

WOODTURNING DESIGN BOOKS

Some resources for improving design talents, with a particular emphasis on showing the turned form

By Lyn J. Mangiameli

The following question was recently posed on the rec.crafts.woodturning newsgroup:

“As a sort-of beginning bowl turner, I'm wondering how people think about the styles of bowl/platter/etc. objects they turn. Specifically, how does one develop a sense of what shapes work well from which size blanks? What shapes do you think of when you see a piece of wood of a given size? How did you develop that way of thinking?”

There are a lot of potential answers to such questions, in part because so many of us never feel we fully master such things, and also because there are so many different approaches to design. One can approach design based more or less on:

abstract principles (golden mean, root etc.);

actively playing with lines and shapes developed on a drawing board or computer screen (perhaps using such aids as a chain, mirror or French Curve);

visually analyzing and logging the pleasing shape of existing pieces regardless of their media (such as wood, ceramics, glass, textile) or style (nature, Oriental, Greek, Southwestern) or source (the natural world, museums, galleries, books, china shop);

practical aspects of the material such as orientation of grain, maximizing yield, dealing with wood stability issues.

Some of these approaches will fit for one person (or one particular application, or even one particular turning blank,) much better than others. Good form is not just a matter of what is most abstractly pleasing, but what can best be matched to the materials, techniques and tools available to you. For example, a long pointed finial might make for a most pleasing line, but if your wood is not dense, fine and straight grained, and your skew technique sound, it might not be a good design for the turning blank before you.

That said, here are a few thoughts.

The very best, and one of the most comprehensive discussions of basic design principles applied to woodturning is presented in a book called **Woodturning: A Guide to Advanced Techniques** by Hugh O'Neill. This 1994 book has long been out of print, but may be found through used booksellers or your local library. He devotes two full chapters to design, one more practical and one more theoretical, but both are the best discussion of design applied to woodturning I have found anywhere. Though only illustrated in black and white photos and line drawings, the illustrations are of the sort you can photocopy, blow up, and use as patterns and guidelines. He even has tables of classically ideal dimensions.

Next in line, and the only current book focusing on woodturning design is Richard Raffan's **Turned Bowl Design**, 1987. The book is not exclusively about design and really has only a couple of chapters on design. It is good book, though hardly comprehensive or definitive. Raffan does discuss catenary chains and a few other helpful methods to help you develop and judge particular design. Richard's work is not so helpful for how adequately he has written about design, as much as that his turnings usually display such good design. The gallery sections are some of the best parts of all his books (at least the older editions, Tauton has done us an injustice by leaving out much of this material in the new editions).

A book that should be out in May of 2003 is the latest in the series written by Mike Darlow. It will be devoted to woodturning design and is named accordingly. Pre orders are now possible on Amazon. Based on having read his earlier books, I'll stick my neck out on this one and say that I don't expect it will be the best or definitive resource in this area for woodturners, but it will be comprehensive and worth its purchase price.

I personally found Stott's new book **Turned Boxes: 50 Designs**, 2002, to be a disappointment. Some of the designs seem too cute or gimmicky, and overall there seems more emphasis on describing a range of boxes that can be reproduced, rather than actually describing the design underlying them. But then I'm not that much of a box turner, and was not that concerned about learning the techniques to duplicate each of his works, so others more interested in this type of turning may find the book more valuable.

WOODTURNING DESIGN BOOKS (Cont'd.)

A book that takes a somewhat different approach to design, and may be particularly helpful to those who wish to engage in the growing practice of embellishing turnings, is **Decorating Turned Wood: The Maker's Eye**, 2002, by Liz and Michael O'Donnell. This is not a book simply about sandblasting or painting wood, but one that reminds us that design requires more than just anticipating what flowing curve should come off the turning tool. It is a practical and somewhat anecdotal discussion of the factors that can influence design, both before and after the act of turning. As an example of the latter, the O'Donnell's describe how they had wood bowls that were regularly splitting in a particular fashion. Rather than just throwing them away, they eliminated the split as a fault by using the "damaged" bowls as the foundation for a new final shape that did not include the section of the bowl that usually split. Chapters include Developing Ideas, Form, Color, Pattern, and Texture.

Going with the idea that looking at good design will teach you good design, there are several woodturning oriented books that can be helpful in developing a sense of design, as well as being enjoyable in and of themselves. Some are woodturning "art" books oriented primarily to the consumer, some are woodturning "art" books oriented more to the practicing turner and some are what I'll call crossover books that integrate information intended for both audiences. Here are a few quick comments on the ones I have.

First, from the technical side:

Master Woodturners by Dale Nish, 1985: One of the earliest (date wise) of the books. Discusses the works of Ellsworth, Key, senior and junior Lindquist, elder Moulthrop, Osolnik, Raffan, Stirt & Straka. Basically a page of biography and philosophy on each turner, followed by extensive illustrated descriptions of them making one or more works. A classic which is unfortunately diminished by age and less than sharp (by present standards) black and white photos. Small color and black and white gallery at the end.

