

Creating 'Tea in the Afterglow'

Michael Scarborough takes us through the steps for creating 'Tea in the Afterglow', a piece which is rich in history and decorative techniques

I have found that the inspiration to create a piece of wood art can spring from many different sources: a conversation, an historical fact, a piece of music, a certain material or a special place. 'Tea in the Afterglow' was inspired by the combination of a very special material found in a very special place.

People speak of places so rich in history that just being there makes one feel as if the past has come alive. My brother has a farm in the mountains of northwest Georgia, near Chickamauga, and it is just such a place, steeped in millennia of history. Native American campsites have been identified there and respectfully preserved; arrowheads are found regularly. And, sadly, it

was the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War.

A little back-story: I grew up in Japan and am now finding that, in predictably Japanese fashion, the sun and moon are playing an increasingly important role in my work. I particularly love sunsets with all their amazing colours: reds and fiery oranges and golds kissing the low hung clouds. But, I have always been most moved by the subtlety of dusk and its afterglow – that short time when the sun is well below the horizon. This is perhaps nowhere more true than in those history-steeped mountains in Georgia. The afterglow makes the red clay seem to, well, glow. I also love the subtle lustre of copper. Dusk, red clay

and copper – surely these three could somehow be combined? In this article I will take you through the key stages for creating this piece.

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About the author:

Growing up in Japan influenced Michael's turning style, which he describes as 'Japanese-inspired art'. He works with a broad range of materials and techniques and spent 25 years as a classical singer.

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INSPIRATION

It is not often that the inspiration for the finish of a piece comes before the actual form, but when it happens, I tend to just go with it, which is what happened with 'Tea in the Afterglow'. This willingness to listen

to the voice within is becoming a recurring theme in my work. But, what of the form for this inspired finish? What type of a piece would it be: a bowl, kettle or vase? The creative process can be an unpredictable one:

things don't always come to us in the order we wish they would. For instance, this piece came into being after its companion pieces, 'Tea at Sunset' and 'Tea at Midnight', had already been finished.

SKETCHING THE IDEA

I puzzled over it and sketched and sketched some more, but I found myself getting nowhere. I needed a subtle form that spoke of the time between the full, round orb of the sun near the horizon and the formless black of night.

I keep a pad and pencil at my bedside in case any dreams that seem significant need jotting down. It is always an amazing thing to wake up in the morning and discover a dream I do not remember recounted on the pad. Well, imagine my amazement when I awoke during the 'Afterglow' pondering process to see this image scrawled on the paper! I decided there and then to set all other projects aside and begin work to bring this image into three dimensions.



My initial sketch

TO THE LATHE

As I had no solid blanks large enough to make the piece, I began by gluing up blocks of maple (*Acer campestre*). I then planed the pieces glass-smooth and used two-part epoxy for its solidity and gap-filling properties.

I began turning, and the form I'd sketched

began to be coaxied out of the wood. To help break up the mass of the piece, I'd decided to leave a raised band, which I hoped would have decorative carving, the design of which had yet to be determined. I chose to position the spout in that raised area. The interior was hollowed next.



The form, once roughed down



I chose to position the spout in the raised area

HOLLOWING

The piece was then reversed on the lathe, the throat removed and the top created from poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). I also fabricated a jam chuck to fit into the bottom of the workpiece. This jam chuck allows me easy access to the entire surface of the piece for finishing purposes.



The hollowed interior



The piece placed on a fabricated jam chuck



The piece covered with paint and some dry Georgia clay



The clay, once dry

FINISHING

Now the real fun began – the finishing. I love finishing and the gooier the finish, the better. I began by slathering the piece with a heavy coat of paint. I then rubbed some dry Georgia red clay into the wet paint.

At this point, I decided to add beading to the wide raised band, as I had on the

upper band and the lid. I do not know what made me think of doing so, but I really like the effect it creates. I had begun the piece thinking I wanted a wave pattern carved there, but I have learned that when something comes along to spark an idea such as this, even if the process is well under way, I listen. Before committing fully to it,

I sketch, I ponder, I meditate on it, I listen to the voice within, and, if it still feels like the right choice, I go with it. It is only now upon writing about this process that I realise that the beads were put into my subconscious by the view of the Georgia hills, marching, row upon row, almost like a serried ranks of soldiers, off into the distance.

OVER-COATING

Once the clay and undercoat of paint were fully dry, I over-coated the entire piece with black, oil-based paint. It is essential to use oil-based paint because it can be sanded and burnished in ways that acrylics cannot. When that coat of paint had really hardened, which took at least a week, I then sanded it to knock off the high points of clay. This is an incredibly dirty process as you are not only sanding paint, you are sanding dirt. Respirator and cross ventilation are a necessity. By using increasingly finer grades of sandpaper and then '0000' steel wool, this process also

begins to burnish the finish. I then began building layers of glaze mixed from spar varnish and decreasing amounts of the black paint. This building up of increasingly transparent layers creates visual depth in the finish of the piece. It is necessary to allow each layer to fully harden before applying the next.



The piece undercoated with black oil-based paint



Building up layers of glaze mixed from spar varnish and black paint...



