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# Local Artisan Nurtured Hobby into Fine Art

A feather marks his creations.

By [Betty Horton](#) [Email the author](#) June 30, 2011  [Print](#)

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It was the Morton Arboretum a mile from his boyhood home in Illinois that helped to start Allen Nemetz on the road to becoming a fine craftsman, turning out wooden bowls and other useful items from an extraordinary array of woods.

The Morton Arboretum grew flowers, shrubs and trees from many different countries and regions of the U.S., and Nemetz's family spent time there on

weekends. He started photographing the things he saw and that experience led to a life-long love of nature, and ultimately to his profound appreciation for woods grown around the world.

After he and his wife Pam moved to Brookfield in 1980, over the years Nemetz took a variety of classes at the [Brookfield Craft Center](#), from stained glass to metalworking and basket-weaving, among others.

"I had seen some duck decoys over 30 years ago," he says, and when the BCC offered a class in making duck decoys, he thought, "I'd like to do that." His grandfather had been a cabinetmaker, and in junior high school, Nemetz had made a lamp from an old bowling pin. He took the class.

He went on to take more classes — in box making and dovetail box making, and he became a volunteer monitor at the BCC's woodworking shop, demonstrating woodturning and answering audience questions.

In 1986, he joined the newly formed Nutmeg Chapter of the American Association of Woodturners at the BCC, one of over 1,000 chapters in the U.S., encompassing roughly 14,000 members. In 2001, he joined the International Wood Collectors Society, which was started in 1947 to identify and collect samples of different kinds of woods from all over the world.

When Nemetz first started carving duck decoys, he thought, "What if I could sell them? How do I sign my work? What name do I put on business cards?"

He was spending a lot of time burning and painting feathers in great detail on his decoys and decided that a clever name might be "Featherworks." So that appears with a small feather on his business cards and the trademark feather appears with his initials on the underside of his creations.

Producing wooden bowls is his first love. A sugar maple bowl 20 inches wide and 8-1/2 inches deep sits next to the fireplace in his living room.

"It's a challenge to turn a bowl that large," he says, "because it puts so much weight on a lathe."

He adds that he did the rough-cut on that bowl 10 years ago and just finished it this spring.

Nemetz picks up a flute that he made of sugar maple and plays it, producing a haunting sound reminiscent of American Indian music. Sitting on top of it is a small dark brown figure of a Bison, made from cocobolo wood. He sits astraddle the decoy carver's bench that he also built, showing how it's used. In the kitchen, he demonstrates a *spurtle* that he made from cherry wood. He laughs: "It's a Scottish stirrer that keeps the porridge from burning at the bottom of the pot, and it works!"

His house is a museum of beautiful pieces that fill cabinets, shelves and nooks everywhere. Large bowls and small, of light woods and dark, compete with duck decoys, ring holders, candle holders, basting brushes and computer dusting brushes — both brushes made with sanitized China hog bristles. Some of the basting brush handles are seedpods from the Australian Banksia tree, of which there are 170 species.

Nemetz has worked with woods from Central and South America, Africa and the U.S. — primavera wood, cherry, mahogany, Southern live oak, hemlock, black walnut and dogwood, among many others.

"Box elder is a most interesting wood to work with," he says, "beetles attack the tree and create unusual red color patterns."

He also loves turning burls because they're so unique, and he has just started work on a burl of Siberian Elm.

When the Craft Center re-opened last November for a holiday sale, Nemetz's work was there. Indeed, his creations have been for sale in the BCC's shop for the past five years, and while he is not a member of the faculty, his work is available in the BCC's shop during its current Faculty Exhibition.

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