Sculpting Wood: Contemporary Tools & Techniques by Mark Lindquist, 1986: Another of the earliest books on this subject. Even more dated in its techniques and poor quality photos than the Nish book. Not limited to woodturning, and often describes the basic use of woodworking tools. I find this book more of an interesting historical curiosity displaying the early primitive development of modern techniques than of any actual guide to modern woodturning. Still probably of interest to those who like the Lindquist's work, particularly the chainsaw techniques.

The Art of The Lathe by Patrick Spielman, 1996: This is a strange book. It combines introductory descriptions and techniques of woodturning, simple woodturning project plans, and brief descriptions of a large number of interesting turners into one volume. From an experienced woodturner's point of view, one third of the book is a waste. Yet It has high quality photos and mini bios of some a good cross section of woodturners and their works including Rosand, Scarpino, Firmager, Gilson, Horn, Hosaluk, Jordan, Klein, Latven, Stirt, Stocksedale & Weissflog to name about half of them. Given its low price, it's probably worth getting, but unless some of its specific projects interest you (earrings, candlesticks, ornaments, birdhouses, platters and the like) it's not much of a technical source.

Illustrated Woodturning Techniques by John Hunnex, 1996: I like this book. It has good photography coupled with pleasant forms and illustrated discussions of how an example of each style of form is made. While limited to just the work of Hunnex, it has a chapter each on bowls, closed forms, natural tops, vases, hollow forms and bottles. Given its modest price, I think it is worth getting.

Woodturning Masterclass by Tony Boase, 1995: The first of Tony's books. Great photography, but most of all, good insights into the lives and works of 12 British woodturners (Bryant, Clare, Firmager, Kaye, Key, Marsh, Liz and Michael O'Donnell, Scott, Smith, Tattersall, White & Woodward). You get a good idea of how each goes about their style of turning. Unfortunately limited to the British woodturners, but generally a must get.

Bowl Turning Techniques Masterclass by Tony Boase, 1999: Second of Tony's books, and of the same level. Everything as with his first book, but slightly less Anglocentric. This time on Robin Wood (pole lathe), Stuart Batty, Ambrose, Larsen, Flynn, Forbes, Mortimer, Comerford, Hibbert and Boase himself. Another must get given its modest price.

WOODTURNING DESIGN BOOKS (Cont'd.)

Crossover books:

Woodturning: A Source Book of Shapes by John Hunnex, 1993. This is basically a color gallery of over a hundred of John Hunnex's turnings, broken down by basic style (bowl, containers, vases, hollow forms, closed forms, natural tops and natural edges, platters and plaques, variation in shape). It is not so much as source of different shapes as one might expect, as many of the pieces use very similar forms but appear different as a result of the wood that is used or some minor differences in detailing. It is a pretty book to look through and though the printing is not incredibly sharp, the photography was good and shows of the pieces quite well. All in all, a real bargain given its price.

Bert Marsh: Woodturner by Marsh, 1995: Part biography and philosophy (which I found boring), part elementary tools and techniques, but about half interspersed and gallery photos of good quality. If you like Marsh's style (which emphasizes form and wood), there are many pieces to study and admire.

Rude Osolnik: A Life Turning Wood, 1997. About half biography (but fairly interesting), a small section on technique (his famous candlesticks, large vessels, natural edges, twig pots & bowls), and all the rest a gallery of his works. Excellent photography on glossy paper. A wonder for the wide range of styles he created and mastered. A must have IMO.

Woodturning in North America since 1930, 2001. This is a wonderful book and great accomplishment. It is both a history and biography, which is illuminated by a wide ranging gallery of photos interspersed with the text. Some of the work only rarely has been displayed such as a bowl by Jerry Glaser and the "potato chip" bowls of Dell Stubbs. The book ends with an essay on Wood: Its Properties in Relationship to its Use in Turning. This essay includes two outstanding pages which illustrate how the final turning will look based on the orientation and depth of the turning with respect to several different log shapes. This essay alone is almost worth the cost of the book. This is one of the finest examples of a Crossover book, offering information and photos that are of great interest to turners and collectors alike. Truly a "must have" book.

Art books:

Mark Lindquist: Revolutions in Wood by Robert Hobbs, 1995. Large size, but actually little content. Hobbs finds more profundity in Lindquist's life and work than I buy into, he also seems to believe the Lindquist's are responsible for almost every advance in woodturning. Short but full size section of gallery photos which are well photographed. If you are a fan of Mark's work, or find it intriguing, then the book is probably worth its price to you just for collecting so many pictures of his work in one place.

Wonders in Wood: The Art of the Woodturner, 1998: Single full page photos (by Tony Boase) of over 100 noted woodturners. Though British turners predominate, there are many prominent US and international woodturners displayed as well. Designed a bit more for the woodturner than the typical art book. Given its low price, it is worth acquiring just to have an overview of so many turners' works in one place.

