



WOODWORK

For centuries,
Hawai'i bowl makers
have been turning
the functional
into fine art



“I work from the center and remove the chaos,” says Aaron Hammer (seen above left). “There’s a stillness in the center and everything revolves around it. It’s a magical thing.” Hammer is among a new generation of woodturners carrying on an ancient Island tradition of superlative bowl making. Above right, one of Hammer’s bowls made of koa, with stitching across a crack. Seen here, an oblong bowl of rare kamani wood, from a historic tree on O’ahu.

Hawaiians have always loved bowls. One-thousand-plus years ago, when Polynesian wayfinders set sail across the Pacific, they packed their canoes with bowl-making materials: gourds, coconuts and the seeds of hardwood trees. Upon landing in Hawai‘i, woodcarvers scoured the volcanic summits for basalt, which they sharpened into adzes and used to shape the vessels essential to daily life. Their finely crafted wooden bowls, or ‘umeke, held not only fish and poi, but also the mana (spirit) of those who made and ate from them. With a few stone tools and many pounds of persistence, early Hawaiian carvers achieved an astonishing perfection of form and function.

STORY BY SHANNON WIANECKI 🪵 PHOTOS BY MEGAN SPELMAN

“In every thing manufactured by these people, there appears to be an uncommon degree of neatness and ingenuity,” Captain James Cook wrote after anchoring in Hawai‘i in 1778. “Their wooden dishes and bowls are ... as neat as if made on our turning-lathe, and perhaps better polished.”

When Europeans introduced the lathe to Hawai‘i in the 1830s, Island carvers embraced the innovation. They turned splendid bowls in half the time it took to carve and made spindled furniture for Hawaiian monarchs. “The lathe overtook hand-carving because it is a tool of immaculate efficiency,” says Hawai‘i-based wood artist Aaron Hammer. “But lathe workers here remain deeply connected to the history of the ‘umeke.”

Today art collectors worldwide prize bowls made in Hawai‘i, which fetch hundreds and even thousands of dollars apiece. Hammer belongs to an impressive cadre of local bowl turners who draw upon age-old traditions to create contemporary masterpieces. And for these artists, “bowl” can mean anything from a porcelain-thin platter to a spectacular, cavernous sculpture big enough to climb inside.

Hammer presses a grooved blade against a slab of milo wood spinning on the lathe. Shavings fly like sparks as the metal gouge cuts away gray bark, and the shape of a bowl emerges. Elegant curves reveal the wood’s underlying grain: a Jupiter-esque pattern of whorls, spots and rings. Hammer stops the lathe to inspect his work. “I love that I can take a muddy, bug-eaten scrap from the woodpile and turn it into something special,” he says.

While all art might seem like wizardry, wood turning has a particular magic. With deftness and skill, Hammer and his fellow turners transform stumps into glowing vessels, furniture and tools. It is an ancient skill: The lathe, a woodturner’s primary instrument, is the world’s oldest mechanized tool. Egyptian stone carvings depicting lathes date back to 1300 BCE. Essentially, a lathe spins an object around an axis, allowing an artist to carve that object precisely and symmetrically.

Originally from the Midwest, Hammer now works on a few acres of coastal rain-forest four miles north of Hilo. He started out carving drums twenty-six years ago and is now one of the finest bowl turners in Hawai‘i. He fits the bill for modern-day magician: an affinity for trees, encyclopedic knowledge of arcane arts and unruly hair that pokes from beneath a helmet of his own creation. The helmet, which bears passing resemblance to Mandalorian armor, protects him from inhaling fine sawdust.

Hammer’s studio smells of freshly milled logs, piney and pungent. Like most woodworkers in Hawai‘i, he relies on salvaged wood—urban tree trimmings and storm casualties. He starts by sawing big logs into workable chunks, then bolts a chunk onto the spinning lathe and roughs out the shape of a bowl. He lets this dry for several months, then turns it on the lathe again, chiseling it to perfection.

Pitched next to his studio is a big army tent: his drying warehouse. This hoarder’s cache of half-finished bowls stacked floor to ceiling is a bit of a headache, Hammer admits. “Roughing out—finding the shape hidden inside the log—is the creative,

transformational part of the process,” he says. “The finishing part is time-consuming and repetitive.” Tedious though it may be, Hammer has turned more than 2,300 bowls—each signed and numbered—since he first laid his hand on a lathe in 1995.

