

Turning wood

into something wonderful



Sue Pritchard uses a steady hand to turn a bowl on a lathe. Moving to Canada allowed her to pursue a life-long interest.

Article by Bronwyn Boyer / Photographs by Corey Wilkinson

Moving to Muskoka from England was the perfect opportunity for Sue Pritchard to turn over a new leaf in her career and start turning wood.

“Wood turning has always been in the back of my mind as something I’d like to do,” she says. Having moved here almost three years ago, Pritchard is still getting used to Canada but it is quite clear that her relocation has provided her the chance to pursue a life-long interest in a serious way.

Pritchard was born in Maidenhead, England. She attended boarding school in Somerset, which is where she was first introduced to the art of wood turning. “There was one teacher who would let a couple students into the wood shop and show us how to turn wood,” she recalls. “I made a tiny little bowl – I remember it even now, and that’s why I knew I could do it.”

Later on, she met a man who took her to a wood turning club where she was the only woman among some 200 men. At first it was difficult for her to fit into the club and be taken seriously, but as soon her bowl was singled out as special, among everyone else’s work, the attitude

changed and she knew she was onto something.

It was then suggested she take some lessons, and she was introduced to her teacher Les Thorne, a renowned production turner by trade. “If you gave Les 200 square pieces of wood, he could make them into 200 intricate and ornate stair spindles in two days, and you wouldn’t be able to tell they weren’t made by a machine,” Pritchard says.

As a teacher, Thorne was a tough critic. “I once

asked him if he’d seen a picture of a bowl I made,” recounts Pritchard. “And he said, ‘yeah, it’s rubbish.’ But it’s nice to have someone like that, because otherwise you think you’re quite clever when you’re not really.” Thorne is still an important element of Pritchard’s evolution as a craftsperson, especially when he visits her shop in Bracebridge to help her learn from her mistakes.

Back in England, Pritchard’s first vocation was a nurse in the heart transplant unit of a children’s hospital. Later, she became a barrister for the government in the customs and revenue department. After working as a nurse for a while, she learned she needed a degree in order to get a promotion at the hospital. “There were a couple people in the cardiac unit studying to be lawyers,” says Pritchard. “And I quite fancied that. I loved nursing but after a while I got burnt out with it. There was quite a high mortality rate, and I was beginning to think it would be nice to go a week without losing a child . . . so I thought I’d try law.”

During her career as a barrister, Pritchard headed up a team that prosecuted cigarette smugglers. Due to the high price of tobacco in England, smug-





Sue Pritchard carefully directs the sharp carving tool to shape the wood on the lathe. Precision is required to avoid lumps, bumps and chips.

glers would bring in large quantities from France and sell it for a high profit.

