

NEW · MASTERS *of* WOODTURNING

EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF WOOD ART



TERRY MARTIN
KEVIN WALLACE



THIERRY MARTENON

It's Good to Work with Almost Nothing

In a field where innovation is highly valued, Thierry Martenon is perhaps the most innovative of all. He has a genius for producing the unexpected and in a remarkably short time, he has established himself as one of the most collectible artists in the field. Martenon explains how he came to be a wood artist: "I reside in the

I live in a small village where everybody knows everybody. It is a long way to the modern life in the city and we live like people did 60 years ago. I need that to create my pieces. I need to be quiet.

mountains where the only raw materials are wood and stone. Everything is made of wood—houses, tools, roofs, everything. If you are not a farmer, you are a carpenter, a cabinetmaker, a logger, or a sawyer. My grandfather was a sawyer and my other grandfather carted wood with horses. In my village, there was an old woodturner, and when I was young, I was fascinated by him. He was like a magician. Later, I saw the work of Jean-Francois Escoulen on show and he was the second magician in my life. I had no choice, I wanted to become a magician."

Martenon is an unpretentious man who is visibly embarrassed, and pleased, when his work is praised. His humility probably has much to do with where he was born and still resides. "I live in the south-east of France in the Alps where the countryside is beautiful. In the mountains, we have long winters, which are good for working. I was born here and I love to live here. I live



Photo by Audrey Martenon. Other photos courtesy the artist unless otherwise indicated.

ABOVE

Martenon burns his signature into the wood with a pyrograph.

OPPOSITE

Untitled #14022004, 2004. Walnut, elm, veneer, slate; 36" high x 6" diameter. Patches of veneer give a remarkable textured effect to the surface of this turned form.

in a small village where everybody knows everybody and the young people help the oldest. It is a long way to the modern life in the city and we live as people did 60 years ago. I need that to create my pieces. I need to be quiet." It certainly is that. Behind his

When I get a good idea, I run to the stock of wood and it starts. It's like wild dance and until it is complete, all my brain can think about is that idea.

Martenon has built his workshop into a restored barn in his home village of Le Désert in the French Alps.

home, sheep graze in the fields that sweep up to the looming escarpment of the forested plateau that dominates the landscape. In a hectic world where many of us dream of such peace, he is a lucky man to be so comfortable in his identity and sense of place.

In his peaceful environment, Martenon can work without interruption, surging into activity when an idea strikes. "First of all, I take my sketch book and, sitting in my comfortable old chair, I draw. It could take days and days. When I get a good idea, I run to the stock of wood and it starts. It's like wild dance and until it is complete, all my brain can think about is that idea."

Martenon's approach is an amazing change for someone who had a traditional French training as a cabinetmaker. After secondary school, Martenon attended the Greta Tête d'Or institute in Lyon and graduated in 1990, as a cabinetmaker. He worked at that until 1998, when he decided to devote himself to turning. During this time, he also was fascinated with graphic arts and continued to learn all he could. It was not long before he left behind traditional turning and allowed his artistic instincts to take over.