Most of Hammer’s creations pay homage to poi bowls of the past. “I’m not trying to re-create historic pieces,” he says, “but I am inspired by them.” He holds up his current work in progress: a raw-edged bowl made of milo, a tropical tree in the hibiscus family, one of the species Polynesian sailors brought to Hawai‘i. It remains a favorite with modern woodworkers. “Milo just gets prettier with age,” he says. “Over time the grain’s natural glow will deepen, accentuating its swirls and spots.” Hammer sculpted the bowl’s round base out of rich auburn heartwood and let an undulating ribbon of golden sapwood determine the shape of the rim. He left the edge raw—a rugged fringe of bark that elevates the piece from salad container to fine art. “I love contrast,” he says. “Natural-edged bowls are great for showing it.”

Sliding off his helmet, Hammer measures the bowl’s thickness with a pair of enormous looped calipers. Once satisfied with the curvature, he’ll sand it with increasingly fine sandpaper, then polish it with natural oils and waxes to bring out the luster, “a museum-quality finish,” he says. His carefully hewn vessels aren’t meant to collect dust on a shelf. “It’s important that my pieces are touchable. People hug them,” he laughs.

One of his most ambitious pieces yet, an enormous monkeypod platter measuring four feet in diameter, involved a great deal

more than hugging. Hammer used dollies, carts and muscles to heft the eight-hundred-pound block onto his lathe. To sculpt this beast, he used a chain saw in place of a gouge. He delivered the finished work of art to Martin & MacArthur gallery on a Thursday; it sold that Saturday for \$10,000. “Hawai’i is a special place to be a bowl turner,” Hammer smiles. “People here have an appreciation and reverence for vessels.”

Sixty years ago Martin & MacArthur began promoting fine Hawai’i wood furniture and art. Today the company represents nearly one hundred artists through twelve galleries across the state. “It’s not as though Hawai’i has the lock on woodcrafters,” says company co-owner Michael Tam. “There are woodcrafters in every state in the union. The difference here is the heritage, as well as the native woods.”

Traditional Hawaiian bowls are distinguished by their unadorned, immaculate form and round base. Europeans called them calabashes, after the plump gourds they resembled. “The rounded bottoms, how they stand straight and upright ... there’s something special about that silhouette, especially if you’re from Hawai’i,” says Tam. “It’s not just a bowl. The ‘umeke symbolizes graciousness, sharing and openness. It’s that sense of love and aloha that you share with family and friends.”

In times past, Hawaiians had as many names for ‘umeke as they had uses for them. Families served meals in medium-size pālewa, stored poi in deep, heavy barrels called kūmauna and kept pa’i ‘ai (freshly pounded taro) in tall, tapered pua-hala. Some parents still present their toddlers with a māna ‘ai. This special bowl belongs to the recipient for life; no one else may eat from it. Ideally, the māna ‘ai is carved from a tree planted over a grandparent’s afterbirth. With each child born, a tree is planted and the tradition continues.

‘Umeke were—and still are—cherished possessions passed down as inheritances. Carvers masterfully mended cracked or damaged calabashes, and these repairs added to the vessel’s beauty and worth. Nineteenth-century Hawaiian historian Henry Kekahuna cataloged the various types of traditional fixes, ranging from wooden pegs to pewa, butterfly-shaped patches. According to Kekahuna, “The most highly esteemed and favorite calabashes had chants composed for them as though they were human beings. When they were placed

on the table one would hear their owner with proud countenances, chanting of the celebrated deeds of those for whom they were named.”

As Cook noted, Hawaiian carvers sanded their creations until the grain glowed, polishing them with sharkskin, kapa (bark-cloth) and kukui nut oil. Bowl makers preferred to work with kou, a coastal tree in the heliotrope family. Its beautiful wood was easy to carve and free of bitter tannins that might taint food. But an invasive moth decimated Hawai’i’s kou stands in 1883, prompting carvers to shift to exotic species such as monkeypod, mahogany, ironwood and mango.

Lathe workers experimented with native hardwoods that were too finicky to finesse with an adze. Canoe carvers had long revered koa, the mighty sentinel of the Hawaiian rainforest, for its strength. But the lathe revealed the native acacia’s extraordinary beauty in new ways. It’s the timber’s imperfections—the burls and knots—that distinguish it. When compressed, densely grained koa wood ripples, curls and gleams like a tigereye gem. The endemic Hawaiian species now ranks among the world’s priciest woods; collectors covet koa bowls with exceptional curl.

“No amount of money could pry me away from my ancient calabashes,” says Emiliano Achaval. The Maui woodturner was lucky; sixteen years ago he inherited three hand-carved Hawaiian bowls from his mother-in-law. While his fellow carvers visit Bishop Museum to study its ‘umeke collection, Achaval can inspect his predecessors’ handiwork at home.

