AN ARTIST'S SOUL TRAVELS, EACH STEP A DESTINATION

ROBERTO FERRER'S REMARKABLE JOURNEY

Photo: Mike Mitchel

Derek Weidman

It was a loud late night in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and a ragtag group of woodturners, metalsmiths, artists, and craftspeople gathered around a large patio table, joking about life and discussing the collaborative projects they would continue the next day. All of those in this clutch of around twenty makers (out of a total of seventy participants) were unwinding as the frenetic, creative, and exhausting Echo Lake collaborative event neared its final day. Everyone was running on empty—except one. After enjoying the social atmosphere for a time, there sat Roberto Ferrer, under the night sky and a dim deck light, in a not-so-comfortable chair, looking perfectly at ease while adding pyrography to a sculpture. Most participants had gone to bed, having spent a tiring twelve-hour day collaborating, but now at midnight, Roberto was intent to ply his craft for a few hours more.

I met Roberto nearly a decade ago, first at the art expo SOFA Chicago and then while teaching at a craft school. At the time, he was turning mostly bowls and before that, doing some carving on organic vessels. All were beautifully, even expertly, done, but his voice as an innovative and spiritually connected sculptor had not yet emerged. In the early days of our friendship, Roberto told me about his goals as a maker. He said with a lighthearted but determined conviction that he wanted to become a "true artist," whatever that meant.

To say that since then his growth has been meteoric would not be an overstatement. Roberto is a joker, unassuming and kindhearted, but make no mistake: those who have met him along his path marvel at the sheer artistic distance he has traveled. He told me he wanted to be a true artist, and he knew better than anyone what that meant: to be willing to put in the work—relentlessly, step by step—to bring his artistic visions into the world and turn his dreams into reality.

The old and the new

Some of the most resonant influences on Roberto's artistic journey and on the creative power infused in his *oeuvre* trace back to his homeland, Puebla City, where he was born and raised, and nearby Mexico City, where he moved at age sixteen. Cosmopolitan and historic, the vibrant sights and sounds of Mexico City etched a visual orchestra onto his sensibilities. Much like the contemporary sculptor Roberto has become, Mexico City itself fuses the traditional and ancient with modernity.

While Roberto brings a work of art into existence with the newest powerful electric grinders and a modern lathe, he may finish the same piece quietly and meditatively, with hand chisels indistinguishable from those of a hundred or more years ago. And in the same way, graffiti and murals on city and subway walls or the bold illustrations of band shirts on tourists clash and juxtapose temporally, as those same tourists, learning about Mexico's history, climb among the pre-Columbian ruins.

As an older teenager on his days off from work, Roberto would take

walks around the rich patchwork of Mexico City, strolling through public parks like Alameda Central, lined with its white and black oak trees and full of monuments and sculptures. He breathed in and marveled at the varieties of architecture, the bones of the city, places like Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral, built on a sacred site of the Aztecs, or the dramatic details of colonial buildings like the National Palace. Dotting the city were also museums, where Roberto began appreciating how painters capture the different types of light cast by the sun throughout the day, as he himself had begun to notice. All of these disparate places, like a quilt, were connected by the thread of a bustling subway system, where again historical elements are woven seamlessly into modern construction.

El Jarabe, 2023, Walnut, steel, acrylic paint, 6" × 6" × 1" (15cm × 15cm × 25mm)

Photos: Tib Shaw

Folklore dances in Mexico were a form of expression used for religious purposes during pre-Columbian times, and as a way to mock the Spanish crown. El Jarabe Tapatio, commonly referred to as El Jarabe, represents the courtship of a man and a woman, with the woman first rejecting the man's advances, then eventually accepting them.

Influential seeds

The influential seeds from his hometown and Mexico City took time to grow through Roberto's constantly expanding creative process. Each new artistic branch, beginning to bear weight and reach for sunshine, found itself inextricably connected in a profound way back to the earliest roots in Mesoamerica. Some of those seeds were quite humble, like the playful first cuts Roberto made in wood while visiting his cousin's woodshop, never realizing that the medium of wood was as surely in his blood as it was coming off in ribbons at the lathe.