Turning Wood Into Art: The Jane and Arthur Mason Collection, 2000: This is an unabashed "art" book published by Abrahms (know for their high quality coffee table books). Excellent photos on slick paper. Lots of Ellsworth (including non hollow forms) and lots of Stocksdale (probably more Stocksdale in one place than I have seen other than in his 88 Turnings book). Good also to obtain a sense of a collectors view and how a collector might seek to have a coherent collection (which in this case is one of the largest in the US, if not the world). Somewhat expensive, but one of rare hard bounds in the art book group. Fairly US centric.

The Fine Art of Wood: The Bohlen Collection published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts July-Dec 2000. Displays of over 130 turnings, mainly of US turners. Along the lines of the Mason Collection book, it has excellent photos on high quality paper; definitely turning as an art.

Expressions in Wood: Masterworks from the Wornick Collection, 1996: Another unabashed "art" book. Slightly oversized. About 1/3 rd verbiage of dubious value to the woodturner. The rest is principally a page of biography followed by one or two good quality photos of the turners work. A wide ranging collection of turners and styles put together by a collector who is a turner himself. Fairly nice "art" book, but in soft cover. Predominantly US but international turners are also included.

WOODTURNING DESIGN BOOKS (Cont'd.)

Contemporary Turned Wood by Leir, Peters & Wallace, 1999: These are the Del Mano gallery folks. Good introduction and history coupled with turners works broken into five categories: Purist; Vessel Transformed; Constructed Vessel; turning as Sculpture & Small Treasures. The best of the best doing some of their recent best. Many of the items are highly innovative while others are classic. International in scope. The very best of those books covering multiple artists, and recommended for every turner's library.

Bob Stocksdale: 88 Turnings. The catalog from the 2001 exhibition held in honor of Stockdale's 88th birthday. This exhibition was loaned bowls and/or received financial support from noted luminaries in the woodturning (e.g. Jerry Glaser) gallery (Martha Connell) and collector (the Masons and the Wornicks) world. Though only 87 pages long, it is packed with high quality photos of a wide range of Stockdale's turnings, and since his work is not only exquisite in form but usually of gorgeous exotic woods, every page is a treat. One of my favorite books.

Marriage In Form: Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi, 1993. Bob Stocksdale/Kay Sekimachi: Books Boxes and Bowls, 1999. These are small catalogs (56 and 32 pages, respectively) made for two exhibitions Stocksdale offered with his second wife, who is an artist who uses fiber as a medium. Though small, both are very well done, with clear photography showing some of the Stocksdale's very best bowls, which makes them some of the best bowls ever created. Difficult to find, they can be obtained via the Brown/Grotta web site <http://browngrotta.com>

The Art of Turned Wood Bowls (I think), 1983 (approximately): I don't have this book, but have gone through it twice at an old friend's. Probably one of the first books to seriously discuss bowls for the serious collector. Good photography (as I remember) and a nice collection for its era. If anyone has a copy to sell, I'd definitely like to acquire this book.

Books from The Woodturning Center (<http://www.woodturningcenter.org>)

Curators Focus: Turning in Context. Seven "art" essays coupled with photos of turnings.
Challenge IV, 1991 (black and white photos only).
Challenge V, 1993 (55 artists).
Challenge VI, 2001 (52 artists).

These books all represent Albert LeCoff's (former production woodturner and founder of The Woodturning Center) vision for woodturning as an art form. The books represent a very wide range of turners, from the essentially unknown to the most prominent, from the traditional to the most avant garde, from the international to the local. The objects selected are predominantly and unabashedly turnings as art, which may dismay the purist (like me) and delight the adventuresome.

Enter the World of Lathe Turned Objects, 1997. I single this book out from the others by The Woodturning Center. Though it is much in the same style as the other WTC books, it is a little different in the source of its content, being an exposition of over 160 objects from the Center's private collection (usually obtained as gifts from the artists). Each artist is represented by a photo of one to five of their works, accompanied by a paragraph usually describing their approach to creative turning. It is notable for having some work rarely seen, such as that of David Pye, Merryll Saylan, Palmer Sharpless, Dell Stubbs, Giles Gilson and the special treat of a collaboration between Gilson and Stubbs. The latter displays a wonderful exercise in the blending of two styles into one appealing form.

Finally, **The Art of Woodturning**, 1983: Actually more of a pamphlet than a book. One of the best short histories of woodturning. Other than the cover, all black and white pictures of variable quality. Nice because it shows the full range of artistic craft woodturning, including chairs, muffineers, architectural columns, screens, posts, bowls and hollow forms. Pieces by Moulthrop, Ellsworth, Lindquist, Kent & Stocksdale, but more significant for its pieces by anonymous turners. Cheap (as it should be) and to my knowledge only available from Cambium Press. Mind you, this is a personal list and only the briefest of descriptions from a recreational woodworker who greatly admires the work of other turners and the wood itself. The value and enjoyment one obtains from these books is apt to be different for each turner, but hopefully you now have a better idea of what's out there, and now can begin to explore as you wish.