

# Graeme Priddle

## A Man of His Land

D Wood

If you ask Graeme Priddle for directions to his home and studio in the northern North Island of New Zealand, his reply reflects the speaker, his nationality, and the landscape. After leaving the main highway, you take a right turn at Pigs Head Road—the road sign may or may not be there because local farmboys keep taking it—then, watch for a group of letterboxes, including a green plastic one. That is your last marker. The road then narrows to the degree that you pray you don't meet a vehicle trying to go where you have been. A woman materializes at an artistic-looking property, but relief is short-lived as she directs you farther toward the back-of-beyond. Finally, a dog, with its cicada chorus, heralds your arrival. You are at the end of the road and your destination.

Seeing this remote location enhances my understanding of Priddle's work. Graeme is the other Kiwi featured in Martin and Wallace's book, *New Masters of Woodturning*, and while the authors describe the property that facilitates Priddle's practice and lifestyle, they emphasize that the ocean and seafaring are Graeme's primary influences. Yet, to experience this close valley on a hot summer morning and sit on the deck, which has

a contained vista of native ferns and spiderwebs, creates a different impression. Graeme Priddle is as much about the core of this country as he is about its extremities. He returns to this protective sanctum after his frequent trips to Australia, North America, and Europe. Here he breathes deeply, conceives his designs, and is restored by family. This is home, the heart of his creativity.

My visit to Northland took place in early 2009. At that time, Graeme was taking a break from the annual routine that had permitted him to remain financially viable as a professional turner. For the previous ten years, he taught workshops and gave demonstrations during the North American summer. New Zealand's summer was spent producing work for overseas and national galleries. Although Graeme loved teaching and the opportunities to hang out with like-minded colleagues and students, each trip was exhausting. The desire to maintain his market presence and sustain valuable relationships became overwhelming. He shut down his computer. Using his radio technician's qualifications he found full-time employment as a broadband installer and put woodturning on the back burner.



Initially, Graeme welcomed the salary and “the sense of relief at being able to survive.” Despite fashioning a roster of four ten-hour days per week, with three days for turning, this did not pan out as neatly as he had hoped. By the time I saw him, his lathe and texturing tools had not been touched in over a month. He described this as a great loss and, as I returned to the real world after our interview, I railed against the reality for such artists in New Zealand. Local galleries for fine craft are few, as are art collectors. International visitors, the primary purchasers of top-calibre woodturning, concentrate their travel in the summer months, January to March. In addition, shipping fragile articles is increasingly risky as customs authorities escalate inspections. The global recession, which has affected all artisans, compounds the ongoing reality for New Zealanders.

When I saw Graeme two months later at CollaborationNZ ‘09, however, he had given up the day job and was happily turning, carving, and rushing about, confirming that his passion was, once more, at the fore. He has the energy and unrestrained enthusiasm of a much younger man, which, last year alone, was invested in trips to the AAW symposium, Marc Adams School of Woodworking, and workshops/demonstrations in North Carolina, Tennessee, New Jersey, Hawaii, and at Magma GmbH in Austria. He participated in Australia’s collaboration event in October. The year 2010 included commitments in eight American states, the biennial Emma Lake collaborative in Canada, a residency in France, and classes in Britain and Europe.



*Tangaroa's Gift*, 2007, Jarra burr, kina (sea urchin) shell, acrylic paint, 3" x 10½" (8 cm x 27 cm)



This is a punishing schedule, but the drive to advance his aesthetic while balancing the need to make a living is deeply ingrained. The significance of a restorative quintessential New Zealand home becomes clear. The house’s character is no-frills, yet rich. Its shelves bear the swaps and gifts from colleagues around the world.

Priddle’s woodturning career began with the purchase of this home. The family’s move to Whangarei for his employment as a radio technician in the late 1980s prompted a search for land on which to establish a home-based lifestyle. The idea was to make freeform furniture from the property’s deadfall timber, but the depressed economy of the late 1980s intervened. A chance visit to the Whangarei Studio Woodturners Guild on the night it showed a video featuring David Ellsworth, prompted Graeme to hatch a decade-long plan to become “the next Ellsworth.”

With a borrowed lathe, the perseverance to teach himself, the perspicacity to assimilate wisdom▶



*Tahi, Rua* (one, two), 2007, Matai, acrylic paint, 15" x 4" x 4" (38 cm x 10 cm x 10 cm)

Detail



Detail



Graeme Priddle’s home, surrounded by the bush.



*Hawk Totems* near the ocean in New Zealand. Graeme and glass artist, Shona Firman, collaborated on this project.



*Paua*, 2009, Swamp kauri, acrylic paint, 3" x 11½" x 10" (8 cm x 29 cm x 25 cm)

Detail

Gradually, he evolved a form of personal expression aimed at galleries that exhibited sculpture. A portfolio of the latter garnered acceptance into the Wood Turning Center's International Turning Exchange (ITE) in 2000 (Rolly Munro and Priddle attended concurrently), thereby opening a floodgate of creativity and opportunity.