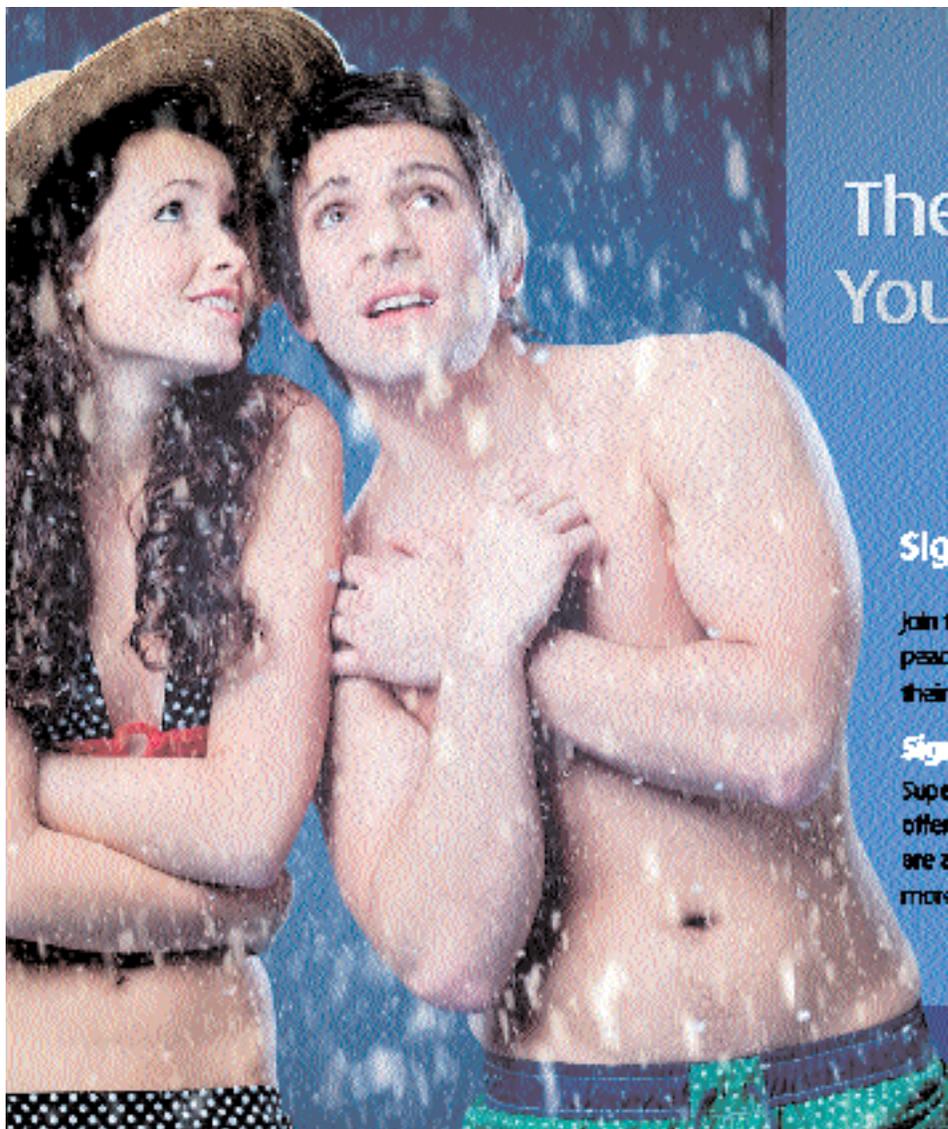
When Pritchard and her partner Ellen, who is originally from Toronto, decided to move to Canada, she knew it was time for a new direction in life. "I just couldn't bear to do any more studying," Pritchard says. "To qualify to be either a nurse or lawyer in Canada I would have to do more training, and I was just worn out from it – I wanted to do something different."

Something different is certainly one way to describe turning wood into works of functional art. "I enjoy making bowls – I like the process because I never know what I'm going to end up with in the end," says Pritchard. "I have an idea of what I'm going to make, but the way the wood is might make me change my mind."

As well as the element of surprise, Pritchard also gets a kick out of the fact that people end up owning her creations. "People actually buy my work and tell me they really love it," she says. "It's funny having people buy my stuff, but I'm starting to get used to it now . . . it's nice."

Pritchard got her start in the Muskoka arts and crafts scene through her neighbour Suzanne Partridge of the Artful Garden, who displayed Pritchard's bowls in one of the buildings at the exhibit.

Pritchard then began selling at the Bracebridge and Gravenhurst farmers markets, which produced a warm reception from customers and fellow vendors alike. Though Pritchard has only been selling her pieces for about a year, she has



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already experienced a successful start in her new undertaking. "This whole scene is quite new to me but I find the Muskoka Arts and Crafts people very helpful and supportive," she says.

In addition to the farmer's markets, Pritchard has her work displayed at the Silver Bridge Gallery in Bracebridge. Most recently, she was asked to be in the Moose Show, an exhibition of Canadian fine craft to be held in the atrium of the CBC Building in Toronto in November.

