

MACO

C A R I B B E A N L I V I N G



US \$7.95



as the wood turns

ST JOHN ARTIST LEARNED TO WORK A LATHE OUT OF NECESSITY. NOW HIS TWISTED VASES TAKE HIM AROUND THE WORLD, AS HE TEACHES AND EXHIBITS HIS CRAFT

MANY ARTISTS ARRIVE AT THEIR CALLING VIA MAGNETISM, DRAWN TO THEIR MEDIUM BY A CREATIVITY THAT FLOURISHES FROM WITHIN, DEMANDING TO BE BROUGHT TO FRUITION. Woodturner Avelino Samuel's story is unique. His path to virtuosity was a slow and steady march through boyhood and a long teaching career; his accomplishment as an artist is rooted in sheer necessity.

Avelino Samuel and his nine siblings grew up in Estate Eden, still considered a quiet, sparsely populated town five decades after his formative years. Lacking in retail outlets where shelves proffer the precise item one requires at the moment of its necessity, St John, the smallest of the three US Virgin Islands, begs of its residents a certain resourcefulness.

"If a handle went on a pickaxe or hoe, my father gave me the job to make a new one by hand until we could get the chance to buy something of a better quality," Avelino says matter-of-factly. "From the time I was in elementary school, I was making replacement handles for tools, or replacement boat oars. You learn to improvise. You don't say you can't do something, you find a way to get it done. It becomes a mindset."

Manually shaping tool handles and boat oars using a machete and a spokeshave, Avelino became intimately familiar with the way wood responded to his touch. He learned just how much pressure he could inflict to exact his desired result. Avelino took his knowledge of working with wood beyond the functional, making small toys, crafts, even afro picks engraved with zodiac signs for his friends in the 1970s. As an adult teaching industrial arts at the island's Julius E. Sprauve School, Avelino expanded his repertoire with furniture, in particular four-poster beds.

WITH EVERY HOUR AVELINO SPENT AT HIS LATHE, TURNING, EXPERIMENTING, CARVING, OBLIGING THE WOOD TO TRANSFORM FROM CHARACTERLESS LOG SECTIONS TO IMPOSSIBLY SMOOTH, FLOWING ROUND VESSELS, HE HIMSELF UNDERWENT A TRANSFORMATION



Working with wood was a constant in Avelino's life, but it wasn't until he was in his 40s that inspiration struck like a bolt of lightning, igniting a passion that he couldn't ignore. After he attended the American Association of Woodturners symposium in 2000, his thirst for the pursuit of art grew insatiable.

"When I got back from the symposium, I was so motivated and excited that I turned almost every day," he says. "I went to work, came home and changed my clothes, then went downstairs and turned from dusk until no later than 9 p.m. so as not to disturb the neighbours."

With every hour Avelino spent at his lathe, turning, experimenting, carving, obliging the wood to transform from characterless log sections to impossibly smooth, flowing round vessels, he himself underwent a transformation. The knowledgeable woodworker became a skilled woodturning artist.

"Once you engross yourself, you can improve your skills incredibly," he says of the astounding amplification his talent underwent in the early 2000s. "The more you practise, the more consistently you can produce excellent work."

Harkening back to the smooth, rounded tool handles Avelino made for his father as a young child, he began producing wooden vases and bowls, confident in his ability to create their fluid curved lines. A fast learner, he soon realised that while his talent for creating strikingly polished finished works was obvious, he would have to go beyond their simplistic beauty if he was going to make a name for himself.

"The vases and bowls are just the canvas," he says. "They alone won't get you that far."

He added flair with twists running down the sides of his vases, inspired by organic shapes found in the cascading vines and spiralled whelk shells of his island's landscape. The lines curve so sleekly from each vase's top to bottom, they defy belief that their creation was guided by human hand rather than computer-programmed machine. Twisted vases remain his signature, though now he often adds texture by meticulously, painstakingly burning tiny indent patterns on his vase exteriors, adding another layer of wonderment to his finished pieces. Avelino Samuel's talent is so innate that even he struggles to define his woodturning prowess.

"I don't know what I have," he says. "I do what I do and it works out. I have a good feel for lines and proportions, and I have the ability to execute it as well. I had no idea where I was going with this; I just enjoy doing the work."

Fifteen years after Avelino's true gift began to reveal itself in the wake of the AAW symposium, he's become a renowned woodturner known for his bowls and vessels that add grace and allure to the homes of their purchasers. He continues to attend the annual AAW symposium that first fuelled his zeal, but now the mentee has become the mentor. Avelino teaches at the symposium, and his calling has taken him criss-crossing the globe from the US to Australia to China to Tanzania, demonstrating his craft at exhibitions. While his talent is an obvious factor that sets him apart in the industry, the native St Johnian notes that he's one of very few black men working as woodturning artists today.

Avelino Samuel is certainly one of the most notable residents of his small island where, at his home and studio near Coral Bay, he accepts deliveries of salvaged wood from local tree-trimming operations.



AVELINO SAMUEL

STEVE SIMONSEN





STEVE SIMONSEN

This makes up the majority of the material that he uses, staying true to his make-do-with-what-you-have ethos, though he does import African blackwood and ebony for the incredibly delicate finials that top some of his vases. A large jumble of nondescript logs sits in his yard, each awaiting its turn at the lathe. Avelino points out several, describing their interior colouring and appearance with a warm familiarity, showing particular fondness for seagrape, which grows prevalently along St John shorelines and exhibits a beguiling pink hue when turned.

The common practicality in which Avelino's career is rooted comes up in discussion with him as frequently as remarks on the artistic aspects of woodturning. He prefers working with mahogany because he likes the look of it, he says, but also because it's predictable and stable, and it doesn't dull his tools.

The resourcefulness that drew him to wood in the first place is still very much a part of his approach today as a professional artist. He's fashioned his own tools and made modifications to others so he can travel with them to exhibitions. Avelino's knowledge of his craft's technicalities run deep, but when he is at work in his home studio, the practical side of woodturning takes a back seat to the incredible vision of the artist at work.

The lathe's motor whines, and its gouge emits a levelled grinding sound as it cuts away at the spinning wood, evoking the feeling of being at a construction site and momentarily distracting me from the transformation that's taking place at the whims of Avelino's dark hands. Wood shavings spray off at an impressive distance and I focus through the red mahogany shower, ensnared by the magic of Avelino's work. The wood gives and changes shape fluidly, metamorphosing from an innocuous section of log to a simple yet beautiful bowl, as though that's what it was always meant to become.

This is the crux of Avelino Samuel's art—the ability to see beyond a slab of salvaged wood's dull grey exterior to the beauty within.



AVELINO SAMUEL

AVELINO'S KNOWLEDGE OF HIS CRAFT'S TECHNICALITIES RUN DEEP, BUT WHEN HE IS AT WORK IN HIS HOME STUDIO, THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF WOODTURNING TAKES A BACK SEAT TO THE INCREDIBLE VISION OF THE ARTIST AT WORK



AVELINO SAMUEL