

## ROBERT M. HAMADA

*Born 1921 in Kapa'a, Kaua'i  
Lives in Kapa'a, Kaua'i*

Listening to Robert Hamada speak about wood and the turned bowls he makes from it, there is in his words and demeanor the unmistakable devotion of one who has spent years living inside his material and craft. His involvement with wood began over 60 years ago when he was a boy, and while he has made things throughout his adult life, his intense concentration on turned vessels has come in recent years following retirement, when he has had the time to devote himself full-time to his art. Hamada is exceptionally focused and disciplined, working from early morning until late at night at the various processes involved in making his bowls. He talks with excitement and awe in his voice about wood, and revealing the beauty in wood is his continual challenge and goal.

The property which encompasses Hamada's home and studio, where he has lived and worked for over 25 years, its yard studied with the hulks of tarp-covered tree trunks and uprooted stumps waiting to have their inner beauty revealed, lies at the end of a road up against the mountains near Kapa'a on Kaua'i, not far from where he grew up in the back country of Kapahi. Hamada's parents immigrated to Kaua'i from Japan, and his father worked for Lihue Sugar Plantation as an irrigation man, regulating water flows and maintaining irrigation ditches and tunnels. The family lived close to the canefields, relatively isolated in a valley with few other people. As a boy Hamada walked six miles each way to and from school in Kapa'a and spent a great deal of time outdoors in the land, which started his appreciation for nature. His love of baseball also contributed an early experience that influenced him: his father gave him a baseball glove that he treasured but on a long walk

home he got caught in the rain with no means to protect his glove, which disintegrated because it was poorly made. The episode instilled in him a sense for good materials and quality workmanship which have long been hallmarks of his work.

Hamada's father also worked as a carpenter/blacksmith/stone mason, performing part-time outside work, and as the oldest son in a family of five children, Hamada was depended upon to help out. The boy's interest in wood began in this way, assisting his father in the making of simple rectilinear furniture forms. Hamada wanted to make something round so he improvised a rudimentary foot-operated lathe (there was no electricity where he lived) for turning table legs. Later, as a boarding student at high school in Lihue, Hamada had access to better, belt-driven equipment and began making small bowls, hand carving the basic forms and finishing them on the lathe. In his sophomore year Hamada persuaded the principal to let him out of physical education classes so he could take an extra period of shop each term, ending up with seven credits in woodworking by graduation. After high school, Hamada enrolled in Kalaheo Vocational School to study carpentry but dropped out after six months when he felt he wasn't expanding his skills enough to justify time spent there. In 1940 at 19, Hamada opened a furniture shop with a partner in Lihue, but with World War II came price controls and general uncertainty, and the business was dissolved. As a Japanese-American Hamada was prevented from enlisting in the military, so he worked for engineers building military camps on Kaua'i. Although accepted in the Army in 1944, Hamada didn't finish his training before the war ended and returned

to Kaua'i to work in construction. When tourism grew in the 1950s he got a job as a maintenance worker in the hotel industry and eventually became director of engineering for the five Amfac hotels on Kaua'i, retiring in 1992.

During these years Hamada always maintained a woodshop at home (he established his present situation in 1971). He recalls that initially at least half or more of what he produced was given away because there was no market. After returning from his day job, he would work late into the night making wooden jewelry (bracelets, pendants, hair pins). He would take the pieces to work or put them in shops on commission and they sold well. He also participated in local craft fairs. Gradually he got exposure for his vessels through the hotels, and his reputation grew by word-of-mouth, occasionally bringing people to his studio seeking to buy.

It was Hamada's wife's initiative that led him into exhibiting his work professionally. In 1974 she encouraged him to enter the Hawai'i Craftsmen annual juried exhibition in Honolulu, and both entries were accepted, one garnering the juror's award. With this success, Hamada began making bowls for exhibitions, entering juried competitions every year for the past 23 years and only once being rejected in a jurying done by slides (he notes with considerable satisfaction that the juror visited him later and wanted to buy the same bowl, not realizing he had rejected it). Hamada's success in entering juried exhibitions has led to several acquisition awards by the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts and occasionally gotten him into prestigious museum collections on the mainland as well. One year a curator from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston was the juror for the Hawai'i Craftsmen exhibition, giving one of

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Hamada's works the top award and seeking to purchase it for his museum's collection. Not wanting to part with it, Hamada declined to sell, but several months later the director of the Boston museum, who happened to be visiting Hawai'i, showed up at Hamada's home and managed to talk him into selling the piece and another to the museum. The Boston museum director later mentioned Hamada's work to his colleague, the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, who also came to Kaua'i and acquired a bowl for his museum's collection.

