The Journey from Penturning to Penmaking

by Kurt Hertzog

Questions from the Mailbag

I receive many questions regarding penmaking from a variety of sources. The questions arrive by e-mail from readers, are asked by workshop or class attendees, or are questions I see posed at online forums. The good part about some of the Internet forums is that the questions get asked and often are answered. The bad part is that the answers that would benefit many don't often reach as large an audience as you'd hope or are on occasion incorrect. Answers given on most Internet forums are accepted as correct with little or no checking. If you sound authoritative in a response, you often are accepted as such, regardless of your experience, knowledge, or accuracy. In this issue, I'll share some of the questions most often asked and answer them.

Q: I Am Buying a Lathe to Do Penturning. What Lathe Should I Buy?

A: The short answer is it really doesn't matter. A more helpful answer is based on the short-term and long-term aspirations of the turner and the turner's wallet. Penturning usually gets people interested in woodturning, and often they "grow" into other larger turnings. Buying a mini-lathe is great for pens and smaller turnings, but what if you decide to move into larger work? Perhaps considering a larger lathe from the start is appropriate.

I don't think I've seen a hobby-type lathe that is too big to be used for penturning. If pens, bottle stoppers, small bowls, and vessels will be your only turnings, a mini-lathe is easy on the wallet, easy on space, and more than adequate for your intended use. If you think there are larger items in your future, at least consider a bigger lathe, because you can always do smaller work on a big lathe, but you can't do bigger work on a small lathe. Along with the size of the lathe, consider the quality. Though an adequate lathe can be purchased at a modest price, these bargain basement lathes are able to be in that price range because of shortcuts that compromise quality. Alignment, durability, reliability, and repairability are all issues to consider.

Q: Why Do Kits from "ABC" Company Cost More Than the Kits from "XYZ" Company?

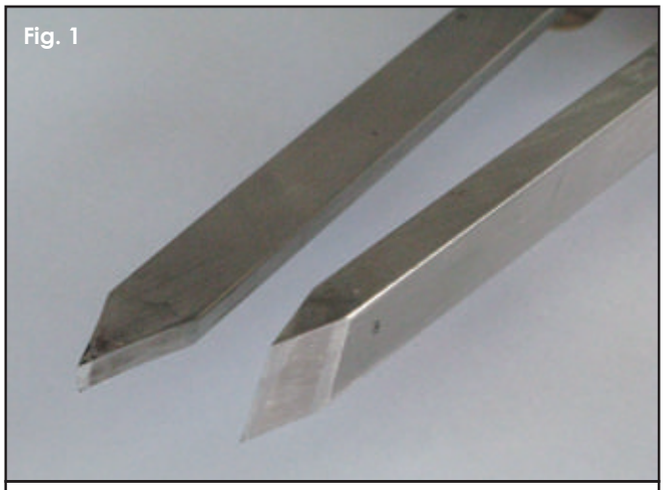
A: The difference in pricing of identical kits between retail outfits is a function of volume and markup. The caution here lies in the term identical. It is rare that you will find the same kit that is identical to another from two independent retailers. Most of the retailers buy from the big producers and offer kits that are similar, but usually privately labeled for them exclusively. Their volume and markup drives the retail price. Sometimes, the retailer buys from another party instead of going directly to the manufacturer. Add another tier of markup and it usually adds more to the end-user price. Some retailers have their own specifications for a product offered by the big kit producers. This can add or remove cost depending on their volume and what they are changing from the standard production unit. Tighter or looser tolerances, thicker or thinner plating, different resins, packaging, and component quality all enter into the cost equation.

Q: Why Are There So Many Different Prices for the Same Kits and What's the Difference Between This Plating and the Other Plating?

A: Aside from the differences between retailers and their line of offerings, there is often an array of products within the line of a retailer. It used to be the various levels of gold-plating—sort of the good, better, best mentality of retailing. Now it is the battle of the platings—gold, titanium nitriding, platinum, epoxy coating, and more. The best advice is to find a coating that is durable enough for your end user and then to be willing to pay for it. The very inexpensive kits have the least durable coatings. Though brass is expensive, gold is much more expensive even when measured in microns of thickness. Every additional step added in the process has to be paid for by someone. There have been many explanations as to the merits of each of the platings and undercoatings. A *Google* search will yield a wealth of information for more in-depth study of the various platings and processes available.

