"Just like a flower....."
Beth Alber's Mace for the University Of Ontario Institute Of Technology (UOIT)

By Dorothea Burstyn

When UOIT sent out an email for entries to design a mace for the new university in the spring of 2007, Beth Alber inquired, but only after a member of the selection committee urged her on did she submit a proposal.

The inspiration for the design of the mace came from her own teaching experience at the Ontario College of Art and Design, where she has worked with students since 1980. Just as a flower needs proper nourishment to achieve full bloom and ultimate beauty so a student's development is dependent on the guidance and teaching of a university. She envisioned the top of the mace as an abstracted flower head to represent the student body but also the vision and mission of UOIT. The strong whittled handle made of cherry wood further emphasized the university's role as protector and teacher to its students. The symbolism impressed the selection committee and

secured Beth Alber this important commission.

The university's only requirements for the mace were that it should not weigh more than twenty-five pounds and be five feet long. Beth added to these that only local materials should be used. She chose Argentium for its non-tarnish property for the flower head, Ontario sodalite, quartz and cherry wood for the handle and a block of granite – left in its natural state and brought from Havelock – as a base.

It was certainly handy that Beth was just starting her sabbatical when accepting this commission, because it took her nearly a year to complete the mace – on time for the commencement ceremony in June 2008. Just like an eighteenth-century piece of silver, the successful finish of the UOIT mace depended on the expertise of various craftsmen and availability of technical facilities, which Beth as a faculty member of OCAD could utilitize. In the final stages Beth also hired Kyla Vitek, a metal- smith and former grad of OCAD, as helper.

Work started with the flower head. While the inner petals were left plain, the outer

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

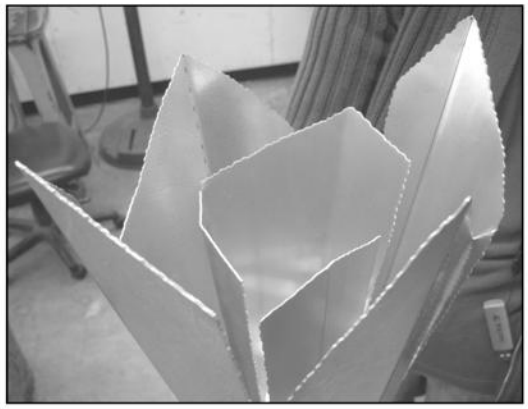


Fig.3

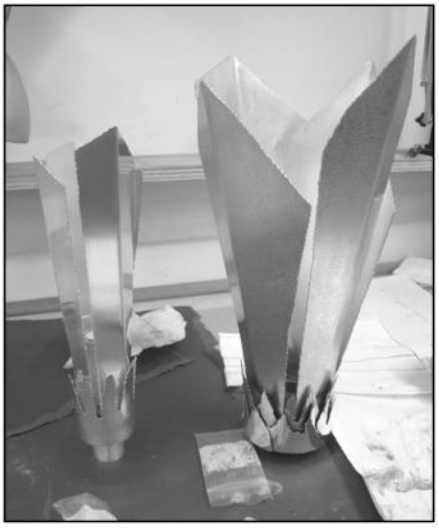


Fig. 1 Outer petals in acid bath for etching of the molecular structure of a poplar leaf

Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 Try-out for assembling the petals

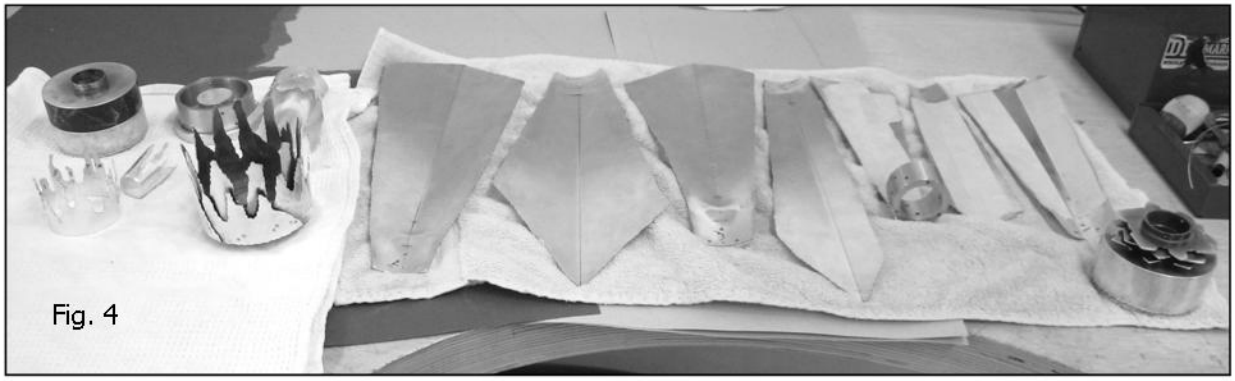


Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 4 and 5: spread out parts of the mace before assembling.

