

# BAMBOO SPOONS

*by Alvaro Abreu*

## Recalling Bamboo

One of the participants in the workshop I held in Vienna wrote on the back of a photo she sent me as a souvenir: “the bamboos and the kites don’t leave my mind”.

I think something quite similar has always happened to me. In fact I believe that my recent working on bamboo has sprung from the memories of a time when each fisherman, like myself, used to prepare his own fishing rods. I still have bright in my memory the pleasure of choosing the bamboos and bringing them home by myself. After cutting off the branches with a jackknife, I used to straighten the rods with the help of a candle flame, by warming up the points that had to be straightened out. Besides softening the bamboo, the heat brings up the sweet smell of hot sap, makes the outer layer shine brighter and leaves dark marks on the surface. To decorate the rods, we used to make burned spots in all sections. At that time fishing rods had personality.

All that doing required attention to identify imperfections as well as the skill to correct them. Any careless move could provoke irretrievable damage. The work would be lost and our dreams would fade along with it. Yes, because after the rod was done, we spent a long time testing its performance with imaginary fish. A fisherman must know his fishing materials, specially their resistance limits.

Bending and getting back to the initial position is a natural capacity of bamboos. Their flexibility is exceptionally efficient to absorb the impact of the bigger fish jerks. The form of the resulting curve, kind of a hyperbole of the fisherman’s pleasure, expresses the absorption of the fish’s strength and the man’s resistance. The more pronounced the curve, the bigger the fish, the greater the emotion.

For many years in the beginning of school holidays we spent hours making our own instruments while we talked about fishing. My skill with both the jackknife and the heat of the fire helped building up my reputation as an excellent bamboo rod maker. It was the memories of such small emotions that decades later, after a heart attack, made me instinctively turn back to bamboo. Mentally depressed and physically weakened, I needed alternatives to fill up my forced inactivity and to escape all that talking about disease, medication and cholesterol control. I



needed badly to keep my hands busy to replace cigarettes. In fact, I also needed to feel capable and, if possible, to receive compliments.

The structure formed by cylindrical sections separated by knots grants the bamboo a unique place among all different types of wood. The sections have their walls formed by fibers. Its flexibility, its resistance to traction and a great diameter variety, allow the use of bamboo for diverse functions and purposes. The shine, the colors and the texture of its rind reinforce its singularity.

I rediscovered bamboo at a friend's farm. In cutting a piece of it in different planes, I could see, in detail, the play of forms and colors of its inner part. I could also find out its fibers. When cut in transverse planes, the fibers look like little dark round dots; when cut in slanting planes they form small ellipses, and in longitudinal cuts they turn into straight lines. I noticed that the fibers had varied dimensions and that they are arranged in an organized way along the bamboo wall. They were thinner and more numerous in the outer part, thicker and in smaller number near the middle. Between the fibers, there is kind of a lighter and softer mass.

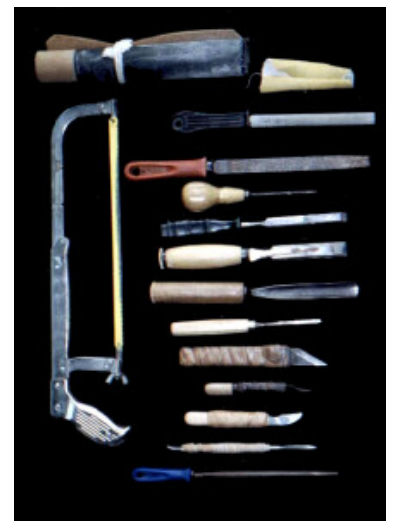
I felt extremely happy to discover the secret of bamboo flexibility and the hidden beauty that lies under its surface. As I showed my findings to my friends, I saw that they were happy to see me connected and talkative again.

Back home, I felt asleep thinking about the bamboo stems I had got at that farm and woke up excited to start cutting that still humid dark-rinded and whitekernelled wood. Those sections almost half-meter long, with thick walls, would certainly require proper hard work tools.

## Choosing the Tools

I have always been attracted to tools as well as I have had an interested admiration towards their inventors. I like trying to guess the needs which determined their appearance.