“It was an eye-opener! I realized I’ve been doing it wrong for years,” says Achaval. Initially, he made bowls with a small foot or recess on the bottom. After studying his antiques, he marveled over their perfectly rounded bottoms. He theorizes that this design facilitated sharing poi and other heavy foods. “People would reach for the bowl on the floor, and it would tilt,” he says. “When they let it go, it would go upright again.”

Achaval also noticed his heirloom ‘umeke lack obvious toolmarks on the exterior surfaces. “No trace whatsoever,” the artist says in awe. He strives for a similar invisibility in his own craft. “That is really what separates a hobbyist from a professional. I want you to wonder, How in the world did he attach this to a lathe?”

Achaval tells a story of Bill Luce of Washington state, widely considered one of the world’s best woodturners. “He worked for years to achieve the perfect form. Finally he says, ‘This is it: the perfect bowl.’ Over in Hawai’i we said, ‘Uh, Bill? The Hawaiians were doing that for hundreds of years. That’s a perfect *calabash*.’”

Achaval discovered his passion for wood turning by accident. Nearly three decades ago he moved from Argentina to Maui to take care of polo ponies. His Upcountry yard came with a big koa tree, which he cut down. He winces as he remembers it. “I didn’t know what it was!” he says. A carpenter friend suggested he buy a lathe to make use of the valuable wood. So he ordered an entry-level Sears Craftsman and taught himself by watching VHS tapes and haunting local carvers’ woodshops.

“I’m glad I didn’t know how hard it is,” he laughs. “I would never have done it! When you start turning, you make a square dog dish. You’re just happy you survived the experience.” Lathe work can be hazardous, he says. “If you don’t put your tool right, it catches. A piece can fly off the lathe and hit you. You can break your tools. It’s a dangerous thing if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

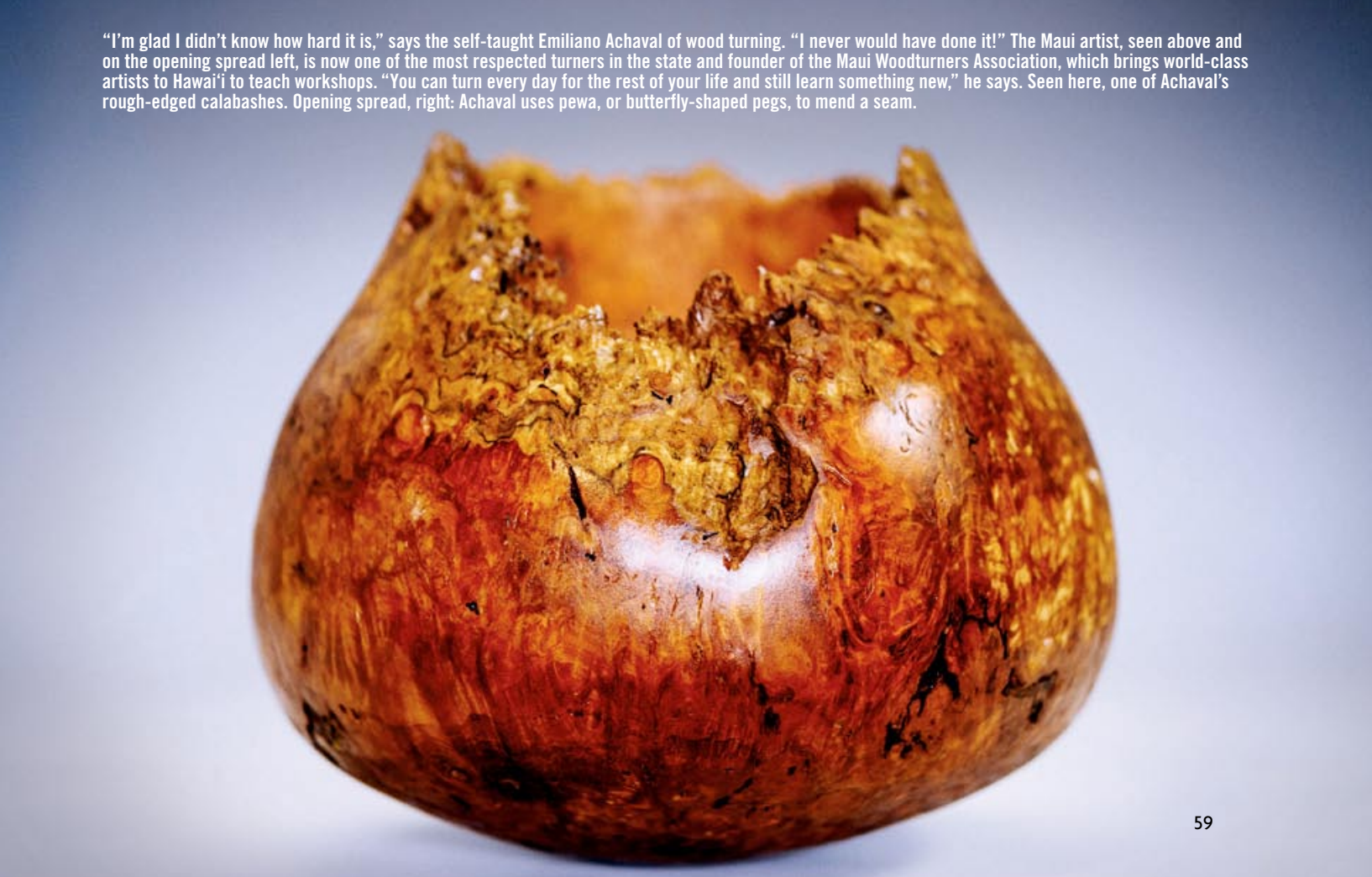
He persisted, and when his son left home, Achaval treated his empty-nest syndrome with more time in the woodshop. He focused on mastering an archaic skill: hand-chased threads. Until the late 1800s artists would hand-cut the threads for screw-top lids. The task demands precision and a lathe spinning at just the right speed. “They sell jigs for this now, but I do it by hand,” he says. “It wasn’t easy to learn. I’m the only guy in Hawai’i who does it.”