Some seeds were quite subtle, like the time he saw an exhibition in his hometown of onyx sculptures with flowing, mesmerizing carved shapes. Roberto explained, "What caught my eye were the fluid lines, bright colors, and translucency of the material. These sculptures seemed to glow when the sunshine came through the windows and filled the space with bright light." Roberto recalls in his idiosyncratic interpretation of materials and experiences how he wanted to run his hand clear through the sculptures, with surfaces like inky swirling portals filled with glowing light.

Antiquity, 2018, Boxelder, lacquer, 6" × 15" (16cm × 38cm)

Collection of Sonal G.

Cleaning small vessels with a carving gouge, 2022.

Photo: Kate Zhuchkova

Others were profound as they unfolded, even when Roberto was just 12 years old. When visiting an archeological site not far from Puebla City, Roberto saw the Mesoamerican pyramid ruins of Cholula, obscured and repurposed with a Catholic temple built directly on top of them. As Roberto explained, "For the Spanish, it was a way to convert the natives to Catholicism and erase their culture," and learning of this erasure made him want to one day share his heritage with the world. Like the Spanish church ▸

Quetzalcoatl, 2019, Black walnut, steel, acrylic paint, 6" × 5¾" × 1¼" (15cm × 15cm × 32mm)

Collection of Rich and Debbie Hall-Rappen

on that Mesoamerican pyramid, time and processes have added layered surfaces that speak through Roberto's art, itself covered in a panoply of carved, painted, and burned textures. Examples include *El Jarabe*, inspired by folklore dances and specifically the China Poblana dress women wore while performing, and *Quetzalcoatl*, a revered mythical Mesoamerican feathered serpent that created the universe and mankind.

Given his heritage, I asked Roberto what it means to him to be among the few who are expanding the diversity of the AAW membership, and he said, "Although it is not my intention to be a spokesperson for the Latin American community, throughout my work I hope to inspire other Spanish-speaking artists living in the U.S. and in other countries to come forward and share with the rest of the woodturning community. I truly believe that by interacting, sharing, and collaborating, society grows and becomes rich with culture and traditions."

While sincere and hopeful in his words, the work that is the backdrop to them is visionary. Perhaps Roberto's most powerful series is his *Mesoamerican Shields*, which represent different aspects and times of Mesoamerican civilizations. These works bring a modern voice from an entire culture, both in iconography and narratives, into our woodturning community. But Roberto does not merely behave as a torch-bearer, recreating forms and motifs from his cultural roots. He instead has traveled through valuable experiences of his own, accumulated all manner of techniques, both learned and invented, and synthesized influences across cultures—the ancient and the new, Mexican and American.

> "I truly believe that by interacting, sharing, and collaborating, society grows and becomes rich with culture and traditions." –Roberto Ferrer

Seeking purpose

There came a point where the vibrant colors, culture, history, and places of Mexico turned into mere memories. Roberto left his homeland and traveled north, immigrating to the United States. Seeking purpose, new experiences, and opportunities, he found himself in a number of states across America. He traveled to towns he temporarily called home, collecting tools, figuratively and literally, and adding tinder to the creative spark about to be lit in a wood artist waking up. To make ends meet, Roberto found himself doing construction—hard work but reliable income. Wherever he found his feet, things needed building with the capable blistered hands of those willing to do it.

His first stop on American soil was California, where Roberto gained almost by osmosis the knowledge of the Chicano subculture, including how they translated their unique

Magnolia, 2013, Spalted southern magnolia, Danish oil, 3" × 23" × 16½" (8cm × 58cm × 42cm)

lived experiences into art. From there, it was all the way across the country to Florida, then up the East Coast to Charlotte, North Carolina. Serendipitously, behind the place Roberto was renting stood a small, inconspicuous, unassuming shed.

