

**Thomas Haaparuro**  
**Interview by: Ellen Gurley**

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**You grew up in the Ohio's Appalachian Mountains? What initially brought you to Charlotte (or North Carolina)?**

True. I was raised in a very rural part of Ohio, not far from Pittsburgh, PA. While I was in college, I grew to love hiking. My friends and I would travel to Kentucky (the Red River Gorge) for weekends, then we started to come to NC on spring breaks, mostly hiking in the Linville Gorge. It was a pretty long drive, so we could only do it when school was out for a week or more. Over my college career, I came to North Carolina to hike probably ten times. When school was over, I decided it was time to move closer. So I came to North Carolina for the hiking really. I liked Asheville, but there was not much of a job market for my profession there. I was not overly fond of the Raleigh area. So I interviewed in Charlotte and liked it and the job well enough, so I moved down. I liked the idea that Charlotte was close to both the mountains and the sea. Before my art started taking up most of my free time, I spent a lot of time hiking the mountains or kayaking at the beach. I don't have a lot of time for that these days though.

**While in Ohio you went to the state university and obtained a BA in Landscape Architecture? What does that mean? Was working for Design Resource Group the first time you applied these skills?**

I actually received a Bachelor of Science, not to be too particular, from the Ohio State University. I graduated from the college of engineering with a degree in Landscape Architecture. For those who don't really know what that profession is, and I meet many who don't, it is better described as land planning. I design sites for urban infill projects, multi-family apartment sites and plazas, that kind of thing. Architects design the buildings, civil engineers design the utilities, and I design how those two aspects fit together.

While I was in college, I worked for a civil engineering company. I spent most of my time drafting and doing basic site design. When I was hired on at Design Resource Group I really began to utilize my skills and develop as a professional. I have designed a wide variety of projects here in Charlotte and throughout the southeast.

**When I first saw your art it was made of concrete and on display at the American Beauty Garden shop. I even think one was a waterfall with plants in it. I have heard more about your woodworking (which we will get to), but do you still do concrete pieces and when did you first start this? Some of your concrete pieces look very organic, like you borrowed a vision from nature. Is that about right?**

I am self-taught as both a concrete artist and a wood artist. I am not much for formal training, clubs, etc. What I learned most from college is that I didn't really need college to teach me things. The professor assigns a book, you read the book, and the test is the book. You get a degree. So now I just buy the books. That is how I learned both woodworking and concrete sculpting.

With concrete, I really liked the idea of direct sculpting which, as I mentioned, I learned from a book I had purchased. It was a very affordable way to create large, permanent sculptures. I did a lot of this kind of sculpture for a few years and really explored a lot of different forms, techniques, and tricks. It was a good way to learn the medium. The down side of it though is that it does take a lot of time to carve them and they are solely one-offs each time. I still work concrete and have done some pretty large and complex fountains; some for homeowners, some for businesses and some for apartment complexes. But they are no longer direct-carved pieces. They are made from molds that I construct. It costs a lot more to produce, but it also allows me to create larger and more complex pieces.

Regarding the natural inspirations of my work, which is absolutely true, I mention in my artist statements my upbringing in a rural setting because it is very relevant to my art and my design aesthetic. As a child, without the distractions of the city vying for my attention, I spent a lot of time really engrossed in the natural world. I made collections of insects, pressed leaves and spent hours with my microscope. I really was absorbed by the beauty of the natural world and spent most of my childhood studying it. That has never (really) gone away. Often today I see a natural shape and it sparks an idea in which I elaborate upon that natural shape. But I also don't want my work to seem duplicative of natural items. I am inspired by nature, but I have little interest in duplicating it exactly. Instead, I try to refine a natural shape down to its vital essence. For instance, *take away* the bark and reveal how the shape makes the *thing* beautiful. I tend to think of this as modern or sophisticated. That is, pairing something down to the simplest elements of beauty, balance and form without a lot of superfluous details to either vie for attention or distract from the elemental form.

**You had some pieces at Red Sky Gallery last year? Were those concrete or wood? Are they still up there? Are you in another gallery?**

I do still have pieces at Red Sky. I have been very lucky to work with that gallery. It was always one of my favorite Charlotte galleries and I am honored to be in that gallery with so many other talented artists.

At Red Sky most of the work I have there is wood; some bowls, boxes, and some sculptures. They are also the first gallery to have pieces from my current experiments with cast resins. That new direction in my art really has me excited, and could really open new possibilities for me.

I am in other galleries, as well. I have been in a few other galleries in Charlotte (the Beet and Wooden Stone for instance) but have pulled back to just Red Sky in Charlotte. I also have work in Studio 19 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and Primary Elements Gallery in Cannon Beach, Oregon.

