

The Hawaiian calabash

Emiliano Achaval explores traditional vessels with a perfect and timeless design that are rich in tradition

I can almost hear the yell of the sailor in the crow's nest when he saw the tallest peak on the island of Kauai peeking through the clouds, Kawaikini Peak.

I'm pretty sure Captain Cook himself heard it and the ensuing commotion from the comfort of his own cabin.

In 1778 the HMS Resolution and Discovery, under Cook's command, sailed past the Island of Oahu, to later make

landfall at Waimea, on the island of Kauai.

I can also imagine the group of Hawaiian craftsman and their priest gathering around a massive ancient kou tree, initiating the consecrating ceremony of the tools and the tree before they could start cutting it down. The wood then would be provided to all the king's craftsmen to make the calabashes that would dazzle Captain Cook himself.

Much has been written about the Hawaiian calabash, in countless books and magazines. This article is written with the insight and eye of a woodturner who has been living in Hawaii for 30 years.

We don't know much about the ancient craftsmen who made these beautiful containers, or the exact process they used. We know that they



Pre-contact Puahala calabash. Notice the unfinished inside, the way the ancient craftsman did it. The outside is beautifully finished

had a lot of skill and produced beautiful things. We have a lot of their work, scattered now throughout the world in museums as far as Vienna and England. Their work speaks for them – superbly and perfectly designed bowls, obviously inspired by the gourd and coconut containers that were used by the lower classes of Hawaiians. The wood containers were reserved for the ruling

classes, the king and his chiefs on all the Islands.

There are lots of historical references describing and highly complimenting the calabashes. What they all have in common is the surprise and awe of encountering such amazingly crafted wooden artefacts, by a civilization in the middle of nowhere, and without the benefits of iron. The Hawaiians

were the only indigenous Polynesian people in the Pacific with highly crafted wooden artefacts. My favourite quote comes from Captain Cook himself: ‘These wooden dishes and bowls are of the kou tree (*Cordia* spp). As neat as if made in our turning lathe, and perhaps better polished.’ Captain Cook took back at least one calabash that I know of, now on display at the British museum. ▶

Usage

The main purpose of the wooden containers was to hold food. The size and type depended on the intended purpose. They varied from a large calabash that would hold several gallons of poi – a food staple of the Hawaiian people and still very much a part of the culture here in the 50th state – down to a very small one that was given to a child shortly after birth to use for meals. There were literally hundreds of names for all the different types of containers. Most of the names have been lost in history. The universal name for a wooden bowl used now that resembles the traditional Hawaiian shape seems to be ‘calabash’.



Pre-contact palewa – made from kou wood – in its traditional hanging net. From a private collection

How they were made

The accepted Hawaiian name for all wooden containers is ‘umeke la‘au’.

How they were made is a bit of a mystery, but we believe that one way was to build a small fire inside, then after it had subsided the craftsmen used a variety of stone adzes and sharp coral implements to remove the burnt parts. Then they would rebuild the fire and continue the process all over again. I don't imagine the old craftsman was in a hurry, as his job was very specific, answering only to the king, with a knowledge passed down through generations, just as the calabashes were. Some have been in families since the early 1800s, passed down as family heirlooms to be treasured for ever.

Once the carving was completed he would start the process of finishing and polishing. There was no shortage of natural things to be used as sandpaper:



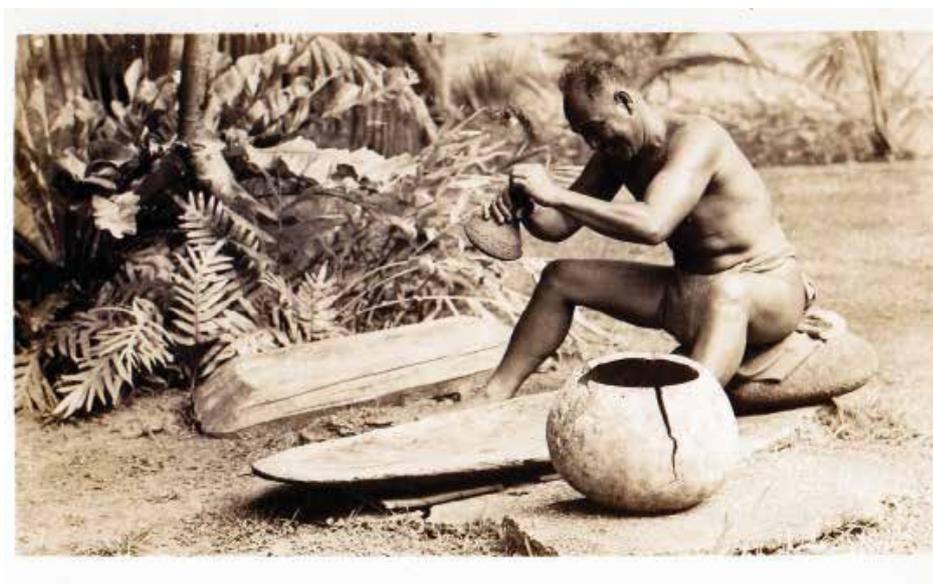
A pre-contact Puahala calabash. Kou Wood (*Cordia* spp) It has been repaired with almost all known types of repairs, including Pewas, round and oval pegs of different sizes and slivers of wood used as stiches.



