

Martha Collins in profile



Briony Darnley finds out about **Martha Collins'** start in woodworking and how she developed her favourite mosaic bracelets

Martha Collins was born in New Canaan, Connecticut. Her family then moved to Birmingham, Michigan. At the beginning of high school they moved to Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan. Martha's father had left his executive position at Ford Motor Company to become a professor at the graduate school of business; finance. "Ann Arbor was a wonderful place to grow up. I did not grow up with a shop in the basement of our home, working with tools and making things – that came later," Martha tells us. Martha did grow up under the axiom that it does not matter what you do in life, just be the best at it. Be totally passionate and committed to it. Her father would use the example of the ancient city of Ur, and say: "If that's what interests you, then know everything about Ur." And so here she is, at 66 years old, a woodworker. She contemplates "who would have ever thought that this would become my passion? To make beautiful laminated pieces, bowls and bracelets from different exotic woods and maple (*Acer saccharum*) veneer that I dye."

Originally Martha went to study medicine to become a doctor, thinking that she would know something concretely and be able to help others. That idea was quickly dispelled after she followed an ophthalmologist around one day and she also disliked organic chemistry. The class she did best in was philosophy so that became her major, with history, literature and chemistry minors. Martha graduated in humanities and then went to

the University of Michigan school of Natural Resources to qualify as an environmental advocate. Unfortunately, trying to change public sentiment about littering just didn't excite her.

A carpenter's apprentice

In 1973 Martha was given an opportunity to become a carpenter's apprentice and she found that she enjoyed working with her hands. She was a young single mother of a two-year old and needed direction in her life. Some friends of Martha's ran the Treehouse Cabinet Shop in Ann

Linear mosaic straight stack bracelet, 75 x 25mm, ebony edges, 250 pieces of wood, 12 different species and artist dyed maple veneer

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK FREY



OPPOSITE TOP: Linear mosaic 'Weaver 9', 75 x 25mm, ebony (*Diospyros spp.*) edges, made up from 400 pieces of wood, 12 different species and artist dyed maple (*Acer saccharum*) veneer



Martha with some of her completed mosaic bracelets

PHOTOGRAPH BY R. EVAN MILLER

Arbor. It was there that she realised she wanted to work with her hands and create tangible objects that had not existed before. At this time Title IX had just gone through the US Congress, entitling women to have the same access as men to sports and educational training. Martha's sister-in-law was a counsellor at a high school and understood what it meant. They were able to enrol at the State of Michigan Rehabilitation and Technical Institute for a two-and-a-half year programme in cabinetmaking. "It was wonderful," Martha recalls, "I was in the workshop every day from 8am to 3pm learning how to draft, how to use hand tools, the importance of sharpening, about tolerances, the joy of making something to specific dimensions and how to create square, parallel and flattened surfaces with only hand tools." Nowadays there are many places woodworking can be learned but in the early '70s this was not the case. Martha is greatly indebted to the State of Michigan for her

fine education.

After graduating, she secured a job as a management trainee at the John Widdicombe Furniture factory. She worked in their sample room and in the design department. Concurrently, Martha was apprenticing in a workshop where wooden jewellery was made using exotic hardwoods and dyed maple veneer. She had begun working in this shop six months before graduation and found it was wonderful. Martha loved the precision needed to create her art on such a small scale. It was here that she learned about lamination, the beauty of the exotic woods and the derivative process of making a laminated block, resawing it and relaminating it to make a new object. It was in this shop that the helical mosaic bracelet was discovered. "It was a 'what if...' moment. We had taken a 'fletch' of matching rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*) veneer and shifted it upon itself and then turned it on the lathe. Examining it, the Maestro said "it looked like I'd created my own grain." The other apprentice asked "what if we did that with a laminated material?" This introduced a whole new world for me to discover and play in," Martha explains. This is a process she has now been exploring for four decades.