He gently twists the lid off of a svelte olive-wood box to reveal four tidy rows of thread. In addition to threaded boxes, Achaval produces traditional calabashes, urns and raw-edged vessels. He works primarily with koa “windfall”—trees blown down in storms. His neighbors at Haleakala Ranch alert him whenever there’s a branch or trunk to harvest. “Oh, I love the smell of koa,” he exclaims, kissing an extra-curly vase.

The former equestrian evolved into Maui’s de facto ambassador of wood turning. He regularly writes for *Woodturning* magazine and in 2016 founded the Maui Woodturners Association. He hosts master woodworkers from around the world who come to practice turning island woods and



“I’m glad I didn’t know how hard it is,” says the self-taught Emiliano Achaval of wood turning. “I never would have done it!” The Maui artist, seen above and on the opening spread left, is now one of the most respected turners in the state and founder of the Maui Woodturners Association, which brings world-class artists to Hawai’i to teach workshops. “You can turn every day for the rest of your life and still learn something new,” he says. Seen here, one of Achaval’s rough-edged calabashes. Opening spread, right: Achaval uses pewa, or butterfly-shaped pegs, to mend a seam.





Too pretty for sushi: Noah Lake's elegant lathe-turned sushi platters (seen here) stretch the traditional idea of the calabash. Lake (above left) is the son of renowned Island wood artist and fine furniture maker Tai Lake. Noah learned to turn bowls and square plates at age 15 under the tutelage of master turner Elmer Adams. Today he and his wife, Ashley, (above right) run Lake House Woodwork on Hawai'i Island.



share their expertise. While artists in other media are often proprietary about their techniques, turners tend to be collaborative. “We have no secrets,” Achaval says. “We share everything: Here is my gouge, this is how I sharpen and use it. ... The more people who get involved, the better.”

Few have done more to promote Hawaiian woodcrafting than Tai Lake. Aaron Hammer calls the Lake family “a gift to the world.” When Tai moved to Hawai‘i in 1980, the high-end furniture maker was astonished by the hardwoods he encountered here. Back then koa didn’t have the international cachet it now possesses; Tai helped cultivate a market for Hawaiian woods and fostered a community of local carvers. Forty years later he and his two sons, Jonah and Noah Lake, work together in their open-air studio in Hōlua-loa, turning slabs of koa into everything from sashimi platters to rocking chairs fit for royalty.

Tai finds lathe work meditative. “You’re able to concentrate purely on form and aesthetic as you chase a line,” he says. “When you get it right, everything is in balance. Jonah agrees. “It’s like tuning a guitar. There’s a sound. If it’s cutting right, you hear it. You’re getting a perfect curve.” Lately Noah has been logging the most time on the lathe. He’s producing a series of rectangular platters with crater-like cups in the center. Each piece showcases the wood’s unique, eye-catching grain, which flows around the center cavity like water rippling around a stone.