I'm specially fond of a small steel sicklecraftly made from a truck spring, which I've carried with me for almost 30 years. Sharp and perfectly balanced, with its anatomic handle, it is good for crushing, accurate strokes. After carefully sharpening the sickle, I began to work compulsively. In the beginning, I cut just for cutting, for the simple sensation of seeing the blade entering the wood, drawing out splinters. Next, I began to try to gauge the strokes seeking the precision and the satisfaction of cutting in the right place. A sore arm from the repetitive effort and my body general weakness made it difficult for me to control the



movements. I learned that switching tools allowed a change in the required effort, so that the muscles could rest.

With the jackknife blade I began to change the rough forms created with the sickle into regular surfaces and curves. I noticed that alternating tools improves the control over the process and allows shape refinement. The first compliments to those big, rough spoons came from my friends' generosity.

As time went by, I learned that bamboo loses volume as it dries and that this drying changes the original shapes. Along this natural process, whatever is plane and smooth becomes curve and irregular. The refinement loses quality, compromising the objects' beauty and the craftsman's reputation. Some time afterwards, an old cabinet-maker taught me how to use the heat to accelerate the bamboo drying process. Since then, a small torch and the gas-stove oven came into action. The heat of the flame thrown upon the bamboo outer surface brings up a kind of dense liquid, which reveals a bright gloss as it is wiped with a damp cloth. In the heated chamber the bamboo expels steam jets in the direction of the fibers. The strong sweet smell, coming from the kitchen, reminded me of the fishing rods time and provoked friendly protests from the family. The use of the microwave oven granted an important quality leap to the process, allowing greater control in the drying of small pieces.

Working with the dried bamboo required more physical strength and sharper tools. On the other hand, it allowed the use of sandpaper and broken glass to finish surfaces, improve conformity between planes, increase borders accuracy, and obtain softer, more precise curves.

I learned with time that borers feed on bamboo sap, which, as people say, contains some type of glucose. They made many tunnels and canals in all the pieces made out of the farm bamboo. A white, very thin powder announced the presence of the insects and the loss of the spoon. That made me start to share the teachings of the peasants' wisdom: bamboo, like any other wood, must be cut down during the last quarter moon and preferably in the cold weather, when the amount of sap is quite reduced.

Little by little I began trying other tools that could be found around the house: saw, metal saw, chisel, gouge, gross, sandpaper, leather-cutting blade. Each one its way and within certain limits, helps to expand the intervention possibilities in the bamboo. That searching made me use the sidewalk pavement, the living-room door glass panel and the lower surface of the dining-room table granite top. Need made me develop a cylinder-shaped sandpaper support, of entirely variable diameter and consistency, very useful for obtaining soft curves.

The noise that came out from an electric sander was thoroughly disagreeable and incompatible with the environment. When I gave that machine back to its owner, I was decided to work with simple tools, moved only by the skill of my hands.

## The Working Process

As an industrial engineer and a technological development specialist, I have always depended on the use of intellect, reason and objectivity. At that moment, away from the business world, I felt entirely free from the patterns rationality or thought rigidity. Now I was moved solely conditioned by the sensations of manual work itself, something that many people scarcely imagine exists.

Gradually I became aware that when you work free from previous aims, the fear and anxiety of not achieving the desired results is better replaced by curiosity. I noticed that each move brings along a sensorial dimension that offers the ego small stimuli and guides the movements of the hands. The surface texture, the sound that comes from the blade, and the burning smell suggest the moment to stop or to replace the tool. The precision in each stroke and the attainment of a perfect straight line are enough reason for quiet smiles.

Making hollow surfaces with the tip of a blade, in replacement for a gouge, requires a lot of patience, but is a great challenge. In the same way, achieving symmetry is useful to confirm the skill when it's got without the help of any instruments. I like to work with regular, repetitive movements and to follow the gradual evolution of their effects. I enjoy using the bamboo fibers as a level curve and extracting long snail-shaped strips with a small blade. The thinner and more even their thickness, the greater the chances to smile. The bamboo must be very dry for that.