It measures 220mm inches tall by 213mm wide . The bottom of the Puahala calabash is thick and round. It measures 32mm thick.



An antique postcard depicting a traditional 'luau', or Hawaiian feast. Notice the ku'oho calabash in the centre and individual serving sizes around the traditional mat



Antique postcard showing a native Hawaiian pounding poi with a poi pounder made with a lava rock. Notice the big gourd by him, the inspiration of the ancient craftsmen for the design of their wooden cousins

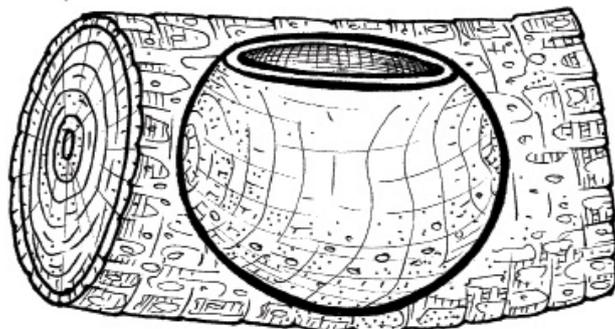
ground coral, sand, volcanic sand, pumice stone and, for a final rub, the skin of sharks. The final step was to rub it with kukui (*Aleurites moluccanus*) nut oil. The kukui tree nut was also used as a lamp – its nickname is candletree.

They would simply drill a little hole and stick a wick in it – it would burn for hours due to its high oil content. The oil would help preserve the wood as well as give it a beautiful shine. I often use kukui oil in my turnings,

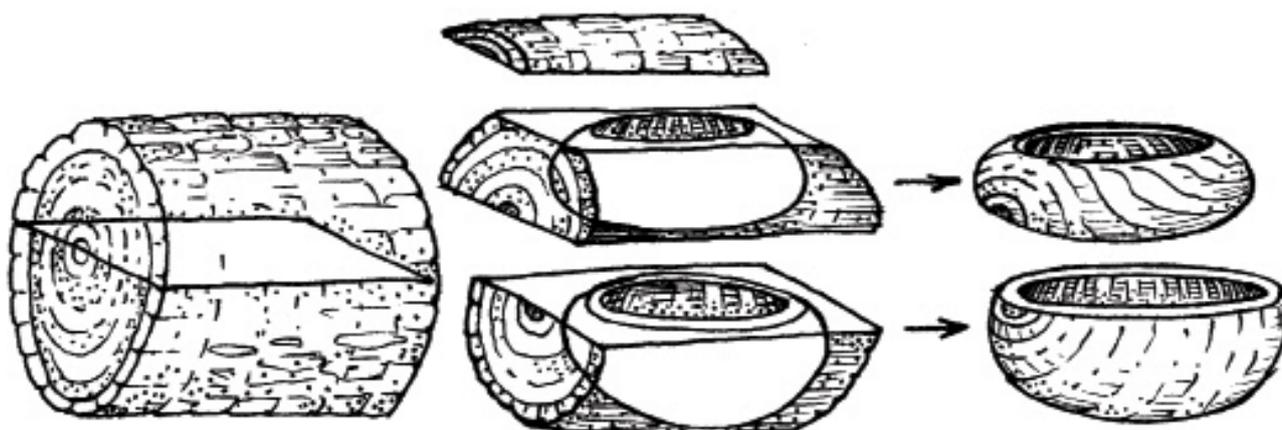
it adds an extra Hawaiian touch to a piece. Because I'm writing a magazine article, and not a book, I will mention the three main shapes of the umekes la'au, the ones that, no matter where you see them, you know where they came from: Hawaii.



Here is a set of ancient basalt rock adzes and tools from a private collection. The big one was probably used to fell trees and to hollow out the inside of the trunk to make a canoe. The hand-held one was probably used for finishing and carving the inside of wooden artefacts, included calabashes



An original John Mydock drawing showing the location of the traditional round-bottom calabash inside the log.



John Mydock's drawings show two bowls: umeke la'au on the bottom, and a palewa on the top

Types of calabashes

Each of the main three shapes had variations in sizes. Each size had a different name. For example, A kumauna was the large family-sized bowl, a very traditional-looking calabash, and a pua niki was the same shape, but small enough that a child could hold it.

And, just as today's woodturners' styles are different and each piece of wood gives a slightly different piece, I believe that the old craftsmen each had their signature work.

Only one piece of all the hundreds that have survived the times had the name of the ancient craftsman. We do not know anything of him, where he lived, when he died, only his name: Puakoa. We know a little about his father. In the *History Makers of Hawaii* author A Grove Day wrote about his father, Kaiana, a warrior

who was killed in the Battle of Nuuanu Pali in 1795.