People assume that Noah’s pretty creations are hewn from koa. But after decades of promoting the precious native tree, the Lakes are keen to introduce people to other island-grown timbers — especially weedy species. “Kiawe is one of my favorites,” Noah says of the thorny mesquite ranchers imported to the Islands in the 1800s. “And the more I work with silky oak, the more I like it.” Whether it’s the volcanic soil or abundant rainfall, foreign species such as silky oak, Sugi pine and Pride of India seem to exhibit more pizzazz here than in their native ranges. “Woods grown in Hawai‘i have unique characteristics,” says Noah. “They are deeper in color, have more figure and are more fragrant.”

While some woods are born beautiful, others benefit from enhancement. Certain fungi cause dramatic discolorations in hardwoods, an effect known as “spalting.”

The Lakes love to exploit spalting the same way cheese makers cultivate molds. Veins of white-rot decay can resemble spilled ink or fingers of lightning as they infect a log. “If you catch an avocado log at the right moment,” says Tai, “it comes out looking like fine-grained marble.” With lathe-turned hardwoods a little rot goes a long way.

Pat Kramer has pondered wood’s transcendent qualities since he was a youngster growing up in Windward O‘ahu. “Once you’re into wood, it becomes part of you,” he says. At age six he worked for his uncle, piecing together chessboards and building architectural models—including the original model for Ala Moana Center. By age ten he was teaching other kids at the Windward Artists Guild in exchange for classes. “I took wood sculpting and never looked back,” he says.

Many people point to Kramer as an authority on ‘umeke. While he has published articles and instructional videos illuminating the nuances of various types of Hawaiian bowls, he by no means considers himself an expert. “If you talk about reviving the lost art, I’m not sure how you would define it,” Kramer says. Early Hawaiian carvers kept their craft secret. “Some of it had spiritual and religious significance,” he says. “We have some written stories, but we have just as many holes.”

It’s not just the ancient knowledge that’s missing, either. It’s the wood. Many of the old bowls in museum collections come from the luxuriant groves of kou that once populated Waikīkī’s marshland. The kou trees that exist today are a different variety, says Kramer. The wood is oilier, with more tannins. Without instructions or even the same material to work with, Kramer relies on intuition when crafting his version of a kūmauna or māna ‘ai.

Around forty years ago Kramer started working with milo. Early Hawaiian carvers favored the golden-hued wood, but like kou, it faded into obscurity as coastal forests vanished. “People looked at me like, What is that?” he says. “Now everybody wants milo.” Kramer uses the rare wood exclusively for making traditional bowls. “It felt like a bit of a sacrilege to use it for just anything,” he says.

Kramer aims for simplicity when crafting ‘umeke but just as often lets his imagination loose on the lathe. Many of his imaginative pieces stretch the definition of

bowl. For an exhibition in Ojai, California, he turned a knotty Norfolk pine into three shiny black bowls straight out of *Fantasia*. He burned the wood and shaved it to fashion the delicate petals that formed the base of each flower-shaped vessel.

The Ojai exhibit was a joint show featuring Kramer and his wife, Sharon Doughtie. The couple helped found the Honolulu Woodturners club twenty years ago and have turned wood full time since 1998. A volcanic explosion inspired one of Doughtie’s most compelling collections of work. One evening in April 1993, she and Kramer hiked out to Kīlauea to witness lava pouring into the ocean. They felt the earth tremble, then saw fire surge up from a fissure. With a massive *ka-boom!* a quarter-acre-size ledge blew into the air. Kramer threw himself over Doughtie to shield her while lava shot overhead. A rock struck her in the ribs and threw her down a hill. For many months afterward she dreamed of fountaining lava and Pele, the volcano goddess.

In response to this intense experience, Doughtie turned to the lathe. She developed “Knotwork,” a series of jet-black bowls embellished with knots and chains. She’s of Irish descent and incorporated Celtic symbols into her interpretations of Hawaiian petroglyphs. “Every piece had a story behind it,” she says.

Doughtie is one of Hawai‘i’s few professional female woodturners — though women continuously approach her for lessons. The first thing she tells prospective students: You need access to a lathe. “I learned the hard way to get the biggest lathe that your money can buy,” she says. In addition to an ample lathe, turners need saws, grinders, gouges and sanders. Instruction helps, too. Wood-turning clubs connect beginners with mentors and equipment. But, says Doughtie, “If there were a school and a maker’s space where people could rent time on lathes, that would be amazing.”

Hammer has plans for just such a space. For several years he has taught wood turning at Laupāhoehoe Public Charter School alongside master furniture maker Peter Zirolì. Hammer hopes to expand this into a small college or create something similar. “I envision a world-class school here in Hawai‘i that builds on the history of the calabash,” says Hammer. “We’d work with local woods and encourage local students. Maybe we would call it ‘Umeke University.” **HH**