For my concrete work I do sell some of my work directly to Roundtree Plantation Garden Center here in Charlotte. This has been a wonderful relationship which has really allowed me to get my concrete work noticed around town and there are truly a great group of people who work there who have really supported my development. I would also like to mention that Hope Nichols has also been a great client of mine for a few years now. She also saw my work at American Beauty (thanks, Pete) and commissioned a direct carved planter. I have done a few pieces for her now and am currently putting the finishing touches on a fountain for her at Boris and Natasha's.

**Ok, commissioned works; who has purchased these? Who is the average person who requests commissioned pieces from you?**

The only commissioned work I do is for concrete. The woodwork tends to be whatever I want to create but concrete is necessarily different. I love doing work with private homeowners. These people are like Hope and they have an idea of what they are looking for. They give me an idea of what they want, but also allow me the freedom to develop the final work to my own standards. I try to achieve their goals while maintaining my artistic vision.

When I do large-scale fountains for apartment communities or architectural offices this is a much different process. Normally I work with a landscape architect, or architect like myself, who wants a piece that fits into a part of their design. They give me an idea of space, the kind of fountain they are looking for and an idea of budget. Then I create a few sketches and really work with them to get a design that meets their needs. Since I am also a professional designer I am familiar with their process and so that helps a great deal.

**And onto jewelry. I've heard some of your stuff can be very intricate. How does one make jewelry from wood and where can some of these pieces be viewed?**

You are very good at asking questions that are short but require long answers. Ok. With regards to my woodwork I harvest all of my own lumber. This normally starts with someone letting me know that they have a tree that is being taken down in their yard or a neighboring yard. If it's the right kind of tree I often will go and take a portion of that tree home. I like the idea of salvaging the wood and I like even better that all of my wood is local and represents the place that I live and work. When I get the wood home I saw it up into boards and set it aside to dry. This wood is used in all of my art. But normally there are small bits of *waste wood* cut off when I am working on a larger project. So I started making jewelry, mostly necklaces and earrings, from these wood scraps. I like to say that when I harvest a log the only thing left of it will be finished art and sawdust. I try to utilize every last piece.

So, yes, I make jewelry and hair ornaments. I was selling these at a local gallery, Unexpected Finds, but they are now closing shop. So the only place to get these are by going to my website: [www.ModernWoodJewelry.com](http://www.ModernWoodJewelry.com).

**I love that you use the entire buffalo. That is beautiful to me in itself. Let's talk furniture. If you work with wood. I can only assume you make furniture too. I've heard of some shelves.**

I do make some furniture but not *traditional* furniture. I make more sculptural forms (soft and sinuous) that look as if they have been grown rather than constructed.

**Last year you became an author on the subject of woodworking. Is this the first time you've been published? Will it be the last? What was the title of this book and from whence can it be obtained?**

I have written feature articles on woodworking for several years for a woodworking (trade) magazine. I eventually decided to sit down to write a book on woodworking. Luckily the publisher of the magazine also publishes books, so we worked out a contract and I wrote the book. It was actually a good use of my time while the 2008 recession was in full swing seeing as there was not much going on in the 'development world' at the time. The book is sold in most woodworking stores. It can also be purchased online at Amazon. I believe it is also sold in France and Germany, interestingly enough. The title of the book is *Fresh Designs for Woodworking*.

**I'm going to say one word and you tell me (in a sentence or less what this word 'means' to you).**

1. **Apricot** - I recently harvested an apricot tree, and have made a few bowls from it. I don't know what the fruit tastes like, but the wood was a beauty to work.
2. **Geometry** - All nature has a geometry, though it is hidden. It is my goal to unearth and exhibit these geometries.
3. **Domestic** - From home, I suppose. Like the trees I harvest.
4. **Love** - ah, my sweet wife. (mushy)
5. **Blanche DuBois** - I believe this name was used in the Observer article on me. I actually don't know the reference, though I suppose I could Google it. It seemed an odd reference, but that article opened a lot of doors for me and (so) I am very appreciative of the exposure from that interview.

**Yes, I often do follow-up questions from interviews I find doing pre-interview research. I wondered about that Blanche DuBois. What is your favorite wood to work with; walnut, maple, cherry, apricot? Favorite tools to use? (Any unconventional woods or tools that you use?)**

Each wood and each tool is unique and has its own opportunities and constraints. You have to find the right one of each for each project. I love pairing the warm tones of walnut with cherry. Fruit trees (such as apricot) are very heavy and prone to cracking but they *work* easily and usually have beautiful color.

I use the tools from King Arthur's Tools a great deal and have been doing demonstrations at woodworking shows for them for several years. They are a great group of guys and create truly wonderful tools that allow me to sculpt furniture from wood (instead of building it).