Fig. 6 Slightly bending the petal.

petals of the flower were etched with the design of the molecular structure of a poplar leaf. The properties of the poplar, a fast growing and tenacious tree, common in the southern Ontario landscape, once again echoed the underlying symbolic concept. The actual etching was done in basins filled with nitric acid on Beth's back porch. The resist was "press and peel". The outcome was a very subtle impression of the design, which would make the flower head more scratch resistant and ultimately contribute to the lasting beauty of the piece. Argentium – a new alloy of sterling – was chosen for the same reason. Tarnish resistant, the mace would not need constant cleaning. But working with argentium Beth soon experienced that the metal becomes very soft when being worked and annealed. Beth had nightmares that, when soldered into place, the petals would not hold their own weight. Another solution had to be found. Ken Nicol, a graduate of OCAD and accomplished lathe/machinist/fabricator came up with the idea to manufacture two stainless steel de-

vices to which the petals could be securely attached with small stainless screws. These devices were hidden in two rings of smaller petals. Also the petals were bent very slightly to give them extra strength.

The practice assembly was the big moment to see if everything worked together; until then Beth had only seen a lot of parts. It was an exhilarating experience to see for the first time what the finished mace would look like and to know that everything worked. Before that there had been countless hours at the bench involving piercing, filing, soldering, riveting, bezel stone setting, etching, forming and the usual endless hours of finishing.

The shaft of the mace was turned on a lathe by Joel Moffat in the OCAD wood shop. Two lathes had to be clamped together to create the length of bed needed to turn the four-foot-plus length of cherry. The lapidary work was done by silversmith David McAleese. Honed sodalite and quartz disks were set in between the metal flower head and the shaft. These semiprecious stones were chosen for the university colors of blue and white.


Fig. 7


Fig. 8

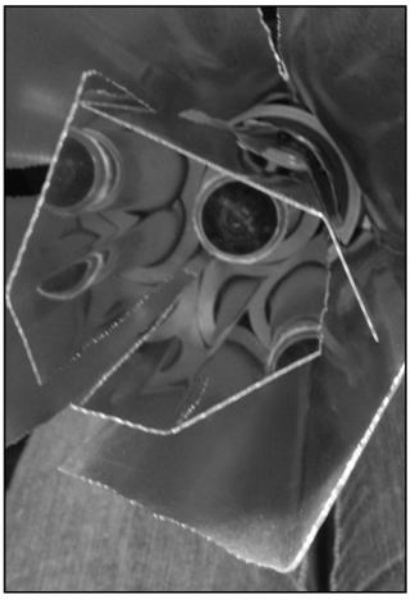
Fig. 9

Fig. 7 Kyla Vitek lines up the metal pieces with the shaft for drilling the holes.
Fig. 8 Joel Moffat working on the lathe in the OCAD wood shop.
Fig. 9 Detail of honed sodalite and quartz stone made by David McAleese.

After having completed the final assembly of the flower head, lining up the pieces for drilling holes in the metal parts and the shaft proved a very critical task. Sterling silver pins were friction-fit in position to hold all the components in place, each component being telescoped over another to assure secure placement. All parts were then slid onto the cherry shaft and pinned into position on it. A sodalite cabochon in the interior of the flower is a surprise mechanical device which holds and secures all pieces to the cherry shaft.
It should also be mentioned that the construction of the mace was designed so that it could be taken apart, should there be need for a future repair.

When not in use, the mace stands in the President's office of UOIT. Beth Alber has designed a wooden cabinet for the mace, which is being executed by cabinet maker Ian McRonald.

After an exciting year of creating the UOIT mace, Beth Alber has returned to OCAD and dedicates all her time yet again to her students as Chair, Material Art & Design, and Professor, Faculty of Design.



Countless hours at the bench.

Below: Detail of interior. The surprise sodalite cabochon setting reflecting off all interior surfaces, a mechanical device that holds and secures all pieces to the cherry shaft.