

Shop Talk

International Contest



The sculptures completed by Betty Scarpino and others will remain in a museum in Dongyang, China.

Carving in China

I had just three months to get in shape for eight days of intense woodcarving in China. I was out of shape and practice because I had primarily been editing *American Woodturner* for the last six years instead of working in my shop. I accepted the challenge in July and jumped full swing into biking, weightlifting and yard work to build strength and carving on a large sculpture to reestablish woodworking skills. As my plane lifted off in October, I felt strong and ready for the upcoming adventure.

In China, becoming a Master Carver confers status and wealth. We witnessed



Contestants used a variety of methods to accomplish their carvings. Charles Chambata from Zambia employed a mallet and chisel.

that firsthand while attending a lavish dinner at Master Lu's "workshop." Master Lu Guangzheng is China Arts and Crafts Master and Asia Pacific Region Arts and Crafts Master. Master Lu employs hundreds of workers who carve and sand his picturesque panels. Prices are high and sales obviously brisk. Carving in China is big business, and Dongyang, the city we visited, is seen as China's woodcarving capital.

In Dongyang, we found crowds of students, TV crews and newspaper reporters, all interested in the experience of the eight-day carving competition.



Golden teak logs were provided for the 38 carvers (20 from China; 18 from elsewhere) participating in the competition.

An International Cohort

Although I was the only sculptor from the U.S., other countries represented included Argentina, Bhutan, Ecuador, Iceland, Japan, Norway, to name a few. I already knew the only other woman in the group, Zina Manesa-Burloiu from Romania. Right from the start, she and I shared stories, insight and laughter.

Terry Martin from Australia organized the internationals. Part of his planning included ensuring that each artist could either speak English or act as a translator. Despite minor communication challenges, we all spoke the language of "carving

wood." As such, a feeling of camaraderie grew as we shared tools and helped each other reposition impossibly heavy chunks of wood.

The electricity in China is 220-volt, so I used a transformer, which allowed me to use the power-carving tools I packed into a small suitcase. Even so, the tool I ended up using the most turned out to be a small electric chainsaw.

Most of our initial wood removal was done by chainsaw, after which each of us resorted to a variety of cutting methods. Some used mallets and chisels, but most employed power tools. Personally, I used an angle grinder with Saburr Tooth® discs and an Arbortech reciprocating power carver, both aggressive workhorses. As my sculpture took shape, I switched to smaller rotary cutters for finer work.

We were provided with golden teak, a traditional carving wood in China, well



Master Lu Guangzheng's workshop (right) boasts a massive carving at its entrance; a detail of one of his carvings is shown above.



sued for detail carving. Surprisingly, the quality of our logs turned out to be pretty rough. Many still contained the pith and some even included rot. As a result of the stock provided, I ended up changing my design.

Although some competitors finished early, I needed every bit of the eight days to complete my sculpture. Woodcarving competitions in China are extremely popular and doing well in one can lead to higher prestige, so the Chinese carvers were well seasoned and ready for action; their forms emerged with ease.

This carving competition was part of the 50th anniversary celebration of the World Crafts Council (WCC).

The WCC had arranged a display area for our sculptures in a building that also housed booths of varied craft items from a range of countries. We finished on Friday at 5:00 p.m., and by Saturday morning, at the WCC's opening ceremony, our carvings were on pedestals. I have to say, they looked stunning!

— Betty Scarpino

Betty Scarpino (bettyscarpino.com) is Woodworker's Journal's former woodturning columnist and former editor of American Woodturner.



The bottom third of Betty's original sculpture (above) eventually had to be removed: rot extended too deeply into the piece.



Betty used a chainsaw for initial shaping and an angle grinder with a Saburr Tooth disc to add details to her sculpture.

Photo Courtesy of Martin Bill

Ye's Carving Shop

Tin Tin, a reporter who made a documentary about my experiences in China, arranged for Zina and me to meet Ye, a fellow woman carver who lives in a small town a few miles outside of Dongyang. Ye has her own shop and employs five carvers and is working on achieving Master Carver status.

In a fascinating side trip, Ye took us to see a nearby blacksmith where many of the tools for local carvers are forged. After that we went to lunch and then strolled through a Buddhist temple where visiting monks were chanting. By moving off the usual tourist path, we gained an intimate glimpse of China.

— Betty Scarpino



A local Chinese blacksmith (above) makes carving tools. Ye, a professional woodcarver (left), is working to reach Master status.