**Ok, let's talk isolation. Is that the only way to get to know yourself and come to receive the truth from nature? I ask because I assume that's where you obtained such a mature, old soul, at such a young age; once living in a canoe with nothing but a frying pan.**

Ah, you did read that article. That story got a little muddled in the re-telling. Let me square the details of that. When I graduated from college I was still working for the civil engineering firm Kabil Associates. There was a small recession back in 2001 and they put me on unemployment for five weeks. So I had a little bit of money and some time on my

hands. I decided to do as much hiking and camping as I could. One of my first adventures was to borrow a canoe and go to a fairly isolated lake in eastern Ohio. The intent was to bring a fishing pole, lures, a cooking pan and butter (no other food than that). I wanted to get to that primal subsistence living for a week to see what it was like to have nothing to eat but that which I had caught for myself. In (all) reality I was pretty hungry for a week and grew quite tired of fish. When the week was over I returned the canoe and went hiking in the Adirondacks for two weeks. Then I drove to NC, did a few interviews and went hiking in the wilderness of Shining Rock for a week. I spent my unemployment time having a lot of fun adventures and even landed a job. I moved to Charlotte a few weeks later.

I am, by nature, a fairly solitary person. I like the company of people just fine, but I do like private time. I am not a joiner of clubs or groups. I have a lot of things I want to create. That is what drives me; to create. And that, for me, is a solitary pursuit.

**Funny story, you were called to the principal's office for producing a figure for a high school project that no one believed you made. Was that something you considered a compliment? (I never went to the principal's office and came out feeling proud, except this one time, but I digress.)**

That story is true. I had recently learned plaster carving and made this awesome little Olmec fertility sculpture. I experimented with various patina effects. It looked pretty spot on, if I do say so myself. I spent forever working on it. And, yes, the teacher accused me of having bought it. It was a compliment, in retrospect, but it really annoyed me at the time. It was as if she (they) could not believe that I was capable of making something beautiful. Though a very good student in high school, I spent a fair amount of time in the principal's office ... something about problems with authority or something.

**I see. So I understand that you've listened to more than 800 audio books. What was your favourite this year?**

Yes, I love audio books. While I am working I always have one going. I listen to them every day for hours on end. They add up quickly. Oh, there are so many wonderful books. Some of my favorites this year were Genghis Kahn and the making of the Modern World, Indian Giver and Howard Zinn's A Peoples History of the United States. These three books really change how I view history and our current situation profoundly so. I also re-read (just recently) The Evolution of God which really changed my understanding of where the main Abrahamic religions came from. I do enjoy fictions, too, though; anything by Chuck Palahniuk or Christopher Moore is definitely worth a listen.

**Your name is from Finland in origin. That is your nationality. Your name actually means wood "Haapapuro (haapa - aspen) (puro - stream)". Your grandfather was said to 'work with wood'. So your destiny, then, was to be a woodworker, yes? Though you were mostly self-taught did he not have a part in your instruction (was he passed before you had a chance to meet him)? (Nature vs. nurture?) And have you visited Finland? (What are the laws of bringing wood "in" from another country, if any?)**

That is my understanding of my last name. My grandfather passed only a few years ago. He did work wood and made a number of beautiful things, but no, I was not interested in woodworking as a child. I was a very *bookish* youth and so, when I wasn't chasing butterflies, I could always be found reading or studying. It was not until I moved to Charlotte that I decided to explore woodworking. I bought a cheap table saw, a few pine

boards and a book of basic woodworking. I just went through the book, making all the joints and cuts that they did, until I understood the basics. Then I started designing my own stuff.

**You make a lot of bowls and vessels out of wood. Do you use any of these for cooking (or serving) or are they mostly just for decorative display?**

They take a lot of time and care to make. Unlike turned bowls these are painstakingly carved so there is a pretty fair price attached to them. But if you buy one to use for a serving dish, go right on ahead. It's your bowl now. But generally, no I wouldn't want to use them for that. They speak the language of a functional vessel but are really more an allusion to that aspect and are more truly meant to be enjoyed for their artistic merit.

**Can it be safe to say that you would like to be contacted when people have fallen trees on their roadside?**

I am actually pretty stocked up for the moment. If I bring home one more tree, I think my wife may kill me.

**What's up next?**

I have some shows coming up this fall. I have had some involvement with the McColl Center for the Arts and did a studio tour with them earlier this year. This December I will be part of the "Palate to Palette" event. I will be showing some of my wood sculptures, vessels and some other items, but it will also be the debut of my cast resin work.

Nearly at the same time, I will be a featured artist at the Green Hill Art Show in Greensboro. At this show I will be debuting my first kinetic wood sculpture. It is a very large piece (about 8' tall and 9' wide) and features a flying space centipede as its central movement. I have never created a kinetic piece before so it is very exciting that it gets to debut at such an impressive platform (the Green Hill Art Show).