At first, Roberto used the shed to store the tools for his construction job—hammers, a circular saw, assorted measuring implements. But soon it evolved into a workspace and then a modest furniture shop with a bandsaw, planer, and contractor's table saw. The goal was to furnish his house with items he crafted himself—after working grueling hours on construction sites, running tower cranes, or spot-remodeling as an independent contractor. With a newfound passion for fine woodworking but lacking the surplus energy to create large pieces of furniture, Roberto began experimenting with smaller pieces like bandsaw boxes and picture frames.

Roberto shared a quote with me that resonates with his own practice, Pablo Picasso's famous line, "Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working." While working intently on bandsaw boxes, Roberto saw the beauty of "defects" in the wood he was using. He recognized that what many would call imperfections—burls, knots, etc.—are storytellers themselves and became completely intoxicated by them. Then, after a chance sighting at a local woodworking store of a grinder attachment that could be used as a carving tool, he began to notice random unclaimed logs in his neighborhood, and his life as a wood sculptor was afoot.

Driving along North Carolina roads and snatching up interesting stumps to carve—that is, using what's around—is an apt expression of how Roberto's artistic pursuits have manifested and evolved. As Roberto continued down his path as an artist, he called upon the stories, culture, iconography, and rich textures from his life in Mexico, all while harvesting logs and tools in the United States.

Roberto demonstrating at the 2023 AAW International Woodturning Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

Tools and logs are simple terms for describing process and materiality, concepts important to any artist. Roberto's interest in the expressive potential of materials—in the same way color, texture, and stories are expressive tools—may have started directly with carved logs. The flowing and dynamically carved *Magnolia* is an early example, but the impetus goes back even farther. The onyx sculptures he wanted to plunge his hand through, the stone temples of his homeland, the metal helmets of Roman soldiers in religious ceremonies he saw as a child all left impressions and the desire to shape things with his hands.

With a medley of influences from both Mexico and the United States, it was natural for Roberto to explore more than one medium. He was always an artist in heart and mind, but his hands necessarily found business doing anything and everything before making art full time. From his broad cultural and work experience came an expansion from wood art to digital demos, then stone and bronze, and even designs for large-scale public works. *Contained*, a cast bronze sculpture, shows Roberto's growth as a maker during that period, but in ▸

Contained, 2022, Bronze, steel, white oak, 15½" × 11¼" × 5" (39cm × 29cm × 13cm)

The bronze sculptural element was cast using the lost-wax method from an original maple form.

retrospect, it was also an experiment hinting at things to come.

Constantly learning and growing

After carving vessels whole cloth and undertaking the meticulous task of sanding them to perfection, Roberto wanted to create works faster. Enter YouTube, where Roberto began seeking out videos showing how wood lathes could be used to create—and sand—beautiful vessels quickly. YouTube creators such as Miguel Zanches and Cap'n Eddie Castelin, as well as mainline woodturners such as (the late) John Jordan and Gary Stevens, greatly influenced and aided Roberto in his woodturning journey. The spiral flutes, rhythm, movement, and grace of the latter two makers can be seen in many of Roberto's works. Pieces from his *Gladiator* series and the stunning *Cyclone* speak strongly to their influence. The evolution of these works into Roberto's *Mesoamerican* series is easy to see and rewarding to understand, as it is a concrete example of how this maker's creative mind works. Seamlessly combining technique, narrative, and personal experience, *Cyclone* is Roberto's response to the devastating effects of Hurricane Dennis, which pummeled Florida in 2005 when he was living there in his early 20s.