1. LOW CALABASH CALLED PALEWA

Palewa are the only ones carved in what today's woodturners would recognise as the most stable way to turn a bowl, side grain, and always they tried to avoid the pith, the part where you have the highest chance of checking. The palewa has to be more wide than tall. No foot, round bottom.

2. KU'OHO

This type is one of the most copied forms, perhaps the most recognisable due to its proximity to the calabash. It can be as wide as it is tall, but not always. It was mostly, due to its size, carved out of the whole trunk, side grain, and its most spectacular ones were done with crotches.

Because of it, they were prone to a lot of checking on the end grain, where you can see a lot of the repairs done by the ancient craftsmen, such as: pewas (Flying Dutchmen) huini pegs, kepaKepa wedges, and aha maka cord repairs, just to name a few. No foot, round bottom.

3. PU'AHALA UMEKE

This iconic form is always taller than wider. Some of the nicest examples have a beautiful matching lid. This calabash was always carved end grain. The walls were fairly thin, but they all had a heavy bottom. We all know how weak an end grain bottom can be, so I believe the ancient crafters solved the problem of cracks and broken bottoms by making it extra thick. Still, we see a lot of these forms always with several repairs on the outside of the bottom.

Woods used

The woods preferred by the Hawaiians were:

1. KOU (*CORDIA SUBCORDATA*)

The kou was almost entirely wiped out from all the islands by an introduced insect. By the mid-1860s it was hard to find a kou tree. At the same time, the first British-made lathes started arriving on the islands. Now it was possible to turn the acacia koa. Koa is definitely harder than kou, thus the reason why we see very few old koa or koa'ia calabashes. I have turned several kou pu'ahalas, palewas and Kumaunas. The wood is surprisingly stable, to the point that you can turn a pu'ahala green and turn it to finish. Applying cedar oil (a stabilising oil) I didn't get any warping or checking. It is also very easy to turn – with sharp tools you can leave a surface that needs little sanding.

There are few pockets of surviving kou trees on some of the islands. A lot of turners confuse the introduced Tahitian kou with the true kou. Almost every new parking lot in the past 30 or so years has the Tahitian kou for shade – the colour of the flower is one way to tell them apart. When the British turners arrived, it started the decline of the ancient Hawaiian crafter. Within a few decades they were gone, and with them a part of history.

2. MILO (*THESPESIA POPULNEA*)

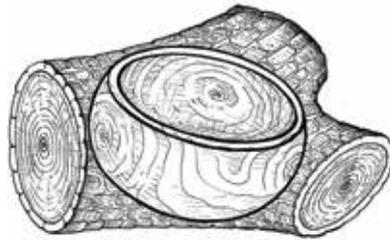
I do not know why milo is considered a hard wood. It cuts like a dream, with a sheer scrape you can leave a glassy surface. Milo was abundant in Old Hawaii. Some war canoes were made from this wood. I can only imagine the size of a giant old milo needed to do this. Nowadays you can see milo growing always close to the beach, but those old giants are a thing of the past. I can see why it was a favourite of the ancient crafters – it is a beautiful chocolate dark wood, very easy to carve, soft, yet durable. The contrast with the almost white sap wood makes for a striking distinctiveness. You always see this on the old milo calabashes. I mount the blank a little off-centre to make sure to have this great contrast.

3. KAMANI (*CALOPHYLLUM INOPHYLLUM*)

The true kamani – not to be confused with the false kamani, an introduced variety by the first white settlers – is a reddish-brown hardwood. Like the milo and kou, the kamani when dried is an odourless wood, thus a favourite to make calabashes for food purposes. It's a rather plain wood, but turns nicely. s



A pre-contact round-bottom palewa calabash with kukui nut lei around it. The oil from these nuts was used for finishing the outside of all wooden artefacts



This drawing by John shows a ku'oho calabash. Notice all the end grain around this type of calabash – you can see why the ancient mastercraftsmen also mastered the art of repairing them



LEFT: This John Mydock drawing shows the location of the pu'ahala calabash. Notice the end grain orientation

ABOVE: A lidded pu'ahala calabash by Hawaiian turner Kelly Dunn. Sandalwood with 14 sandalwood pewa patches, 113mm wide x 138mm high

TODAY

The Hawaiian calabash remains one of the most recognisable shapes in the world. Copied by many, the shape is not easy to reproduce, simply because it's a perfect design, very round and with very specific reference points.

The calabash in Hawaii is more than a bowl and is still revered by families. It's common to order one for a wedding present, anniversary, special occasions, and we still have the traditional birth of a child small calabash. I work mostly with acacia koa, with the occasional find of milo, kou and kamani. The tourists prefer

koa for its beauty. The local buyer who knows the history prefers the true woods used in the old days.

We do not know if the calabashes had a religious significance for the ancient Hawaiians, I do know that when you see a huge one made pre-contact with the white man, you get a sense of reverence at its size, its shape, its beauty and the mystery of who and how he did it, a sense of awe, that I'm sure is something akin to what the king felt when the humble artisan gave him his latest creation.

Till the next time, aloha. ●