In 1996, Mike Hosaluk invited Graeme to travel to the University of Saskatoon. Hosaluk understood only too well the isolation and aloneness that accompanies artistic concentration. He envisaged a gathering of peers, in those pre-Internet days, to establish a network that was readily renewable. Priddle obtained a grant from Creative New Zealand (CNZ) to attend his first Emma Lake Collaborative. Although he

was intimidated by the multinational array of talent and daunted by an introduction to Stephen Hogbin, the experience was life changing. In a subsequent report to CNZ he sought funds to replicate the Canadian event and, with the support of Whangarei glass artist Shona Firman, gave a slide presentation at her gallery to foster local interest. As a consequence, in May 1998, fifteen artists and friends encamped at the Priddle homestead to have a week's trial run at collaborating, followed by an auction of the finished products. The first Emma Lake clone was born.

The following year, sponsorship plus fees supported catering and equipment rental for a gathering of ten overseas and twenty-five national attendees in Whangarei. The most recent CollaborationNZ, 2009, hosted sixty-five participants in diverse disciplines such as woodturning, jewelry, ceramics, furniture making, glass, ironmongery, weaving, printmaking, stonecarving, and fibers.

Priddle, as site coordinator, is still part of the committee that organizes the event. In 2011, eighty artists from a diverse mix of countries and cultures are set to gather. Graeme flourishes

from veteran turners, and practice galore, Graeme turned bowls, hollow forms, weed pots, and vases for eight years. He also sold roasted chestnuts, dug holes, pitched hay, and milled/marked timber blanks and burls to pay the bills.



*Starfish Vessel*, 2006, New Zealand kauri, mulga, paua shell, copper, metallic thread, acrylic paint, 8" x 5" x 3½" (20 cm x 13 cm x 9 cm)

*Point Break*, 2008, Sheoak, ebony, copper, metallic thread, acrylic paint, 10" x 6" x 4" (25 cm x 15 cm x 10 cm)



*Starfish Vessel*, 2006, Ebony, paua shell, copper, metallic thread, acrylic paint, 8" x 5" x 3½" (20 cm x 13 cm x 9 cm)



Intense concentration is needed as Graeme turns wood off-center to begin one of his *waka* pieces.



*Waka, Iti*, 2010, New Zealand matai, acrylic paint, 1¾" x 6" x 2½" (45 mm x 150 mm x 60 mm)



Detail

while surrounded by his mates—local and from abroad. Ironically, the intense camaraderie that results from eating, sleeping, and working with the group only lasts for one week every two years; the collaborators rarely see each other in between events.

Priddle was eagerly anticipating the March 2009 version when I met him. The work occupying his studio until then was outdoor sculpture, totemic in content. It combined Firman’s cast glass and Graeme’s carved elements. Several successful juxtapositions were evident, but the series proceeded slowly—the conception of the wooden form to merge with each glass shape takes time. The placement of several finished pieces amongst the foliage surrounding Priddle’s studio demonstrated how naturally the totems nestled into the landscape. These contemporary *pakeha* (European) markers seemed as powerful and iconic as those revered by the Maoris.

Priddle’s signature pieces—canoe forms and bowls with charred mottled surfaces—are reminiscent of New Zealand’s native bush. New Zealand has five endemic tree ferns (*cyathea* and *dicksonia*) whose stalks, as the ferns age, harbor the remains of previous fronds, along with a brown/black fibrous beard. Priddle’s proximity to these colors and textures can be seen in his *waka* series as noticeably as the reference to Polynesian canoes—the openings, stance, and patterns of the *waka* are conjured up by standing beneath the native forest canopy. The bowls are solid and grounded, shiny yet soiled like mammoth truffles.

There is even a virtual scent of rich damp loam and subterranean fire about these canoes and bowls.

Even without its title, *Starfish Vessel* can be imagined as a primeval artifact from the floor of an ancient arboreal kingdom. Wood tones in the draped timber, accentuation of grain, contrasts of smooth and rough, organic

patterning, and balletic whittled sticks that support the fabriclike configurations combine to remind me of my own hours in the Northland interior.

Priddle credits the tradition of Maori carving as an influence on his work. A visit to a Maori *whare* (meetinghouse) reveals that much of the carving is inside, enveloped within the ancestor that the *whare* represents. This introversion is synonymous with enclosure and containment, to which woodturning, itself, is irrevocably wed.

Priddle wants each viewer to bring his or her own story to the work created. He believes that “art is the content you put into the wood.” His content is a reflection of himself, his environment, his heritage, and his experience. Graeme Priddle is 100 percent New Zealand/Aotearoa. ■

*D Wood received an MFA in furniture design from the Rhode Island School of Design. She writes about craft media for a variety of international publications and is currently a PhD candidate in design studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand.*



Pyrography is one of the surface embellishments Graeme frequently uses.



Detail

*Wakara (Yacht)*, 2006, Monterey cypress, acrylic paint, 20" x 6" x 6" (51 cm x 15 cm x 15 cm)

*Bowls*, 2009, New Zealand matai, acrylic paint, approximately 3" x 6" (8 cm x 15 cm)