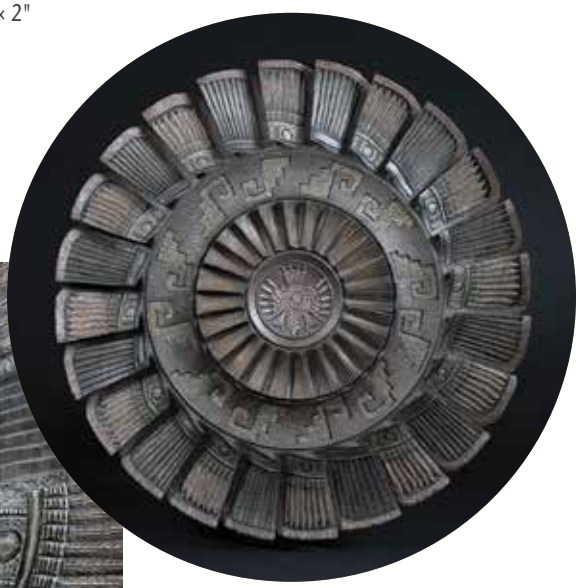
Not surprisingly, each chapter in Roberto's life left a thread that he carried forward into his current artistic life. Beyond wood art and woodturning stemming from his time in North Carolina, he also began making online content and undertaking other digital endeavors, including interactive remote demos (IRDs) like the ones that contributed to his own woodturning education.

Chicago and the Agave Engine

The most recent stop in his expansive journey is Chicago, where Roberto

La Venta (Mesoamerican Series), 2021, Black walnut, pyrography, metallic paint, 15" × 15" × 2" (38cm × 38cm × 5cm)

Collection of Tom and Terry Wedel



Cuauhtemoc (Mesoamerican Series), 2021, Maple, pyrography, acrylic paint, 15" × 15" × 2" (38cm × 38cm × 5cm)

Collection of Maureen Mark

now lives with his wife Kate and their three children. Roots of family and community anchored him there and allowed him to begin making art fulltime.

Chicago offers a bustling woodturning scene that Roberto has fully embraced. Much like how Roberto took advantage of online content to learn woodturning, the other giant pillar of the woodturning craft is the local clubs and communities that make wood shavings into a local and international family, which he soon actively joined.

He is active in his local club and has demonstrated twice at the biennial Turn-On! Chicago symposium. He has also demonstrated for local clubs and at craft shows, as well as at other regional and national events, including the 2023 AAW International Woodturning Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky.

Time, like woodturning, moves in circles. Roberto met Francisco Bauer, who soon became his woodturning mentor. Francisco was born in the United States but was raised in Mexico, so they had an immediate and meaningful connection. Francisco taught Roberto more sophisticated sharpening and turning techniques, along with making him tools and custom lathe attachments, as Francisco is an industrial mechanic by trade. Now retired, he generously found time to help Roberto with each step he took. Better turning skills and direct exposure to making his own tools were key to Roberto's inspired level of work.

A strong theme among Chicago-area woodturners is the notable number of ornamental woodturners. Ornamental turning uses a modified lathe and rosettes to create ornate, mathematically infused patterns in wood. Some of the original machines were called rose engines, as the way they created patterns was reminiscent of the repeating petals

Traveler, 2018, Cherry, acrylic paint, 5¾" × 2¼" (15cm × 6cm)

Storm, 2022, Maple, pyrography (*not* fractal burning), 13" × 13" × 2" (33cm × 33cm × 5cm)

of a flower. These are stiffer machines in the way an artisan uses them, with less direct human interaction than a conventional wood lathe. Much of the artistry is locked into the rosettes and setup, determined before the machine is ever turned on.

After seeing ornamental turning in action, Roberto was struck—not unlike a bolt of lightning, or perhaps a few shots of tequila—with a wild idea. After visiting the shop of accomplished ornamental turner Dr. Scott Barret to study his rose engine, Roberto reasoned that an angle grinder could be modified into something akin to the cutters of a rose engine. With a jig to hold the angle grinder, Roberto began making cuts in tandem with a lathe—precise, yet open to spontaneity—a clear departure from a conventional rose engine.

The rose, a symbol of perfect love and beauty, fits the unwavering and interwoven cuts of a rose

Iridescence Dream, 2017, Mahogany, 10" × 10" × 1¾" (25cm × 25cm × 4cm)

engine. The agave fruit, central to Mesoamerican culture, looks strikingly like the patterned cuts of a rose engine as well.

