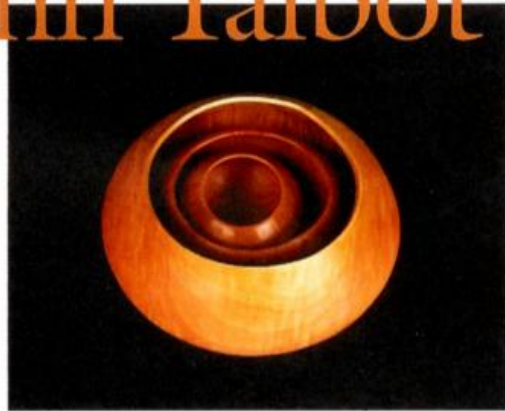
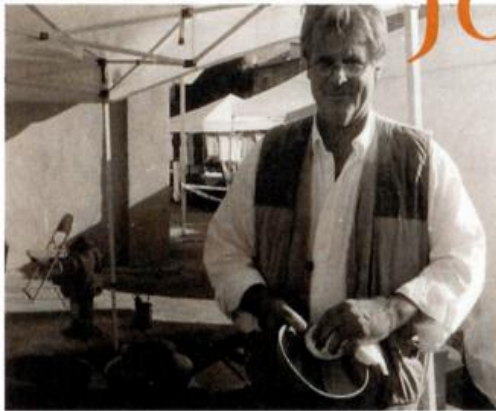


John Talbot '70

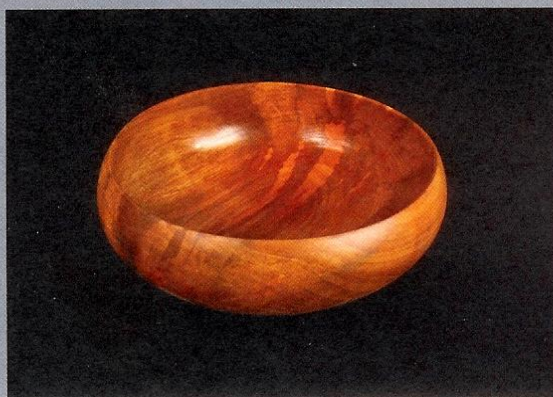


Salvaging old wood like swamp maple or Douglas fir, John Talbot '70, works in his North Hills, California studio to create beautiful objects that become instant heirlooms. He uses time-honored traditions for handworking the wood to emphasize strength over weight. In working the wood, John is sure to preserve the most distinctive features of once-living trees: the annular rings, scars and stains, the tunneling marks of bees or the darker parts that were once saturated with honey.

John, who has variously been, a Shakespearean actor, a contractor and a teacher, indicates that what really captivates him is his work "reclaiming the souls of trees." "When I began working with trees, it was like a revelation to me to be making things of beauty. Living 'beautifully' really has to do with your spirit and the spirit of things around you."

In Los Angeles, there are trees from everywhere in the world that were planted in backyards or along the streets.

“When crafting a bowl, it’s really moving to know that there is a landscape locked therein. What could be more exciting than working on a piece of wood that bears the stain of some honeycomb that leaked out from within the very heart of the tree?”



“Carob trees (originally from the Middle East and imported to California) can withstand the area’s summer heat. The trees, once planted along the city streets, grow to huge proportions. One hundred years later, the roots are lifting foundations, and otherwise creating havoc, so the city is cutting them down. The wood is bright red in color and offers a very complex grain, which makes for a very exciting bowl.”

John uses olive wood, which looks “like slabs of marble,” to make cutting boards, big bowls and platters. “The annular rings of the tree are so chaotic; the finished product has the look of an ocean floor map.”

To find the wood, John drives around until he sees a truck loaded with tree stumps or comes across men cutting down trees. Sometimes, people will tip him off to a tree removal. “I just came back from Santa Cruz where a guy was going to dispose of a huge old walnut tree. The trunk is now in my driveway and I plan to make a table and chairs and some bowls from the wood.”

“I also have a good friend who lets me know when a tree is going to be cut down, and I go there at the appointed time. Once a huge oak was being cut down – it took a whole afternoon. It turns out the tree had been the home of bees for hundreds of years. That night, at sundown, we sat in the back of the truck and watched as great swarms of bees gathered at the very spot where the tree had stood. The swarm quickly grew from the size of a basket ball to an alarming size, and then they all took off together, I hope to a new home.”

Sometimes, when John comes across a tree trunk, he knows immediately what he wants to make out of it. Other times, he has to get it home and live with it for a while, before he makes the first cut that will result in something beautiful.

As John handles the wood, he reflects on the fact that the tree once had a life and that one-half of the tree grew above-ground, and one-half underground. “When you think about that, it’s incredible how trees grow ‘down’ and ‘up’ at the same time, somewhat akin to the dual polarities of our awake and dream states. There’s definitely a kind of poetic quality to the life of a tree. I think there are many touch points between the life of trees and the spiritual world in which we live.”

“You can tell so much from the annular rings, scars and stains, or the fact that there is more growth on one side, marks from the tunneling marks of bees, or darker parts that were once saturated with honey. It’s very much like performing an autopsy. As you work, you can actually reconstruct the life of the tree!”

Remembering a 400-year-old tree that he once salvaged, John says: “it conjured up images of the history ‘witnessed’ by the ancient tree that was in place before there were towns with Spanish names, and when native Indians sat underneath, eating a meal in the midst of miles of meadow lands.”

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