

Turned Wood Art Presentation 10-25-2003

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Introduction

Let's start with a definition:

Art: The product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion, or visually interesting form.

If one looks at the decorative objects we see around us, what probably sets one apart from the others are the details added to or selected in the item. In the case of turned items it can be as simple as the case of the bowl with a textured rim or the addition of color to a vase; or as simple as the pink stains in a piece of box elder; or the grain pattern of the wood used. It could be a complicated pattern of pierced holes in the piece. In any case, whatever is used sets the piece apart from the others. For the purpose of Art, we 'select and shape' the materials to get across the "idea, emotion, or visually interesting form" we want to convey.

The purpose then of this session is to stimulate the thought process to help you decide what, if anything, you would like to use. To do that we'll break down some of the elements of turned art and discuss them in general and then take a few to discuss in more detail and demonstrate.

Our first step will be to break down items into two categories, those with an implied use and then those with no apparent use other than to have a pleasing or interesting visual affect. Next, we'll look into some of the strategies for decorating a turning. We'll discuss some and actually demonstrate a few others.

Categories

We can divide turned art into two major categories, implied use items and those meant solely for decoration.

Some examples of implied use objects are:

- Vases and vase forms – used to display flowers or to store nuts.
- Platters/plates/saucers – Food service
- Symmetrical bowls – Food service
- Utility items – Spatula, spoons, honey dipper – used in food preparation.
- Toys – Tops, baby rattles
- Lidded boxes – Storage of precious items.
- Chess pieces

We as turners must realize is that the implied use may be the actual use in the end. One of my personal experiences may help to make the point. A client bought one of my bowls from Foothills Crafts in Manchester. She later sent me a letter asking if the bowl was food safe. I sent her a note telling her that I hadn't intended the item to be actually used for serving food. It was intended to be an art object. She took great objection to that. Her idea of paying such an exorbitant price for the bowl was that she could picture one of her beautiful salads being displayed to her friends in a beautiful, hand made bowl. Her art form was culinary. Mine was wood turning. The two art forms together made up the final product. In the end, I told her that I had used Deft oil, lacquer, and wax for a finish and referred her to some articles on the web to make up her own mind whether the finish was safe for food. Incidentally, it probably is safe to use, but I'm no expert in that category.

Have you ever heard this question? "What is that used for?" This question's persistence suggests the prospect that people do not see art objects as an entity in and of themselves. You might consider this to be their ignorance, but is it? On the other hand, you are selling a bowl; it should not be a surprise to you that the client intends to use it for its "intended purpose".

Some examples of purely decorative pieces are:

- Eggs
- Spheres
- Closed form vessels
- Natural edge bowls
- Totem poles

These are some of the things that collectors collect, and are fun for a turner, but offer no utility other than decorating.

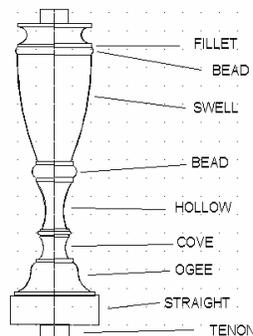
Strategies

First, let's agree that there is probably nothing we can try that hasn't been tried and adopted or discarded already. So much for originality! Then again, Michelangelo didn't invent the painting form either. This begs the question of whether one should 'copy' the work of others. Well, it all depends. I use texturing, taught to me by Tom Cowan, to decorate my turnings in both art objects and furniture pieces. On the other hand, if someone has a trademark piece, I would not

compete in the same market with a 'Chinese copy' of the piece. Having said that, one cannot create an interesting form and then say: "Don't you do that! That's mine!" A form is just a form. Furthermore, a technique, taught in a seminar, is rightfully assumed by the attendees to be open to their use.

There are many strategies for decorating turned wood art. Just some examples are:

- Shapes – There are as many shapes as there are turners and pieces of wood. You can invent one, be inspired by another's work, or find one in a book that appeals to you. Shapes are a primary means of expression in wood art.
 - Helpful: Use the Golden Proportions or simple progressions like: 1,2,3,5,8,13, . . .
 - Shapes of lamp bases, candleholders, and the like are really just extensions of the spindle elements sized and applied to fit the application.



- Wood figure – Selection of a piece of wood for a certain shape is one aspect of defining wood art. The figure of the wood can either enhance the shape of the turning or, if chosen wrong, really detract from the piece.
- Offset turning – Unlike Ornamental turning, which requires a special lathe, offset turnings are accomplished on a regular lathe by using multiple centers or offsetting the center to achieve the bias desired. Not much different from basic turning. Just more 'air' to turn.
- Coloring:
 - Painting – Simple painting isn't out of the question for wood turnings. To achieve a black or white, or for that matter any primary color, paint is a good choice – especially when one desires to cover-up wood figure.
 - Staining/dyeing/chemical – When wood figure is to be visible, coloring can be done with pigmented stains, dyes, or a combination of the two. Chemical means, such as lye on cherry, are also a possibility.