Through a lifetime spent on Kaua'i, Hamada has accumulated a great deal of knowledge about his raw material. He has been collecting and stockpiling wood since his high school years and feels that he has come to know every important accessible tree on Kaua'i. Although he salvages his wood only from trees felled by disease or nature or trees condemned to come down for safety reasons or which are in the path of construction, Hamada has made his interest in many trees known to landowners in case they are ever taken down. He prefers to salvage trees himself if possible, so that no part of their potential will be wasted. However, Hamada also has a profound respect for living trees and will often try to persuade landowners to spare especially old and large specimens. Hamada works only with woods found in Hawai'i and almost exclusively with woods from Kaua'i, although he has traded wood occasionally with woodturners on the other islands. He prefers to work with the woods which offer great color, grain and figuration—milo, hau, camphor, koa—but has also made vessels from kamani, kou, sandalwood, kauila, tecoma, and lychee, among others. Hamada has a keen understanding of effects of climate and growing conditions on the development of trees and consequently on the wood. For example, a tree growing in the moist area of Hanalei will have a very different color and patterning inside than a tree of the same

species struggling to grow in the harsh, dry environment of Kekaha. While Hamada can generally look at a tree and intuitively know from such things as formations of the trunk and crown what the wood will look like, he often likes to study sections of trees over time in order to decide which cuts will produce the best pieces. He notes that he still has a piece of hala in log form that he obtained in 1938 when he was in high school. Hamada says that he has learned not to rush things ("You can always make a piece of wood smaller but never larger"), and the most important thing is to not lose or compromise the integrity of the wood.

With no formal artistic training, Hamada has developed his art through instinct and working at it long hours every day. The labor-intensive process begins with selecting a piece of wood, planning how to cut and turn it and then roughing out the form on the lathe, working both sides to determine where the best quality of the wood lies, removing as much extraneous material as possible, and setting it aside to dry, which can take a year or more (each inch of thickness equals approximately one year of drying time). Hamada's turning shed is crowded with piles of rough-cut forms carefully dated. Periodically Hamada retrieves a piece that is ready to be finished and once again turns it on the lathe, often incorporating an elegantly tapered foot in the design, getting the form of the bowl as thin and even as possible. Evenings are usually spent in front of the television with a bowl form in his lap, his hands sanding it over and over with increasingly fine grades of sandpaper, subtly refining the contours and surface (it can require over 20 hours of sanding for a small bowl and an astounding 200-plus hours for a larger vessel). The meticulous sanding and a final rub with a piece of leather or suede produces the glossy polished surfaces which are characteristic of Hamada's work.

Two bowls in this exhibition, carved at different times from the same original section of a hau tree illustrate the range in Hamada's approach to form. One is a deep bowl made in 1990 with flaring sides, thin, turned walls and smoothly polished surface which emphasizes the swirling pattern of the grain. Hamada chose to capitalize on the striking light-colored areas surrounded by dark where the tree turned and grew around sapwood and an open slash in the side where wood had rotted away. The second hau bowl was made after an interval of seven years early in 1997. Here the form is elongated and elliptical, carved out completely by hand rather than turned, with thicker slightly turned-in walls. Hamada has covered the entire exterior save for the base with continuous tiny chisel cuts which emphasize the form over the figuration in the wood. The way the many facets catch the light from different angles creates a striking contrast with the soft sheen of the polished interior.

Hamada also likes to produce what he calls freeform pieces, improvisational, irregularly-shaped vessels which incorporate a tension between function and sculpture, tradition and contemporaneity. In these works, he takes advantage of the defects in the wood—rotten areas, termite damage, splits, bark inclusions—to create highly sophisticated objects which hint at the tradition of classic bowl forms but which demand to be considered and appreciated as abstract objects.

Robert Hamada's father once told him, "Wood listens to you, it does what you want but you have to be sensitive to the wood." Through a lifetime of work Hamada has come to intuitively understand that the process of woodturning is a dialogue between the artist and the wood. Each of his vessels is a celebration of the wood from which it is made. As Hamada himself has said, "Every piece of wood has a future, and my job is to release that future from the wood."