YouTube titled 'Presence of a Maestro - Alain Mailland'.

There were 5 others on the course, Frenchmen Hubert, Olivier, Claude and Bourgeois plus Marc from the French speaking part of Switzerland, **photo 6**. I only found out at the end of the week that they were all professional wood-

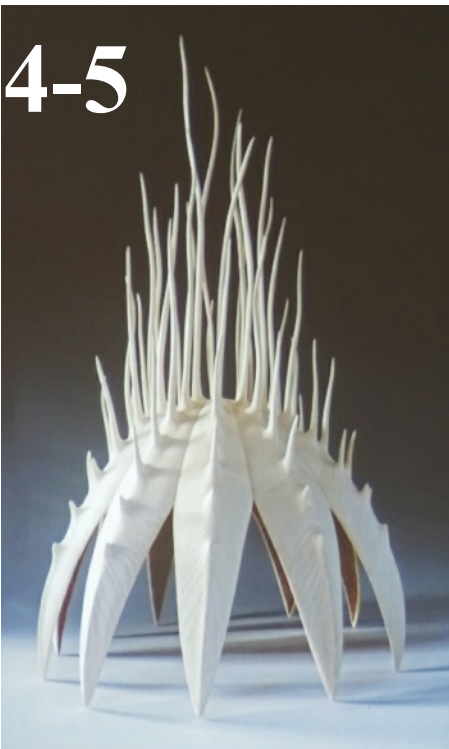
4-3



4-4



4-5



turners, earning a living from turning. Being a relative beginner and with such rudimentary French, it proved to be a challenging week for me. Claude turned out to be quite a linguist, speaking 5 languages, so he was able to help out with

4-6



5

translating on occasions. He now lives in Italy, where he has tried to increase interest in woodturning



from a very low level and he runs a number of courses; he is also main agent for the special Vicmarc Escoulen eccentric chucks. The school is well equipped with more than a dozen robust Oneway



lathes and a full range of woodturning equipment, including Escoulen eccentric chucks plus carving equipment such as



Freedom flex shafts. We started by making flowers using his special cutters fixed into long handles. The curved cutters, which can cut both convex and concave shapes profiles depending on which side of the blade is used, were used on wet wood to form thin curved petals less than 1mm thick, photo 7, that were subsequently cut with scissors to form the individual petals, photo 8. Next we made a 'tree' along the lines of one of his signature pieces. Turning the branches was not too difficult, but enlarging the bottom

of the hollowing, like a bell pit, with his special tools but without direct thickness measurement was difficult and my thickness soon reduced to zero and 2 pieces! The subsequent carving away of much of the wood and further shaping using various burrs in a Freedom proved more difficult than it looked and the longer spiral cutters are not easy to control safely. Four of the incomplete pieces made in the class are shown in photo 9.

A carnivorous *Nepenthes* plant was our next exercise using an Escoulen off centre chuck. The top of the plant was first turned as eccentrically as possible with a thin stem, which was bent to a curve using a heat gun; however the stem tended to straighten even though string was used to hold it to a curve for a while. The bottom half was then turned and carved, before re-bending the top using a plastic steam tube was slit so it could slide over the slim flower stem, **photo 10**.



To obtain a good curve, Alain emphasised the need to turn the stem to a very uniform diameter, not more than 4mm and the longitudinal grain needs to line up exactly with the stem. We then used a different feature of the special chuck to turn a coral like piece on several radial axes like 3 overlapping spheres. Hollowing was carried out on each axis, but only limited turning could be completed on the outside, before reverting to carving.

My unfinished piece is shown in photo 11.



Alain experiments with many different textures and methods, some of which he demonstrated. Many different types of bits or burr are used and he keeps record sample pieces of his different results together with the method employed. A fine sample of his texturing is shown in **photo 12**. Pyrography is an additional effect he uses, especially for a contrasting colour and he likes to use sandblasting as a further means of texturing.

We had a very inspiring slide show of many of his pieces from 1994 to the present and we took turns using a whiteboard to try to work out what form he had turned before starting the carving stage; some were just impossible to work out. His sculptural pieces are generally different

from any other turner and are featured in many galleries around the world.

It was a fascinating and challenging week that leads me to admire him even more as a unique and unusual turner making the most amazing pieces – many with a lot of patience to carve and smooth the pieces to produce the beautiful finish and shapes that are his signature. In addition he is an amiable and charming family man. His type of pieces are extremely time consuming, but I would like to experiment further if I can obtain some suitable green wood.