- A form of coloring is to use colored fillers to enhance grain patterns.
 - Apply dye on the lathe for fast even application.
 - Airbrush
- Adding texture – Texture can be added by various means
 - Chatter tool
 - Rotary tool
 - Engraver
- Painting patterns
 - Airbrush
 - Hand painting
- Inlays and fills
 - Metal
 - Wood/burl
 - Plastics == epoxy/acrylics
- Piercing
- Burning
 - Wood burning irons
 - Torches
- Segmented turnings
- Stave turnings
- Gilding – Adding metal foil to turnings e.g. Gold Leaf
- Patterns

Technique and workmanship

One expects the final product of an art piece to represent the skill of the artisan, yet many pieces have obvious defects. Some aren't too egregious. Some are. The question is, why are they there. Surely the artisan didn't leave them on purpose or miss them in final inspection. On this assumption, I've looked into some reasons.

Some personal experience: I've spent much effort cutting, shearing, and sanding on some pieces to ensure that tool marks are gone only to find ring defects after the finish has been applied. My personal analysis failed to discover a reason. I assumed that I had just missed them during the sanding process, and this is the correct assumption. The reason – quite likely – is my turning technique. Let me quote from *The Practice of Woodturning* by Darlow:

Crushing and bruising. Some species, and perhaps especially the softer fine-grained hardwoods, tend to crush under the tool rather than stand up and be crisply cut. To minimize this, your tools must be sharp and be cutting with plenty of side rake. Tool presentation should be such as to avoid heel of bevel contact which causes circles of paler crushed cells.

We tell all turners to “rub the bevel”, but Darlow is telling us to keep the heel of the bevel off the wood to avoid just what I’m seeing. Is this a contradiction? Not really! The rule is to ‘follow the bevel when cutting’. Rub the bevel is shortcut lingo. My particular solution is to use a shear cut or shear scrape technique to do the final passes to minimize the latent ring problem.

So what’s the message? If you’re having troubles like this, and this is just one of many, consult literature and cohorts to get past it. It turns out that this isn’t just my problem. This latent ring problem is well known, and if I had just looked, I would have been able to save a lot of anguish.

Technique, it turns out, is an important part of workmanship.

Demonstration – two part vessels and decoration.

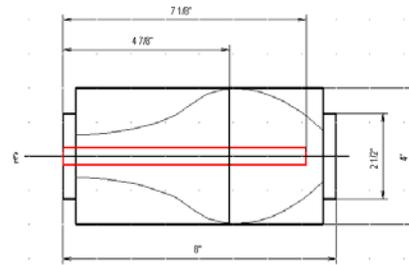
We’ll demonstrate a few of the above decorating strategies with a demonstration of the use of the multi-part turning and its decoration.

- Multi-part turning – Pieces can be turned in parts and connected by various means. The outside shape is usually formed; the piece is cut in sections to permit hollowing; then the parts are reunited and finished. This technique comes to good use on turning vases and other closed forms.
- Repetitive patterns
 - Use of index wheel – One can accomplish repetitive patterns of carved figure with the use of an index wheel.

The Two Part Vessel

The approach for creating a two part vessel is straight forward. While it can be done with a face plate easy enough, it is facilitated by the use of a scroll chuck. If you’re using this procedure with a faceplate just replace the term ‘chuck’ with ‘faceplate’ and make allowances for you screws as you proceed.

In the following procedure we will produce a vase in the two part process, then demonstrate a technique for creating repetitive pattern decorations, and finally to part off the base to get the piece ready for applying the finish. In the interest of safety and comfort, we won’t sand nor put on finish during the demonstration.



Stage one

1. Prepare a rough work piece from green lumber. In this case we prepared a 4 x 4 x 8 inch blank. Take the time to roughly true up the ends and stay as close as possible to balanced in your cutting the square section on the bandsaw.
2. Then mark your centers and punch a small centered hole in both ends. We’ll use these to mount the piece between centers, and later we’ll use them again to realign the piece in the lathe several times.
3. Once mounted between centers, turn the square into a cylinder.
4. True both ends and turn your attachment tenons for mounting your chuck. In my case, I turn them 2 ½ inches diameter and about 5/16” thick.
5. Remove your spur drive, mount your chuck, and install the workpiece loosely between the chuck and the tail center with the ultimate base in the chuck. Tighten the tail quill to press the work piece into the chuck, and then tighten the chuck.
6. Remove the tail center and replace with a ½” drill bit mounted in a Jacobs chuck in the tailstock quill, and drill ½” hole from ultimate top through the blank to within ¾” of the ultimate base.

