

A family affair

Jade Beecroft meets Connemara turner Richard West, who takes inspiration from the wild Irish landscape around him – and enjoys artistic collaborations with his painter daughter

Just like no tree is the same, woodturner Richard West says that none of his pieces are the same. Richard fell in love with wood while working as a teenager in a Connemara boatyard, and says his pieces take inspiration from the uniqueness of the natural world around him on the wild Atlantic coast, and the wood that is his raw material. 'I like the idea that a fallen tree doesn't necessarily have to end up rotting in the earth, but a part of it can be repurposed through a new shape, while also still keeping its original essence,' explains Richard. 'I like to think of it as giving wood a second life.' From functional salad bowls intended to be 'picked up, held and used' to large, decorative and artistic hollow forms, Richard likes to take inspiration from the type and grain of the wood he's working with.

Drawn to wood

Richard grew up 'in an artistic' family in Dublin and says he's 'always worked with my hands'. His mother, Margaret Irwin-West, is a painter and print maker, and his sister Katharine West is a ceramic sculptor

and teacher of contemporary art. Richard was just nine years old when he started woodcarving because his mother used to teach a college night class and took her son along with her. At 15 he spent a summer working in a boatyard in Clifden, Connemara, and learning the 'rough carpentry work' left a lasting impression. 'Working with the wood, and learning how to cut and steam-bend the ribs, really stuck with me,' he says. After finishing school Richard did a foundation year at the National College of Art & Design in Dublin, then transferred to Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design, where he studied for a degree in filmmaking. 'I made a short film in Connemara, had a few pints in a local pub, met a French girl and before long I was living in France,' he laughs. The family moved back to Ireland after a decade in France and ran an oyster farm for 17 years, before selling up. 'I'd always wanted to get back making things,' he says. 'My three kids were off at college, so I sold the oyster farm and bought a second-hand lathe in 2015. I've been woodturning full-time ever since. I was pretty much self-taught, and I started selling my pieces not long after.'



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF RICHARD WEST



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Inspired by nature

Richard's coastal location, flanked by the rugged mountains, bogs and moorlands of Connemara, means he doesn't have a lot of local trees and has to improvise when it comes to finding wood to work with. He explains: 'I work with any wood I can get and find ways to give it value. Each piece starts with me trying to identify an aspect of the wood that I can bring to the fore, whether that be a physical thing like a branch or a knot, or the characteristics of that type of wood, which might colour well, or be interesting to scorch.' He says he takes a lot of inspiration from organic shapes and ceramic artists to create 'large vessel forms', adding: 'I enjoy working with pieces of wet wood and I also use gilding techniques to bring light and colour into the centre of my pieces.' Richard rarely chainsaws his wood, preferring to work with really large pieces so he doesn't unwittingly cut away something interesting. His favourite tool is his 'woodcut Proform hollowing tool with the Irons tool

gate' because it's 'easy and effective' to use. 'I enjoy the process of discovery with each piece,' he adds. 'When I start turning something I find that if I just start paring the wood, following the shapes, before I know it I've found something interesting.'

Always striving

Richard says he likes to feel that he is 'constantly progressing' and his favourite piece is 'always the last one I did'. He likes to work with different metal leaves – particularly Japanese coloured silver leaf, which has 'a wonderful reflective quality that is completely complementary to the wood', using the same classic gilding techniques as gold leaf. 'My go-to finish is Danish oil which – once cured – I buff to a final finish with carnauba wax,' he explains. 'I feel this finish is hardwearing, yet does not diminish from the tactile nature of the wood'.



1 Bleached horse chestnut with blue silver leaf 2 Working at the lathe 3 Abyss, winner of the Leitrim Award 4 Horse chestnut form with marble leaf



5 Leylandii, textured and dyed 6 Spalted birch bowl 7 Textured and scorched ash with copper leaf 8 Textured, scorched and gilded beech

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9 Textured and coloured lime vase **10** Spalted alder with blue silver leaf **11** Studio West, Cleggan
12 Scorched ash with green marbled Japanese silver leaf **13** Scorched and dyed pin **14** Spalted beech vase

In summer 2025 Richard won a Leitrim House National Art, Design & Craft Award for the sustainability of his work. 'At the beginning of January 2025, storm Éowyn ripped a load of trees down and lots of people contacted me offering wood,' he says. 'One man offered me a huge ash tree that had fallen down near a lake surrounded by mountains. I loved that silhouette of the mountains against the sunlight and tried to reproduce it in the final piece, with the inside gilded in copper. I was really proud that it won the award.' But he also admits he has a soft spot for 'the things that end up in pieces on the workshop floor' as those are the experiences he learns most from. 'I often work on something, then set it aside and wait for the right idea before going back to it,' he adds.

A family affair

Richard sells his work from his gallery, Studio West Connemara, in the small fishing village of Cleggan, on the west coast of Ireland, which he has co-owned with his daughter Manon West since 2024. His bowls and other pieces are displayed alongside Manon's paintings of the cloudy Connemara landscapes, and the pair also collaborate, with Manon using pyrography to burn one-of-a-kind designs into Richard's turned bowls and other pieces. 'We can also add monograms or inscriptions for wedding presents and other gifts,' he adds. Manon works in multiple mediums, including oil, watercolour, chalk pastel, ink and photography, and Richard says she tells visitors: 'I do all the flat things and Dad does all the round things – a good division of labour.'

Richard makes his creations in his on-site workshop and is happy for visitors to the gallery to 'pop in and look at how the wood is turned on the lathe'. He says: 'The workshop is at the back and the small gallery is at the front. I have a window connecting the two, so that when people enter the gallery they can see me working and I can see them. When people see that I'm a genuine person actually making stuff by hand, I think they feel more connected to it.' Richard describes his workshop

as 'small and very messy'. He adds: 'As I work on large pieces, I generate a lot of shavings that fly everywhere. The window to the workshop means visitors can watch me without getting covered in dust. I work with all kinds of wood but I must admit I like working with cherry a lot, if for no other reason than that it makes the workshop smell nice.'

From 3-12 July 2026, Richard and Manon are joining forces with his mother Margaret, who will be 100 in April and is still painting, and sister Katharine to put on a family exhibition in the Courthouse Gallery in Oughterard, Co Galway.

Letting inspiration flow

Richard says his goals for the future are always to make more and improve on his craft. 'If I had to give a piece of advice to other aspiring woodturners, it would be to make what you want to make, not what you think people want you to make,' he smiles. When he's not in his workshop, Richard enjoys cooking, joking that he 'married the only French woman I know who doesn't cook', eating with his family and creating videos of himself turning that he posts on Instagram. 'It's become a great way to get my name and work out there, and I've got some of my best corporate jobs – large display pieces for reception areas in hotels and things like that – from Instagram. The other thing I enjoy is the way it makes me think about how I organise my process and break down my work to explain it.'

The thought of other people enjoying his pieces really spurs him on. 'My work is not only meant to be displayed on a shelf or table, but also to be picked up, held, felt or even smelled,' he says. 'A lady recently bought one of my pieces and told me she brings it with her whenever she's travelling to her holiday home, which made me smile. I'm constantly inspired by the countryside and the colours where I live, and the wild nature of the Atlantic coast. I just want to share that inspiration in any way I can.'



Studio West Connemara, R337, Knockbrack, Cleggan, Co Galway

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