I have experienced the pain and frustration of having a spoon lost due to the imprecision of the cut. I hate to have to interrupt my work because of my carelessness or an error of mine. Gradually I developed certain practices that helped reducing the risks of failure. Besides concentrating all my attention on what is going on, I learned that each piece of bamboo is unique. Thus, it is absolutely essential to know and consider its specificities. The color of the gloss, the unevenness on a section, a variation in the thickness of the wall, a stain on the rind, each is a part in the same jigsaw puzzle. In the process of creating each spoon, the attitude of valuing some of the characteristics of a certain piece of bamboo is complemented by that of overcoming its defects.

Most times, the complete forms emerge from the series of material withdrawing operations alternated with observing



moments. Identifying the flaws is essential for their cure. Perfection is also the absence of defects.

I have observed in my daily practice that the results obtained with each tool are limited and include small imperfections. In the same way, I have noticed how transverse light and the contrast against a dark background are useful in identifying small flaws. Fingertips are delicate sensors in carrying out that activity, even in the dark.

My workbench is full of tools, unfinished pieces, apparently useless objects, and many parts of bamboo trunks. It offers many options to whoever intends to play with wood. Silently, I like to watch and organize all that as part of a ritual for choosing the piece of bamboo that I'm going to prune. Curiously, in that process the choice seems to happen without any determining reason. On the other hand, some bamboo stems and uncompleted pieces await their turn for over two years.

My bench is beside the TV set in the living-room, where the people in the house like to gather. The activities that don't produce any sound enhance the pleasure of working while talking and, above all, listening to the others' conversation. Because of the noises of the sandpaper and the club strokes, I'm invited to leave the room. On the other hand, I've earned the right of leaving bamboo traces throughout the other corners of the house.

Because of the portable character of the tools I use and of the reduced size of the pieces I make, I can work in the garden, in the porch and on the kitchen table. I often carry my tools and bamboos over to friends' homes. I eventually work on the train, at the movies, in business meetings.

I love to carve spoons on the sand of the deserted beach, during my daily walks in search of health. I like the synchronism of the cutting rhythm with the pace of my steps: it seems to help to organize my thoughts. In those moments, when I'm by myself, my attention concentrates on the themes of life, on the company I own, on the people I love. It's good to keep in mind the image of the person for whom I'm carving a piece. And that can last for many hours in a row.

As far as I don't sell the pieces I make, the destiny of most of them is the bottom of a cardboard box placed beneath my workbench. A few of them, the longest, remain stuck in giant bamboo pots, helping to make the atmosphere of that homely workshop cozier. I like to have them around as witnesses of what I was able to achieve some day with my own hands.

## Real and Virtual Results

I believe that during the last 6 years I have made over 900 pieces, mostly spoons and spatulas. Only three forks and many objects which are useless for any practical purpose. It's curious that all of them differ from each other, either by bamboo imposition, or by the simple satisfaction of creating different forms. Any similarity between the piece I'm working on and some other one brings the impulse to change its shape.

Some of the pieces are especially significant either because of its esthetics, the raw-material origin, the difficulties to create them, and so on. I confess that I prefer those that express bamboo peculiarities and the ones that are soft to touch.

I have fun watching people's reactions before my spoons. Some just want to know about their use, their destiny, their commercial value. Others, whom I prefer, touch the pieces with their hands and their souls. It seems that a kind of magic happens and they begin to make gestures and movements which are typical of the imagined use for each one of the spoons. To such people, the bamboo pieces bring out dreams and emotions that transform them into famous cooks, enthusiastic conductors and skillful swordsmen. Usually, they ask me to take one for themselves. I deny it, though embarrassed, and I promise I'll send them later.

Anyone who sees a completed piece, certainly cannot imagine that one is only the last of the much many forms which were obtained during the whole process. Before that one, over a thousand others existed and were lost in a succession of strokes and the pruning of sandpaper.

I say that because from a certain moment in the process the objects are practically ready and finished. The thickness and the shape of the handle, the lines of the scoop curves, the surface regularity and finishing, the harmony and balance of the whole may suggest that they are completed.

I like to evidence a kind of mystery that makes itself present in the clash between the permanent state of being almost ready and the moment of completing each artifact. A delicate equation that is almost always solved.

Bamboo definitely exerts kind of a fascination over some people. Perhaps that can explain the invitation I received to exhibit my work at EXEMPLA 2002.



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bambuzau@tecmaran.com.br