... creates increasingly transparent layers to give visual depth



The template for the handle



The handle, once cut out on the bandsaw and carved

CARVING THE HANDLE & SPOUT

The handle was then carved, followed by the spout. The initial shapes of both were created on the bandsaw. I then worked with rasps and files and a spindle sander used very judiciously. I finished it all off with hand sanding. I worked diligently to create a visual balance between the disparate parts of the piece. One misstep with a spindle

sander can wreak havoc with that balance. Better to take the time to sand by hand than rush it and have to start a new spout.

I wrapped the handle in wire using the following method: I drilled a small hole in the back of the handle and then epoxied in the end of the wire to secure it in place. I then mixed a small batch of five-minute

epoxy, coated a portion of the handle with it and tightly wound the wire in place. I continued this process until I had the entire handle tightly wrapped. I kept a small dish of alcohol close at hand and wiped off the epoxy that inevitably oozed out during the process. This is a messy, messy process, to say the least.



The various stages of creating the spout



Applying copper leaf to the beading

APPLYING COPPER LEAF

The careful viewer may wonder why the colour of the copper wire on the handle doesn't match the colour of the copper leaf. Simple answer: I had purchased copper wire with which to train Bonsai plants – only it turned out to be copper-plated wire and thinly plated, at that. In fact, it might have just been copper-coloured paint! One good buffing with waxed steel wool and it was good-bye copper 'plate'! In the end it worked out well, as these things most often do. There is enough copper colour left to relate to the other copper portions of the piece, but there is also a chromatic difference that adds interest.

I then applied copper leaf to the beading. Being much thicker than gold leaf, copper leaf is far more forgiving in its application and might be a good bet for a first project in applying leaf. I used oil-based quick size as an adhesive and was not concerned about wrinkles or overlaps, as these would actually add to the rustic look of the piece. I find that leaving the piece chucked in the lathe makes the leafing process far easier than having it flat on the bench. Once the leafing was completed, the spout was inserted and the handle mounted.

Creating a patina on the leaf and the rest of the piece involved long processes using lots of chemicals, glazes and waxes. After lots of

experimentation and sample-making, the initial warm brown patina on the leaf was created by using ferric chloride and ferric nitrate. I also used household ammonia, but did so outdoors. In all cases, I wore eye protection, a respirator and gloves.

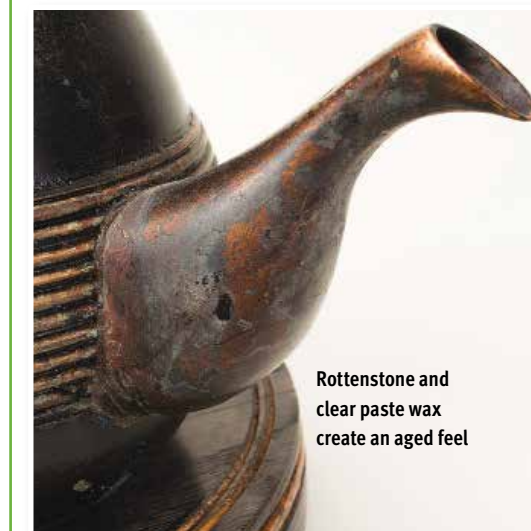
Over the patinated leaf, I sponged on mixes of oil-based paints: ochre, sienna, umber – lots of earth tones to fit the overall feel of the piece. I also added a bit of the original clay to the mix to create a sense of chromatic harmony. There is no specific formula to any of this other than to experiment, experiment, experiment and play a lot. Warning: when you find a formula you like, may I suggest that you write it down, as details can be forgotten in the 'Eureka' moments of discovery. I look back at some of the pieces created in my pre-note-taking days and think, "I'd give anything to know how I did that."

Once I had the copper where I liked it, I waxed the entire piece using dark oak-coloured wax and dry pigments as follows: I wrapped a piece of cotton cloth on my finger, dipped it in wax, then in the dry pigment. Again, earth tones were used along with a bit of the original clay for chromatic harmony. The coloured wax/pigment combination stays in the slight crevices left in the finish and also gathers in the beads.

FINAL FLOURISHES

As a last step, I gently sprinkled rottenstone on the piece and waxed over it with clear paste wax. The rottenstone gathers in the beads and around the spout and handle and gives a sense of age to the piece. It also acts as a very fine abrasive and, when buffed along with the wax, adds a subtle glow to the finish.

All of the glazes and wax are sufficient to seal the copper. But those same layers of wax will grow rich with age and, in time, a glowing patina will encase the entire piece.



Rottenstone and clear paste wax create an aged feel

◀ THE FINAL RESULT

When viewed between the other two pieces, 'Tea at Sunset' and 'Tea at Midnight', I think the feeling of afterglow is apparent in this piece – not as solar red as 'Sunset', not as black as 'Midnight', but a subtle blend of both.

This was a very rewarding project and proved to me, yet again, that creating turned wood art is as much about using the head as the hands. ●



TOP: 'Tea at Midnight', mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*), mixed media finish, 2011, 280mm high x 20mm wide x 150mm dia.

ABOVE: 'Tea at Sunset', maple (*Acer campestre*), 23k gold leaf and a mixed media finish, 2013, 330mm high x 220mm wide x 150mm dia.

RIGHT: 'Tea in the Afterglow', poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), copper wire, copper leaf and a mixed media finish, 2011, 200mm high x 250mm wide x 235mm dia.