Being her own boss

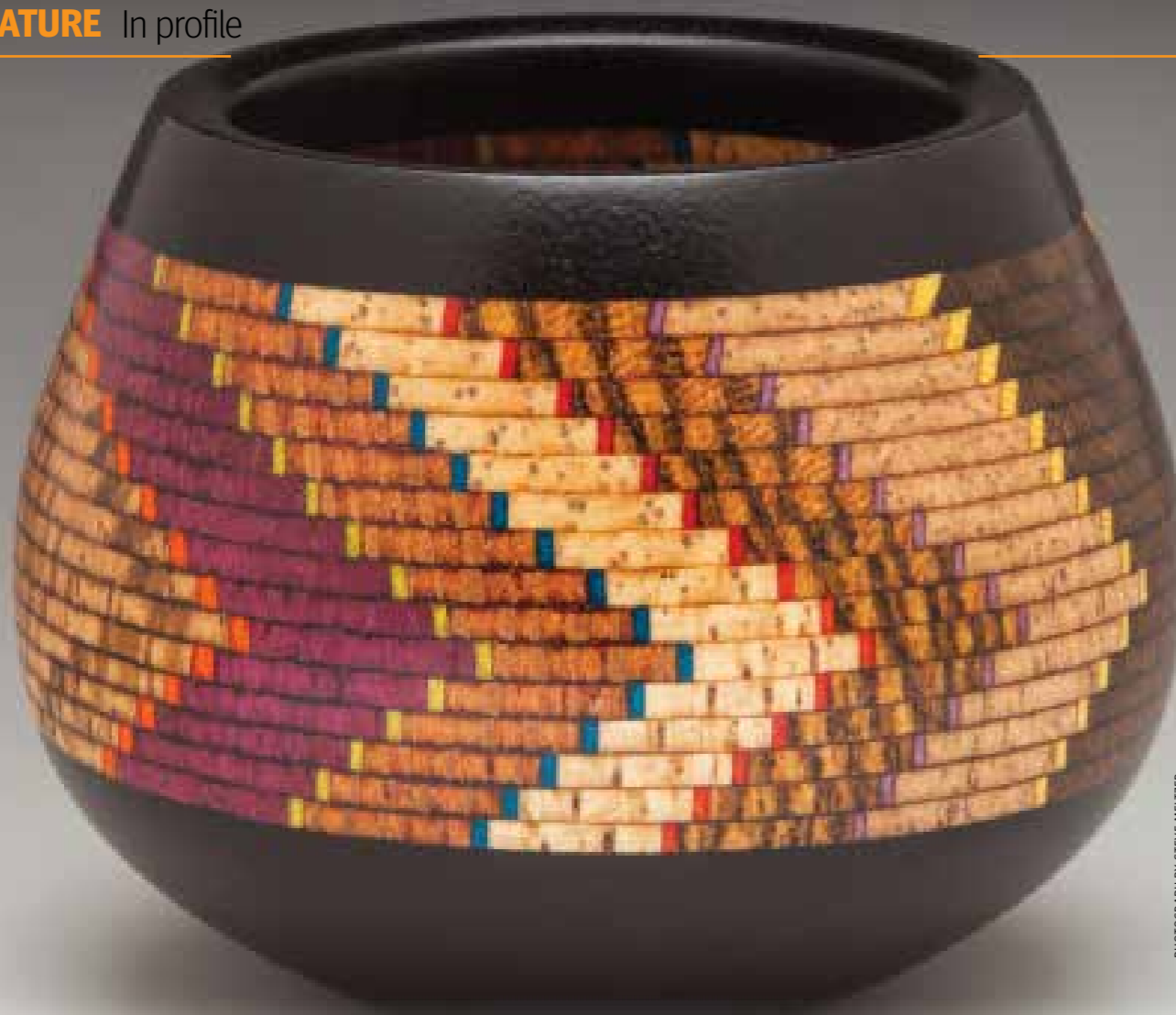
Martha did not stay long at the Widdicombe Factory as she wanted to have her own shop and wanted to

