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SOME THOUGHTS ON DESIGN

How often as an amateur woodturner have you stood, holding a block of wood and pondered, "What do I do now, what wonderful shape and what life is going to be brought to this inanimate lump?" Or are you among those that state, "I will see what lies within the wood as I turn it"? The interpretation of which may well be "I have no idea at all".

Well join the Club! You are not alone by a long shot. It would be fairly reasonable to say that even Shakespeare suffered "Writers Block" at some time or other.

So what's the answer?

Look at the work of others; look at ancient pottery designs, antique furniture, last years International Woodturning winners, inspiration may be found in many places.

There is nothing at all wrong with copying, it's a great learning process and aside from great woodturners you would be joining the ranks of such Masters as Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and Constable to name just a few and to the many present day artists who took and still take their easels and paints into the art galleries around the world to copy the work of the Masters before them.

Although it is a very hackneyed phrase "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" there is truth in it. Although it's doubtful that you could explain in any detail, just why you consider some things to be ascetically pleasing and others not, it is a fact that we, as creations of nature have an inherent, though not always understood, oneness with the things around us.

For instance, Leonardo da Vinci, together with others of his time, developed the first scientific studies of the human anatomy. It was discovered that a person's head for example, if measured from the chin to the crown, is one eighth of the height of the whole body and that the navel is five eighths of the whole body from the ground. The distance from the foot to the knee is one half the length of the leg and the whole leg is one half the length of the whole body. The shoulders are two eighths wide and the distance from fingertip to fingertip of the outstretched arms is equal to the total height of the body.

And so on and so on, but prior to that, in the first century B.C. the ancient Greeks studying in detail the number of leaves on plants and petals on flowers, the ratio present in the growth patterns of many things-the mathematical precision of a spiral formed on a shell and the curve of a fern, for example, concluded the presence of a "The Divine Proportion" and from these things derived the Golden Mean or Golden Section.

A treatise by Vitruvius titled "De Architectura" established standards for the proportion of columns, rooms and buildings.

SOME THOUGHTS ON DESIGN (Cont'd.)

Now, you dine out on this one. It was based on the concept of the ratio between two parts of a whole, where the proportion of the smaller to the larger is equal to the larger to the whole. (Phew!)

Both the Greeks and the ancient Egyptians used the Golden Mean when designing their temples and monuments. Many artists used the ratio when laying out their paintings. Artists and architects alike discovered that by utilizing the ratio 1:1.618, they could create a feeling of order in their works. New scientific discoveries are still being made today how this ratio takes its place in the nature of things.



This is a rectangle sized to the Golden Mean

You may ask, "What has this to do with woodturning?" Well, whilst there are many uses for this rule of proportion, too many to go into here, one conclusion that can be made is that it could be a pleasing proportion for a bowl. Bringing the figures 1:1.618, to 5:8 makes them easier to use. So for example, in this instance a bowl 8" (200mm) in diameter would feel just right if it was 5" (125mm) high. Or 8" high and 5" in diameter. The eye however, may be tricked by halving one of these measurements; this is an alternative when struggling to obtain a blank of the suitable size. But avoid having a proportion of 2:1.

Bowl Design Unless you deliberately intend turning a plain cylinder, the outside of your bowls will be curved in order to create either an open or closed design. So where do we look for inspiration, how do we start? It has already been mentioned that there is nothing wrong with copying a design and there are many books published for this purpose, in fact it would be hard to come up with a design that has not been made previously by someone else. But try looking around the garden, the shape of flowers, seedpods, fruit on a tree, the way a branch bends, a melon or lowly pumpkin are all full of delightful curves. You will not find a straight line in nature.

A combination of curves may be used to create a form, but when doing so bear in mind that flowing lines are usually the most pleasing and the inside of the bowl should, unless for effect, follow the curve of the exterior.

Vases, Candlesticks and things A lot of sins may be committed when turning bowls and except for the experienced eye, these sins, although they vaguely disturb and do not enhance the article, may go unnoticed.

Try this with spindle turning and the mistakes scream out. Many weed vases for instance, despite the quality of the turning are just that-weed vases, something in which to stick a weed, certainly not a floral arrangement, which is a pity as these items often show skilful tool work.

SOME THOUGHTS ON DESIGN (Cont'd.)

The problems are many, but leading the race are:

- Lack of proportion and balance.
- Poor design, unattractive shapes.
- Lack of fluidity, interruptions to line that don't make sense.
- Overworked, too complicated. If in doubt keep it simple.

Candlesticks, in addition to being beset with these problems, are frequently not designed to carry a candle without falling over. The center of gravity is too high.

Here is another point worth remembering. A vertical piece standing alone must not only be stable, it should also appear to be stable.

Decoration When using beads or grooves to add interest to a piece don't overdo it. Beads or, say a ring of bark worked into a design should not interrupt the underlying form; they should almost appear to have been added after the work was completed.

Finish The eternal question raised when being shown a piece of turnery is "What finish did you use?" or again, how often are you asked "What finish should I use on this?" Because of the sincerity of the questioner, you stifle your first thoughts of "Why not apply a match" and suggest a particular polish. The moral here of course, is don't apply any finish other than elbow grease, until all of the tool marks and signs of turning have been removed.

It has often been said and it makes good sense, "When you think you have finished, spend at least another 15 minutes going over it."

Whilst we all have our eye open for that special piece of wood and live in the hope of finding a red gum burl in our Christmas stocking, take heart in the fact that a well turned and well finished plain timber beats the hell out of the most exotically grained blank poorly turned and finished.

An excellent way to check up on your ability to produce a good design is to spray the finished piece flat black, completely hiding the grain. If it still looks good, then you have been successful.

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