Despite her success, this avenue is not without its challenges. Aside from all the hassles of finding machinery and tools and getting a shop together, Pritchard had trouble finding wood until she finally found a source in Toronto.

Obtaining wood locally is a particular challenge; because processing is required before it can be turned, otherwise it won't last. "Wood grows in layers like an onion," explains Pritchard. "So it needs to be cut strategically in sections that won't fall apart. If you cut down a tree today, you have to wait two or three years before you can work with it, or else it will split."

And then there's the type of wood that is best for wood turning purposes. Pritchard's signature pieces are the beaded bowls which have ridges running around the circumference of the outsides. For these, she uses a lot of ash because its open grained wood and she can push wax into the wood, which is what makes the colours of the bowls "pop."

She also enjoys experimenting with making smaller pieces like Christmas ornaments and wine stoppers. But regardless of what she's making, Pritchard chooses hardwoods so that her work will be durable enough to stand the test of time and wear.



What really gives Pritchard's work its unique quality is the way she colours her bowls. At first glance, many people think the outsides of the bowls are pottery due to their colourful glazed appearance. A closer inspection reveals that they are completely made of wood. This is what sets



After a career in nursing and law, Sue Pritchard is enjoying working as an artist.



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Sue Pritchard includes colour on her turned bowls. She enjoys seeing her bowl designs evolve as she experiments and tries out her many new ideas.

Pritchard's bowls apart and makes them desirable. Making the bowls is quite a process. Different shapes and textures are created with different tools. Pritchard works with the natural colours of the wood she turns, and that creates the variety.

Manitoba maple, for instance, has a pinkish hue to it. Beech and ash have lighter shades.

Pritchard starts by cutting blocks of wood in half and drawing out the shape of the bowl, then uses a band saw to cut the extra bits off. The back

is made first by creating what's called a foot, which is a knob at the bottom held by the chuck of the lathe, so that the shape can be dug out as it spins.

The tool that shapes the wood comes from the other side of the lathe and cuts out the concave of the bowl. A wide selection of tools can be utilized, depending on what is being created, or how deep the cut will go. Controlling the tool while the lathe is running is the most challenging aspect of making the bowls and requires the most amount of skill.

As the lathe turns the wood, the tool spirals in and gradually threads itself into the grain, thereby sculpting the wood as desired.

"It's a matter of just directing it in," Pritchard explains. "If you push it in, you'll get lumps and bumps, or the wood will fly off the chuck."

Pritchard makes her specialty beaded bowls with a round beading tool that is pressed into the wood to create the ridged beaded texture as it turns. This causes the grain of the wood to rip, which creates tiny hairs on the wood.

Pritchard then burns these off with a blow torch, as normal sanding would disrupt the definition of the beads. The charcoal marks from the burning are then cleaned off with a small circular wire brush attached to an electric drill. Finally, the piece is dusted off with an air compressor.

The colours of the bowls are created by pushing wax into the deeper channels with a brush and then painted with wood dyes. After the bowl is shaped, it is sanded by various grits of sandpa-



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Wood chips end up everywhere in Pritchard's studio. Many different tools are required for the art of wood turning.

per. Finally, it is finished with a hard microcrystalline wax.

Sometimes Pritchard also works with spalted wood, which is wood that is covered in dark patterned lines. These lines are formed when groups of fungus attack each other and leave trails behind, creating geometric designs. The effect is

very attractive and interesting to look at.

In the future, Pritchard would like to tackle making threaded screw top lids.

As far as the bowls are concerned, she hopes to keep growing as an artist. "People tell me my bowls are very different than anything else they've seen," she says. "So, I'd like to keep evol-

ing my designs and coming up with new ideas."

When asked what it is about wood turning that holds her interest, Pritchard has an easy response. "I like the smell of wood," she says. "I like having people look at my work, pick it up, and seeing what they think of it . . . basically, it's just a lot of fun." 

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