be her own boss. Martha has now worked for herself for her entire career, except for a few years in the 1990s when she made the interior of the yachts at Admiral Marine Works in Port Townsend, Washington. "That was a wonderful job where I learned lots of new methods of working, including making moulds and veneering them," Martha recalls. In Martha's own workshop she made furniture, a fair amount of cabinets and kitchens, but she has always made bracelets. After working in the marine industry, Martha dedicated herself again to her artwork, going to national art shows and expanding her product line to include bowls, tableware and jewellery. This last year Martha added a new platform to her jewellery line: intricate mosaics of wood, inlaid into silver bezels for bracelets, cuffs, pendants, pins and rings.

After the death of her son in 2012, Martha began working on another new project, remembrance vessels. These were shared around the family for her son's remains. These are small, two-part threaded round boxes with Martha's signature mosaic inlay on the top. "Some are even made with a hidden mosaic pattern on the inside," Martha tells me.

Martha teaches at the Port Townsend School of Woodworking and, like her father, she enjoys teaching very much. Martha also has people come to her shop for one-on-one consultations and classes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK FREY



Her shop is 93sq.m, with three bandsaws and three lathes, a tablesaw, jointer, planer, various sanders and plenty of clamps. "All of my glue-ups are done with epoxy. My bracelets and spice mills are finished with the same epoxy, for a durable finish. I finish my bowls and tableware with lacquer," Martha explains. Her work is always done with the natural colours of the different woods and their beauty is accentuated with the maple veneer that she dyes. She enjoys going to shows and educating people about the amazing process.

Martha learned how to turn on a machinist lathe and still uses one for the majority of her bracelet work. It is only recently that she has started learning the proper turning techniques, thanks to Bonnie Klein. Martha believes that sharp tools are a necessity and like everything, if you do it long enough, then you learn how to do it.

Martha's workshop

Martha lives above her workshop on a south-facing slope looking at the Olympic Mountains. She designed

and built the space and absolutely loves it. Martha tells me: "My days begin early with coffee and quiet refectation time, and most of the time a walk in the forest with the dogs – flat-coated retrievers – which were originally an English breed. Then it's on to the workshop. Nowadays I like to work two different sections, in four hour periods: from 10am to 2pm, then from 4pm to 8pm each day. By the end of each workday all the clamps need to be in use." When trying to determine how long a piece will take, Martha always factors in the time at shows and the running of the business. This is 50% of her time in a year; so that allows 1,000 hours to work on her art. Martha explains, "The work in my shop is like cooking; there are many courses being prepared all at the same time.

There will be material all machined and ready to be selected into blocks, there will be blocks ready to glue, blocks already glued and ready for re-sawing, there will be different stacks of laminate material for all the different styles of bracelets and

ABOVE: 'Small Chevron Bowl', 75mm high x 20mm dia., ebony rim and base, made from 675 pieces of wood with artist dyed maple veneer

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE MELTZER



PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB BARRETT



Serving tray, 305 x 460 x 50mm, made with 24 different woods with a base of exotic or domestic wood

there will be a box containing eight different laminated blocks ready to turn into bottle stoppers. Everything is all in-process at the same time, so it is difficult to say 'this object' will take 'this long'. This system works well for me. It is exciting and always different and challenging."

Martha's greatest teacher has been her work itself and the 'what ifs...' "It is true that after a lifetime the individual pieces speak to me and come to me in my dreams." Recently, Martha has created a beautiful linear mosaic bracelet called 'Weaver 7'. She tells me that there are only 300 pieces in it, but it is truly one of her very finest pieces. She refers to her best pieces as 'hole in ones' and says this is one of them. Martha is also experimenting with decorative wall pieces, using different lamination techniques and creating a 'collage of lamination'.

