

Gibson's Got Gourds

By Karen Nystedt



Photos by Donna Sisley

Early man most likely grew his own water bottles, eating utensils and mixing bowls. They sprang from the earth courtesy of a practical Mother Nature who had fashioned an assortment of gourds in handy, utilitarian shapes, among them the long-handled dipper, canteen, kettle, caveman's club, and bottle.

The earliest evidence of gourds was unearthed in Peru and dates back to 10,000 B.C., but botanists believe gourds most likely originated in Africa. Historians suspect that gourds were the first cultivated plants to span the globe (used by every known prehistoric culture living in tropical and temperate zones).

Bonnie Gibson's Tucson kitchen, circa 2003, is adequately stocked with flatware of metal, bowls of glass and bottles of plastic. So her interest in gourds is purely aesthetic. She finds, however, that they are challenging substitutes for canvas, clay and wood; perfect for painting, carving and

inlaying, with their value linked to their beauty, not their use.

A self-described "hobby junkie," Gibson, who has explored watercolor, miniatures, sculpting, woodcarving and beading, is overwhelmed by the versatility of gourds. "On a gourd you can do 50 different [artistic] techniques," she explains. "I think that's what I like most about them."

There are three types of gourds: ornamentals (*Cucurbita pepo*), hardshells, (*Lagenaria siceraria*) and luffas.

Ornamentals are the colorful gourds often used in fall wreaths. Grown on vines that bloom with orange or yellow flowers, ornamentals have thinner skins than their hardshell cousins and are often shaped like other edible objects, such as oranges, pears, eggs, pumpkins and squash.

Vines that bear hardshells bloom with white flowers at night. Because their shells are thicker, they're more durable than ornamentals, and, when dry and properly prepared, they have a texture and look of a golden wood.

They're often the preferred choice of artisans.

Luffa gourds found their usefulness not by reason of their shape or outer shell, but because of their tough fibrous interior, which is commonly harvested for use as sponges.

For the past four years, the vast majority of Gibson's art has been served up on hardshell gourds. Working with power and hand tools, acrylic paints, semiprecious stones and resins, Gibson designs and creates gourd kaleidoscopes, candle holders, rain sticks, musical instruments and decorative pots, which range in price from \$50 to \$500.



In the company of two parakeets, and Lucy, a white cockatoo who greets guests with a shy "hello," Gibson creates her art on the patio of her Foothills home. "I don't consider myself an artist," she explains. "I'm more of a fine craftsman. When you go to a big art museum you see sculptures of alligators crawling up ladders on the wall or calf fetuses floating in vats, and I think if that's art I'd rather be called a craftsman."

As a college student majoring in art and physical education, Gibson was disillusioned by an art professor who snidely suggested that if she was going to draw realistic images, she should study photography. "That was when they [academia] were pushing abstract art," says Gibson, in retrospect. "I thought, I don't want to do art to please somebody else, I want to do art to please me. So I ended up with a master's degree from the University of Arizona in athletic training and sports medicine and I decided to do art for fun."

Gibson went on to train athletes at various area high-school football programs, and served as the athletic trainer for the World Games for the Deaf in 1977 before she had a family of her own and gave up sports medicine to stay at home with her two children. Never one for soap operas or housecleaning, Gibson used whatever spare time she could manage to indulge her artistic side. Her home is now filled with the fruits of her efforts: watercolors, beaded weaving, miniatures, silver sculptures, woodcarvings, scrimshaw, and gourd art.

When asked about her most challenging gourd project, Gibson excuses herself and returns to the kitchen counter with a gourd about the size of a soccer ball. "This was the first attempt I made at inlaying materials," she explains, pointing to a turtle design on the side of the gourd. "This is inlaid with emu egg shell. The natural egg is a dark emerald green. The inner layer is a

light greenish color and, if you carve any further, it turns white. So I had to figure out how to get the shell inlaid into the gourd surface without breaking the shell or changing its color. I had to find a place on the gourd that somewhat matched up with the natural curvature of the shell in order for it all to fit in there flush."

Gibson's gourds, with a few exceptions, are all decorative, not intended to be used for storage or transport. Her designs often explore either Southwestern or natural themes: wildlife, desert flora, American Indian symbols, etc. "This is a traditional Native American design called the *avanyu*," explains Gibson, pointing to a stylized image on the side of a gourd. "It's supposed to be a type of water serpent."

Bears, Kachinas, eagles, saguaros, dragonflies, daisies (all are recurring images on Gibson's gourds).

Bonnie and her husband, Everett Gibson, were both surprised by the large number of people they saw working on or collecting gourds, when they first began attending gourd craft fairs and Bonnie began subscribing to gourd-related publications. Bonnie now writes for *Through the Gourd Vine*, and *Gourd Art Today*, magazines for gourd artisans. She will have her work featured in a book due out in 2003, tentatively titled *Gourd Carving*, and, at the time of this interview, she was scheduled to teach a workshop at the 7th Annual International Gourd Art Festival in Fallbrook, California in late June.

"Mostly women are into gourds, but some men are also getting into it," says Gibson. "Right now I'd say it's a wide age group, but more tend to be middle age."

"There is a woman at the gourd festival in Fallbrook who sells her gourds for \$20,000-\$30,000," adds Everett.

Although the Gibsons grow a few gourd plants in their backyard, it's much more time-efficient to purchase

the dried, raw gourds from gourd farms in Sunsites and Casa Grande, Arizona, where they cost from 50 cents to \$12 apiece, depending on size and shape.

Bonnie's personal gourd stash is spilling from boxes and bags in the family garage. "When I get the gourds, they have a skin," she explains, holding up a raw gourd. "I wrap them in wet towels and let them sit in a plastic bag overnight and then I scrape the skin off." With the skin removed, the inside scraped clean, and the shell dry, the gourd becomes a blank canvas waiting for an artist.

You can find Gibson's gourds locally at Desert Son, at Swan Road and Sunrise Drive, and Framed to Perfection, 6328 E. Broadway Blvd., at El Mercado, or online at www.arizonagourds.homestead.com. Gibson's website has links to the Arizona Gourd Society, the American Gourd Society and Old Pueblo Gourd Patch. The latter is a local organization catering to gourd enthusiasts. It meets the last Tuesday of each month, (except in August and December) at 6 p.m. at Far Horizons East, 7570 E. Broadway Blvd., in the main clubhouse.

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