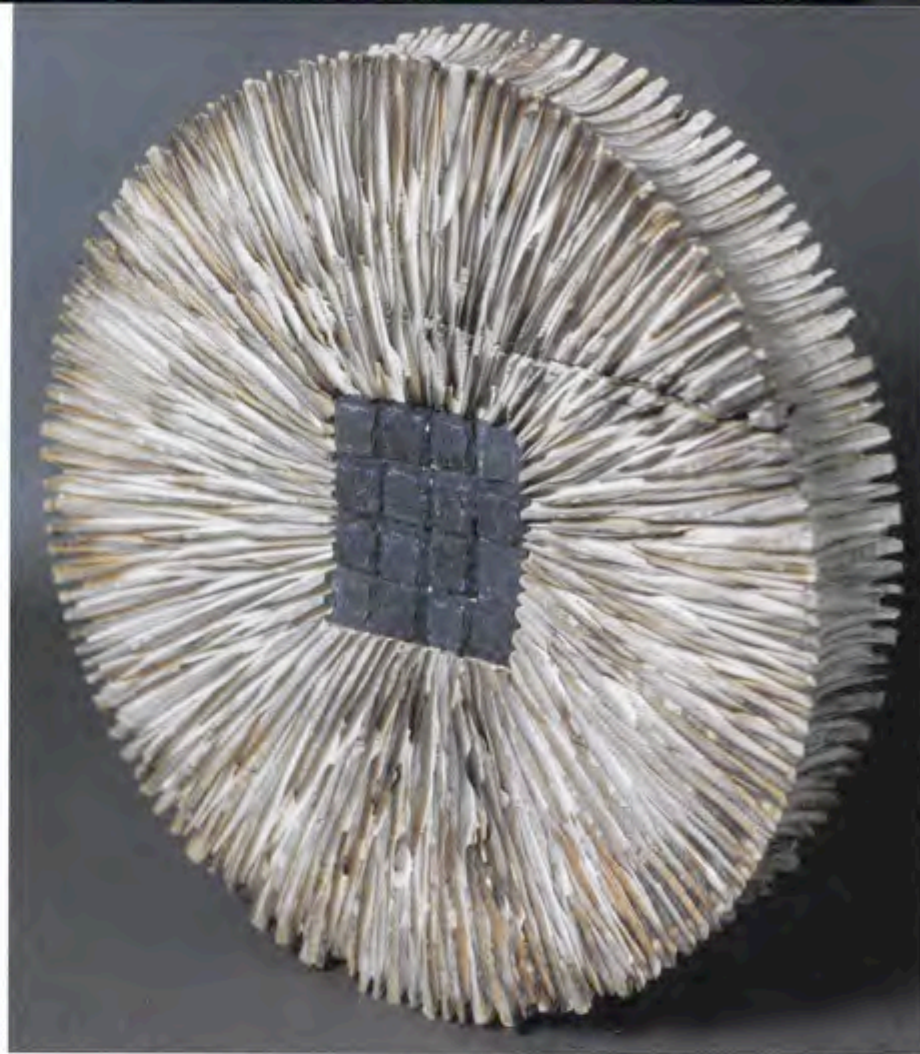
Serenity in Simple Forms

Martenon uses simple forms, aiming for a degree of serenity. Martenon's surface treatments give his pieces such extraordinary qualities. The treatments seem simple, but they are the result of meticulous work. Even seemingly brutal tools like the chainsaw, acid, or a blowtorch are wielded with great care. Martenon explains, "I like to create a contrast between light and shadow. The notches in the wood create the downstrokes and upstrokes that play with light. Polishing creates effects of darkness and light as well. The wood also adds its own qualities. I mainly use local woods such as walnut, maple, and ash. By combining different materials, such as copper, stone, linen, tin, or resin with the wood, I can give each piece its own character." The treatments are completely unlike the work of anybody else in the field. The strips of veneer look like metal hammered onto the surface of the

wood. Thin sections of slate laid edge-on to fill the tops of vessels create a startling contrast and the slate has a harsh tactile quality that contrasts deeply with the feel of wood. The sculptural pieces have clearly been influenced by Martenon's interest in graphic art and they often look like sketches solidified, drawn concepts brought to three-dimensional fruition.

Working from a restored barn in his village, Martenon is determined to keep his processes simple and he is not obsessed with equipment. "It's good to work with almost nothing. I tinker and invent. I've made textures simply by rubbing a handful of gravel on the wood. You can waste a lot of time freeing yourself from technique. To be honest, for me the lathe is just a tool like any other tool. But, it has given me the taste of simple shapes, pure design. It has been an important part of my artistic life."

In 2004, Martenon stopped naming his pieces. Now he gives them a simple number for identification. Possibly Martenon believed the search for original names was distracting from the simplicity of his forms. The response would be in keeping with the



ABOVE

Untitled #06012005, 2005. Maple, slate; 19" diameter. Martenon's juxtaposition of two unlikely materials, slate and wood, is typical of his approach. He is unrestricted by conventional expectations.

BELOW

Untitled #05052004, 2004. Walnut and slate; 22" long x 6" diameter. *Untitled #05052004* resembles a ceremonial vessel to be held in both hands. The carving on the body reflects the edges of the embedded slate.



HOW MARTENON WORKS: CREATING SIMPLE ART



Photos by Thierry Martenon

To show the creation of art can be a simple process, Martenon turns a simple disk on the lathe.



After sanding the disk, Martenon cuts a square and smooth hole in its center using conventional carving tools.



Martenon chars the surface with an oxy-acetylene torch. Done quickly, the charring is only superficial and does not crack the wood.



Outside Martenon uses a wire brush to remove the loose carbon from the wood surface.



Martenon bevels the edges of the piece using a rasp, then sands it and applies an oil finish.



The finished piece: the beveled edges highlight the simple form, contrasting with the burnt surface and its exaggerated grain. Art does not always have to be complicated.