Highs, lows and goals

Martha tells me that the highs are when someone goes into her booth and 'gets it'. When they are completely mesmerised by the process, looking with new eyes they can see and understand the intricacies of the process and work. The lows for Martha are the yearning for financial reward to go on and the belittling of the process, when others say "oh, is this all you do?" Martha's goals are to

one day be accepted into the Sculpture Objects Functional Art & Design – SOFA – exhibition and to have her work shown at the Smithsonian Art Show as well as being included in the permanent collection at the Smithsonian Museum and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

You can see more examples of her wonderful work on her website.

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LEFT: Bottle stoppers: 'Fountainhead' and 'Here's One for the Gripper'

Handy hints

1. Go slow
2. Each piece should look good at every stage of the process
3. Work with complete attention
4. Innovate using the 'what if...' method

LIKES & DISLIKES

Likes:

- Beautiful wood
- Strong colours as the veneer is dyed
- Sharp tools
- Good epoxy
- Sharp bandsaw blades

Dislikes:

- Loose clamps
- Static on the radio when listening to NPR
- Not having my work appreciated

ARTIST'S PROCESS

Beginning with 12 or 13 different species of exotic and domestic hardwoods, a block will be laminated. Each hardwood piece measures 6mm thick x 90mm wide x 405mm long. There are 40 different species of wood ready to be used in making the original block. Choosing the 12 and establishing their order takes time. Each piece is selected for its natural colour and grain. Once this order is chosen, I add the maple (*Acer saccharum*) veneer that has been dyed in my shop. After placing the dyed veneer next to the hardwoods, I check the block for visual interest. Each three pieces of wood and veneer must look right all across the block. It is dry clamped so its aesthetic composition can be evaluated over the next few days. An enormous amount of artwork will come from this block. It is very

important that it has a strong pleasing pattern. The block is laminated together with a jeweller's epoxy, which has a thin viscosity and a long working time. The block is glued in a fixture with five enormous 'C' clamps. Once it is cured, the block is squared up on the jointer and taken to the bandsaw for slicing. This is the hard part! These slices need to be 0.6mm thick and within 0.05mm on all four corners of the slice. It can take all morning to set up the bandsaw. The blade has to have a smooth weld, otherwise a ripple will be transferred to the slice. Currently I am using a 10/6 blade, which is 10 tpi with a slightly deeper gullet. This blade works well with the epoxy and the resinous exotic woods so a smooth glueable surface is left. 25 slices are taken, jointing the block between each slice.

Care is taken to keep the slices in sequential order so that the grain lines will match up in the later laminations. After the slicing, the edges are chosen for the piece and it is glued up all at one time while shifting the slices into the desired pattern. After this second lamination, the piece is taken to the lathe to be turned into either a bracelet or bowl. Bracelets are finished with the same epoxy they are built with; bowls are finished with lacquer.

There will still be block left and this is one of the fun parts. Different thicknesses of slices produce different laminated patterns. The orientation of the slice will also produce different appearances as will the addition of either natural veneer or dyed veneer between each slice. The variations are endless! ●

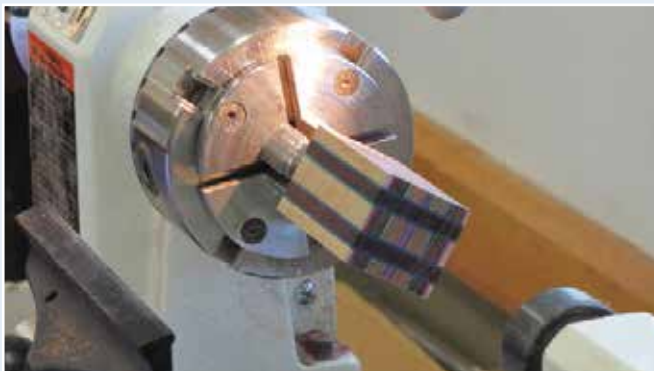


PHOTOGRAPHS BY R. EVAN MILLER

Just some of the veneers used by Martha



The pieces of veneer, all clamped up



The bottle stopper blank mounted on the lathe, ready for turning



Once the block is turned into the desired shape, the range of colours and patterns becomes more evident



Sanding the item on the lathe



One of Martha's finished pieces