This new machine, the Agave Engine, designed by Roberto, is a different beast altogether. It creates the repeating patterns similar to those of a rose engine, but a human hand, full of life and imperfection, is still part ▸

of every cut. Like the agave plant and the tequila it makes, there is spirit, vigor, and risk persisting in each pass of the cutter.

The work Roberto has made with the Agave Engine now forms the canvas for all of his stories—stories from his hometown and Mexico City and from his journey in the U.S. that brought him to Chicago. They are the canvas for all of the textures, from crumbling stones to spinning blades; the palette for all of the colors, from serpent gods to Ferris wheels. They are the collisions of past and present.

Roberto's work, like his life, is full, chaotic, and always moving forward. ■

Having devoted many years to wildlife rehabilitation, Derek Weidman is a full-time wood sculptor focused primarily on multiaxis turning with an emphasis on animal forms. He is a known boundary-pusher, demonstrator, nature lover, troublemaker, and fledgling writer.

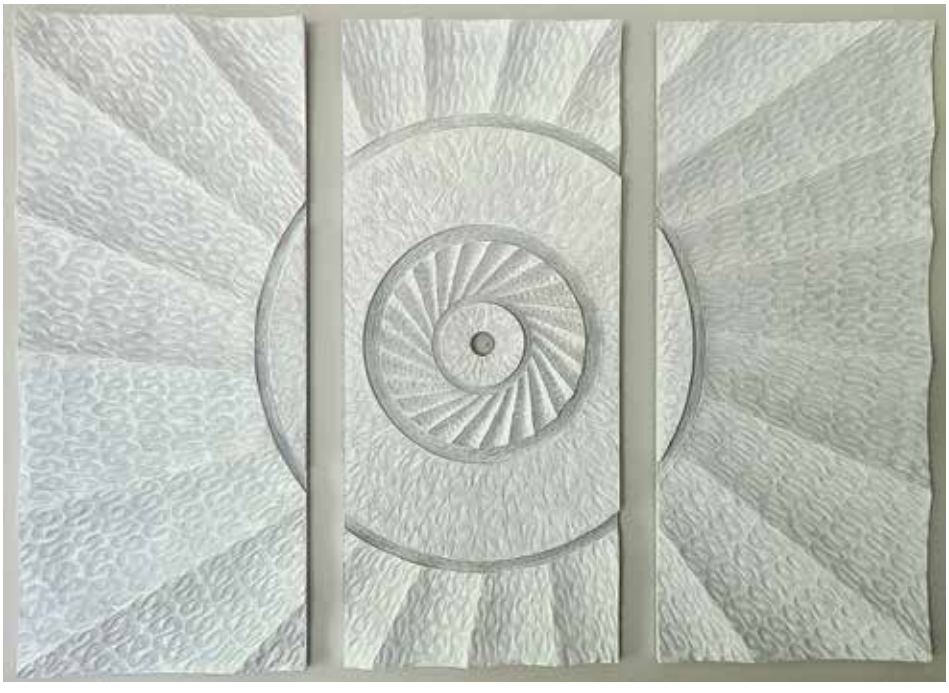
PBS Video on Roberto Ferrer

PBS visited Roberto's Illinois shop in 2022 and featured him in an "Eye on the Arts" episode. View the video at tiny.cc/Ferrer.

(*Left*) *Gladiator #3*, 2019, Black walnut, metallic wax, 14¾" × 14¾" × 1¾" (37cm × 37cm × 4cm)

(*Right*) *Cyclone*, 2017, Black walnut, 13" × 13" × 1" (33cm × 33cm × 25mm)

Photo: Vic Berardi



Wall Sculpture, 2024, Poplar, 40" × 52" × 1" (101cm × 132cm × 25mm)

Roberto with his ornamental-lathe-inspired invention, the Agave Engine.