

Kade Bolger The Accidental Artist

Story by Katie Ryalen | Photos by Kirsten McGoey

Custom. Handmade. Artisanal. These are the words of a revolution. In our overwhelmingly consumerist society, we're seeing a significant shift in how we feel about the things we buy, the gifts we give, and the items with which we accent our homes. We don't want mass-produced, rather, we want something that has the hand of the maker in it. Woodcarver Kade Bolger knows exactly what it takes and as an artist he puts his heart and soul into each piece he makes.

Each of Bolger's unique carvings is beautifully crafted, lovingly finished and utterly timeless. He has been carving professionally for six years, during which time he has determinedly sought to not just grow his business as an entrepreneur, but also to perfect his craft as an artist. His repertoire includes canes, bowls and boxes. "I do a lot of live-edge bowls, platters and plates," he explains. "And my niche is the custom canes. That's where it all started. Before I learned how to use the lathe, I would do custom canes and carvings."

As a child, Kade was always intrigued by woodworking, wood carving and the source of wood in general: trees. "My grandfather got me into everything wood," he recalls. "I was eight years old when he gave me my first knife and told me not to cut myself." Together with his grandfather, Kade began carving whimsical figurines, miniature houses and caricatures.

It was an unfortunate accident on the job which affected his back that gave Kade the idea to turn his hobby into his business. "I couldn't really work a regular nine-to-five job with my back injury," he says. "The pain was too much and my sleep was disrupted as a result. So I had to create something, a business of my own that I could do at my own pace." Returning to wood carving was therapeutic, he found, and helped him through the grieving process as he worked on his recovery.

Once Kade had regained his mobility and could walk again, he evolved from hand carving into wood turning. An internet search for community-based programs led him to the membership-based Durham Woodworking Club in Oshawa, which he joined in 2011. It was there that he learned how to use a lathe. "I took a crash course in safety and operation, and from there I was hooked," he says.

Much of the work he does on the lathe was self-taught through books, internet instruction and trial and error. Over the years Kade has made a great effort to attend talks and demonstrations held by other woodturning guilds in Ontario to learn about new techniques and methods. "I've worked with probably 10 internationally known artists and wood turners," Kade says. "And then I take their techniques and meld them all into my own."

Though Kade still lives with the ghost of his injury, he doesn't let it slow him down. On his good days he is in the shop. On his bad days, where the pain limits his ability to be on his feet, he is able to take it easy on a couch or in a chair, and work on his carving and finishing. "It's really about managing my back pain now," he says. "It has been a life saver for me to not have to work for someone, to work at my own pace and be on my own schedule."

Within the past four years, Kade has had the opportunity to teach woodworking through the Durham Woodworking Club—a testament to the idea of the student becoming the teacher, since this is where he effectively learned his trade. He has also been asked to perform demonstrations for the Woodturners Guild of Ontario on live-edge bowl turning and his finishing and box turning techniques.

In 2016, Kade had the opportunity to travel to Ireland to learn from world-renowned wood turners. "I spent three days with a fellow named Seamus Cassidy, who does a lot of embellishing, gold flaking, texturing and carving on his turnings," Kade says. "I also did a master class weekend with a really well-known fellow, Glenn Lucas, who does production turning of bowls."

This year, Bolger also travelled to Manchester to attend an international woodturning symposium. It was at this event that all attendees were invited to enter a piece of their own work into the symposium gallery. "There were three or four hundred professional wood turners in attendance, and each person could enter one or two items into this gallery," he recalls. "I entered two pieces: one called "Mesmer's Eye" and another one called "Le Feu". I didn't know it when I got there but they were choosing 50 items out of this gallery for a year-long travelling art exhibition, and Le Feu was chosen! I was ecstatic because there were over 375 entries of phenomenal work, and I walked in there thinking I didn't have a chance. I mean, I like my work. It has nice form and quality execution. But some of these guys have been doing this their whole lives and I've been doing it here professionally for six. So I was happy that my piece was number 32 of 50 chosen."

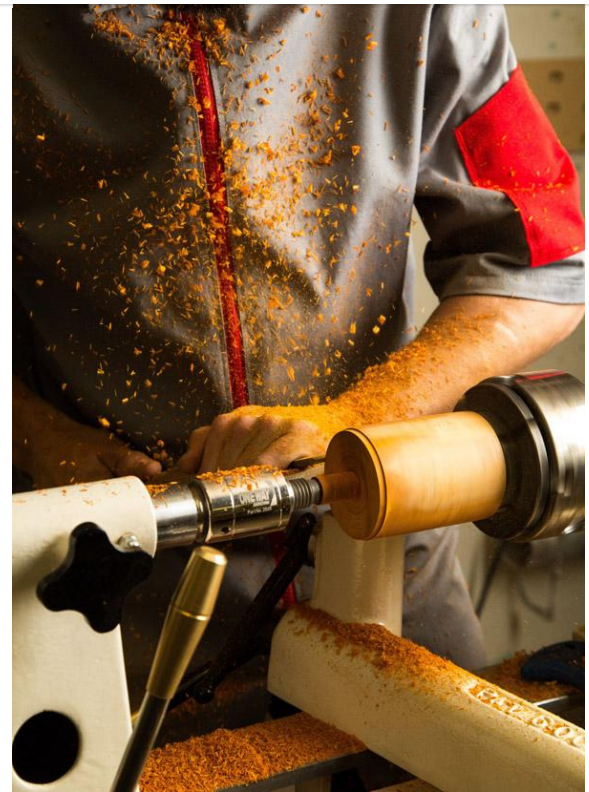


project and I wouldn't like how it was turning out, so I'd either scrap it or redo it. I'd be up all night, spending weeks on these projects to finish them perfectly, so I just stopped taking art." Since deciding to turn his hobby into his profession, however, Kade began doing simple projects to build his technique and tool control before moving on to more challenging ones. "I'm always thinking of evolving, and what sort of a new twist I can put on my pieces—whether it's a different piece of wood to give it that coloured contrast, or it's one shape flowing into another."

The reward for this artist, though, is seeing how his growing skill results in a finished piece. "It's gratifying to take what is essentially a log or a piece of wood, to mill it, chop it, and then make something beautiful out of it," he says. "It's nice to see that people visually love my work as well as appreciate it. I know there are things you can buy from big stores that can be nice, but they're mass produced in factories. With handmade pieces, your love, your heart, your soul, your blood and sweat and tears go into these items. It's very rewarding when people love your work."

"People ask me how long it takes to finish a piece," he adds. "Some pieces take four, five or six hours from start to finish, and some can even be up to thirty. But the real answer to that question is 'Since I started.' Each piece is an accumulation of everything that came before it. All your mistakes, all your trials and errors, all your learning to get the fine finesse and control of the tools."

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