Note: The hole is just an aid to simplify hollowing. You can improvise if you don’t have a bit of the proper length. Take is slow and bore in straight. An off-center hole will cause a lot of trouble, and it may be better not to have the hole than to have an off-center one.
7. Reverse the cylinder putting the ultimate top loosely in chuck and bring up tailstock to center and hold it in place. Tighten chuck and leave tailstock. Make sure hole is now toward the headstock end.
8. Turn outside shape of vase.
9. Part the pieces using parting tool and pull saw.
10. Put base in plastic bag to keep it from shrinking.

11. Set calipers and mark where the mortise will be cut.
12. Hollow top half leaving 3/16" to 1/4" thick walls.
13. Turn a mortise in the top rim being careful to keep its sides parallel to the lathe axis.
14. Set the caliper to measure outside dimension of the mortise.
15. Recover base from bag and store top in bag.
16. Install and center base half.
17. Use caliper to mark base for tenon location.
18. Make plunge cut with parting tool to give safe starting edge for hollowing.
19. Hollow base half.
20. Cut a tenon to rough dimension of mortise based on caliper. Be careful to stay wide of the measurement.
21. Bring out top and cut tenon to final fit. Fit should be tight but easily inserted and removed from the mortise.
22. Mark the joint for alignment. Look for the best figure fit for the two parts then put a pencil mark across the joint at that part. You will align the joint to the pencil mark during glue up.
23. Use medium CA glue in the mortise being careful not get the glue near the ultimate joint.
24. Connect the two halves and bring up tailstock to clamp and let dry for a few minutes. Leave tailstock pulled up.
25. Clean up turning. Making sure that the joint is smoothly dressed. Do whatever turning you will do on the piece at this point including grooves, or other disguises, in the waist.
26. Cut top tenon off and clean up mouth.
27. Remove and set aside to dry.

Stage two – Marking and parting the dried turning.

1. Install index wheel and pin reference behind the chuck. Be sure to tighten chuck on spindle against wheel to prevent slipping.
2. Set pin in reference and wheel to establish a start point.
3. Decide on the number of segments you want to use. My wheel offers the choice of 8, 12, 16, or 24 segments.
4. Bring the tool rest up to the wheel adjusting its height to match the line that is 90 degrees from vertical. This is the center axis of the lathe.
5. Install the dry turning in the chuck.

6. Mark waist segments by rotating and stopping the index wheel pinning the holes for the number of segments you chose in step 3.
7. Part off base tenon.
8. Reverse on jamb chuck.
9. Clean off base.

Stage three – Decorating

Choose your method of decoration to fit the shape and figure of the turning. A turning with busy figure may not accept busy decoration. Consider just jumping to the finishing step. On the other hand, one with little figure may accept almost any decorative scheme available.

Finishing

It's probably safe to say that any finish that can be used on other wood products can be used on woodturnings. Some lend themselves to 'on the lathe' application better than others.

Finishes meant for metal applications; i.e., surfaces that offer little movement, are usually best avoided for woodturnings since they are inelastic and will ultimately crack with the expansions and contractions of wood.

I've experimented with other finishes, but I now finish most of my turnings with lacquer and wax for the following reasons:

1. Easy to apply. If you don't have spray equipment, just use Deft Gloss Clear Finish spray cans.
2. Durable.
3. Polishes up well. Use gloss lacquer. Let it dry completely and rub out to any finish from a satin sheen to a high gloss.
4. It can be used over oil. I use Deft Oil (which has polymers) according to directions to bring out the grain in dark woods. Linseed oil will work too but may require longer drying periods. Any oil under any finish must be allowed to dry completely; i.e., it must be let stand long enough to allow all the solvents to completely evaporate before applying the film coat. Then cover with a few coats of spray lacquer.

I wax all my turnings to get the warm, smooth feel of the wax finish and to protect the base finish from superficial scratches and scuffs.

An exception to my lacquer rule is the use of Deft Oil and wax for a warm and woody feel to the piece. I apply 3 coats of the oil following the directions on the can but using a 3M grey pad to rub it in after the first and second coats. After the third coat, I apply paste wax and rub it out with the grey pad. It's not very durable but is easy to maintain.

A word on 'food safe' finishes. I've used polyurethane with a coat of beeswax for bowls used for food. I'm told that's safe. Some experts say that all finishes are safe once the solvents have evaporated. I'm not a chemist, so I can't say.