

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



15 / Les Brandt, wood turner, Huntsville, Arkansas

In a previous life, Les Brandt was married to a Dutch woman and lived in the town of Amersfoort not far from Soesterberg Airbase, where as a medic he was attached to the 32nd USAF Air Defense Squadron stationed in the Netherlands during the Cold War. In another previous life, he and his second wife Mary Ann were artists who made a good life traveling and painting large abstracts inspired by the different landscapes they discovered. Surprisingly, these paintings appeared to be much appreciated by portrait photographers, who used them for background sets; providing these atmospheric backgrounds became Les and Mary Ann's quite booming business.

His six years in the Netherlands provided Les with a fair understanding of the Dutch language and culture, and I discovered he got totally infected by the Dutch sense of humor. I cannot explain what exactly this is—but I can assure you it differs from American humor; it may come close to the British kind though with a unique twist that can be rather undiplomatic if not cruel, with its cynicism not aiming at

being politically correct in any sense and being lighthearted nevertheless—at least, that’s how most Dutch see it. Anyhow, when Les and I first met, we found we could really understand each other. We kept meeting, and for a couple of years Les and Mary Ann came scouting in New Mexico for a permanent home. They ended up elsewhere; they bought a place on a forested mountain near Huntsville in the northwestern corner of Arkansas, a mere six hours away from where Ans and I settled in Kansas.

Les “retired” from painting to become instead a craftsman, a wood turner—finding a wholly new profession. “I’m doing this now for a little over two years and I am still learning,” says Les. He creates his pieces in two different ways: some are rough-turned and then dried before being turned to a round shape and finished; some are turned to final thickness and allowed to warp and twist as they will during the drying process, then sanded and buffed in whatever shape develops.

Les says, “I don’t create the tree, so why should I have final say in the final form?” Although most of his work consists of wood-turned items, as his work evolves he is beginning to create more sculptures. He invests 60 to 70 hours a week to develop his craft, refine his skills and tool work, and create new textures and finishes. His body of work changes as each new piece of wood is found and shaped on his lathe revealing the grain patterns and more creative possibilities.

“I explore form and textures, using wood as a medium. The wood is primarily found where I just happen to find it, which is not in a store, but in logged areas, or as storm damage like after the wild 2009 ice storm, or in areas cleared for development.” His finds are trees that are native to northwest Arkansas: bradford pear, tulip poplar, walnut, pine, sycamore, oak, maple, cherry, and box elder. “I use found trees not only to help people appreciate the beauty of our native woods but also because I don’t want my art to come at the expense of the environment.” Les takes the logs and chainsaws them into manageable sizes, then brings them into the studio to be worked on the lathe to a rounded form. He creates bowls because he prefers turning to flat woodwork: “It’s instantaneous and I can see what has to come out of the wood almost immediately.” His starting point is the shape and size of the log, and its specifics. “I may sandblast a piece or texture it with tools for different surfaces, because I enjoy the visual aspect of wood but like its tactile aspect as well.”

“Once I have a rounded form, I start making the bowl part—working until it is carved out to about 10% of the diameter of the bowl, with a wall thickness of $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch. The piece dries for two to three months in the open air; then it goes into the drying cabinet for another two or three months. At that point, I remount it on the lathe and turn it down to a final wall thickness of $\frac{1}{2}$ inch or less.” Now the piece sits out to dry for a few more days, after which for four days running it is dipped every day into a certain solution. In between dips, it sits in his “kiln”—a refrigerator. A couple more weeks of drying, a final buff on the lathe and it is ready for exhibit. And for sale. For Les Brandt’s pieces, they sell like hot cakes.