

CUTTING IT FINE

Reducing a huge rock to an object of ethereal delicacy takes innate talent and nerves of steel. Helmut Wolf has both, as Verena Aufermann found when she visited his atelier near Frankfurt. *Photographs by Graeme Montgomery*

Helmut Wolf is a fortunate man: he is the master of an art that he does not have to share with anyone else. With self-confident sincerity, he claims he is "unique." By profession, Wolf is a designer of containers and *objets* made from precious stones. Behind this somewhat bald description stands an artist of creative genius and dazzling manual skill.

Using 14 complex and time-consuming processes, he creates *objets d'art* – some wafer-thin, others massive – completing, on average, about 20 a year. To make his bowls, a simple design is drawn onto a huge stone, then the rough form is cut out with a diamond saw. A diamond disk is used to cut the interior into minuscule sections, which are then hollowed out with a hammer and chisel. Next the bowl is ground against a silicon carbide wheel, then sanded with a wooden wheel, and finally smoothed with a felt wheel and polishing paste. His materials are rock crystal, rubies, agate, rose quartz, lapis lazuli, jade, and other precious stones. No one else is capable of carving and grinding objects of such variety and sophistication, whose fragility, lightness, and transparency belie their origin. In many ways, creating each work is like walking a tightrope or climbing Everest.

Helmut Wolf does 95 percent of his work by hand, and 95 percent of the objects are created without any specific commission. His most sensational piece is a rock crystal vase, tall enough for a small child to stand up in, and so intricately grained that ice splinters and veins are

clear to see. For months, in the quiet of evening, Wolf would walk down the steps to his workshop and simply look at the giant crystal. He had to get to know it, to study it, to understand its "language" and carefully learn the direction in which its veins ran. Only after these nightly encounters did he set to work.

His apprentices had to hold his chair steady so that he could support the counter-pressure of the 2.5-ton crystal as he carved and ground it. After three years Wolf had created the world's biggest vase, and was rewarded, in 1998, with a mention in *The Guinness Book of Records*.

A big but graceful man with a ready laugh, Wolf, 61, has all the attributes of an impassioned fanatic. In love with stones and their formal perfection, he is also in love with adventure, where there is always the risk of failure. Stones are mysterious things: they hide what is inside them. Very few are perfect through and through, and in the case of an opaque stone, only a small percentage is usable. For millions of years, they have kept their secrets to themselves, secrets that are there inside when they are mined in Brazil, India, or Africa. Before breaking them up, no one knows the quality of these lumps of rock. Does the stone contain holes, cracks, or other fingerprints of nature? How pure is it? How healthy is its inner life? "I work with nature," Wolf explains, "and I make a compromise with her; I want nature to be preserved."

There is a 50-percent chance that the rock crystal will shatter while it is being





processed. Just one false move, a split second's inattention, excessive heat during polishing, and the work of one, two, or three years is destroyed. It happened to Wolf with a jade bowl three feet long and 30 inches wide. The piece now stands in his garden, split diagonally in half. It is as if the artist himself had fallen apart.

The work is both a vocation and a family tradition. Wolf was born in 1940 in Idar-Oberstein, the world center of the gemstone industry. For centuries, the very finest amethyst, rock crystal, and agate were mined in the Steinkaulenberg. However, by 1832, the dozen or so galleries in the mountain were exhausted. Deposits ran out while it was still spring in the barren Hunsrück valley, a time when summer had already come in other parts of the country. The inhabitants of Idar-Oberstein had to find a way to survive. All the stones from the mines had gone and there was nothing left in the mountain. The millwheels along the Idarbach turned in vain. The stone carvers sang in the face of adversity.

They began to leave, many emigrating to Brazil. There, they continued to stand in courtyards and make music, for which they were renowned, but one fine day they discovered that there were deposits of agate and rock crystal in their new-found land. A son of the Arend family of Idar-Oberstein started an export business, packing stones in sacks made

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of animal hide, and sending them first by sea to Hamburg and then by horse and cart to Idar-Oberstein.

Two years ago, the town celebrated its five hundredth anniversary. Wolf claims that it took 500 years to create someone like him, capable of making such large objects and bowls from gemstones. But he is a generous fellow. He says his 37-year-old son, Oliver Wolf, who works in the paternal workshop, is "as good as I am." A person has to be born to this dangerous artistic game in order to stand the tension.

Stone carving is not only a risky business, it is also arduous work. In the old days, the dust and the cold water made it an unhealthy occupation. As a small boy, Wolf would bring his father's midday meal to him in a pot as he worked at the grinding wheel. As an apprentice to his godfather, he earned a weekly wage of DM 6.50 (approximately US\$3) plus one extra "performance-related" deutsche mark per week.

At the age of 27, he set up on his own, building a workshop with living accommodation above. He bought heavy stonecutting machinery and traveled to Brazil to choose his own rock crystal and agate. He made sketches and returned home, put on rubber boots and a rubber apron, and went back to the workshop. Here, he carved his chunks of gemstone into shape under warm, running water,



sanding each piece with ground diamonds on a wooden wheel. After many weeks, the stone would begin to shine and then, a few weeks later, to sparkle.

"Many artists have to be dead before their achievements are recognized," says Wolf. Nevertheless, he has already gained national awards among his many accolades. Two of his bowls were presented to Queen Elizabeth II, one by Sheikh Khalid during a state visit which she made to Saudi Arabia; his works can be seen in such collections as Château-Chinon's Musée du Septennat and the Museum Gion Ishi in Tokyo and Kyoto; and collectors travel from around the world to his studio in search of new objects – which can cost from US\$1,000 for a bowl five inches in diameter and one and a half inches high,

to US\$1.3million for a three-foot-high engraved rock crystal vase with a jade base.


Wolf shares every artist's dream: that succeeding generations will rub their eyes and catch their breath as they stand in wonder when they see his work in a museum. However, he has not let his most important pieces out of the house: a jade fountain, two obelisks in Indian aventurine, a sugilite goblet with two bands of jade around the base, two African ruby goblets, a goblet with two horses' heads in Afghan lapis lazuli. Then there are the large bowls in Brazilian agate, and gossamer-thin bowls made from jade, rock crystal, rose quartz, and lapis lazuli...

These raw materials have a language of their own. Only the great nineteenth-century Austrian writer Adalbert Stifter

– who had an almost prophetic dedication to nature – could find the words to do them justice. He described mountain crystals as "hail over bulky white or green clouds" and "bristling with frondlike shafts."

Likewise, the finished products made by Helmut Wolf have a sound of their own. When he flicks his index finger against a bowl of thinnest crystal, the master craftsman knows that the clarity of the sound is due to his skill. He reacts with proud delight rather than self-satisfaction. Then he places the bowl in a bathful of water, and his "instrument" floats. These bowls are sturdier than glass – as strong as steel, he says. Yet from a compact 100 pounds of stone he has conjured up a floating breath of air. ♦

Translated by Isabel Varea / Ros Schwartz



Previous pages: three of Wolf's bowls, made (from top) in tiger iron, rose quartz, and jade. These pages: Wolf in his atelier (left), cut from a 440lb piece of Brazilian agate, this bowl (top left) weighs just 17.3lb; a Brazilian rock crystal, Indian aventurine, and African jasper bowl (right).