Q: What Tools Should I Buy for Penturning? Do I Need Miniature Tools or Can I Use Full-Size Woodturning Tools? Can I Use My Dad's Old Woodturning Tools? Will the Woodturning Tools I Bought at a Garage Sale Work?

A: There is no right answer to any of these questions. It really depends. You can make very nice pens with only one tool. Which tool? It almost doesn't matter. You can do nicely with a roughing gouge, spindle gouge, bowl gouge, skew chisel, continental gouge, or parting tool. Yes, I did say parting tool. A parting tool is really a skew chisel (see **Fig. 1**). With an 1/8" parting tool, you can rough blanks, turn blanks, and detail them—perhaps not for the begin-



A parting tool is just a skew chisel ground in a different orientation.

ner to try, but with a little experience it certainly will work nicely. I would suggest mastering one or two tools and forget loading up on a host of different tools. For years, I did all my penturning with an 1/8" parting tool and still use it on occasion.

Penturners are often newcomers to woodturning and they (much to the vendor's delight) believe that the tool is what produces the final result. Believe me when I tell you that there is no such thing as the "magic" tool; the magic is in the hands of the user, not in the tool. Give an old hand just about any tool—along with an opportunity to sharpen it—and he or she will produce a decent turning. Give a newbie a roomful of the finest tools and equipment, and he or she will still struggle to create a good result. Regardless of the source or the size, almost any woodturning tool of any generation can be successfully used for making pens. Focus more on the learning, and practice with the tool(s) much more than the brand, size, age, type, or coolness of the tool(s). Learning the fundamentals of woodturning will never be lost in the pursuit of penturning. The results will be quicker, better, and more repeatable as overall turning skills grow.

Q: I Love Penturning! How Can I Make a Living Doing This?

A: I am not aware of too many kit penmakers doing this as their "*pay the mortgage and feed the kids*" type of job. There may be a few, but probably not too many. In reality, they are the craft fair folks who do the circuit and usually offer a variety of turnings and crafts, including pens, in their product line. If you are going to crank out kits and expect to make a living at it, there are probably a few things to know. First, you are probably going to have a tough and Spartan life. Also, your love of the hobby, craft, or whatever term you use is going to fade fast. It is fun now, but when you have to really crank the work out, fast and cheap, your enjoyment will probably turn to drudgery. A retirement or hobby sideline is more probable, but hopefully you have paid for things and the pin money you'll make will be for fun things rather than necessities. Moving above the kit pens and into a niche market can be more lucrative. This entails custom parts, unique designs, and upscale markets. It is a pretty small market with not much room for a lot of makers. Can you make a living at it? Some are, but not too many.

Q: Where Can I Sell My Pens?

A: I guess the better question is where can't you sell your pens. Recently, my column was about selling your work. Take a look at that issue (*Woodturning Design* #24, Winter 2010), but in the interim, figure out your target market and where they will be able to see your product, and then get it in front of them. That could be hand-carrying it around at work or other gatherings of potential customers. It could be at the local or regional craft fairs. It might also be on the web or at retail stores. Marketing is part science, part art, part voodoo, and part luck. Mostly, it is hard work. Also, don't forget that your marketing costs (out of pocket and time) are just some of the costs that need to be captured and figured into your cost analysis, if you really want to understand your profit potential.

Q: My Pens Are as Good as Theirs. Why Do Theirs Sell for a Higher Price Than Mine?

A: This is a really difficult question, particularly without seeing the makers work side by side. Assuming you are selling in the same venue, is it presentation? The enjoyment of a meal begins with the sight and smell, and lastly with the taste. Are your pens presented appropriately? Do they entice the buyer? Does your presentation exude the upscaling of your work? These questions are long after the basic quality questions. Are the levels of workmanship and materials comparable? After the fit and finish are perfect, what makes yours any different than theirs? Are yours unique or the same as all the others? If there is a uniqueness, does that drive the price differential? I won't dwell on the salesmanship, but there are natural sellers and those who couldn't give water away in the desert. Your sales skills may be the answer alone. Obviously, differences in quality, components, presentation, venues, and sales skills all can be part or all of the answer (see **Fig. 2**).

From felt bags to custom stands, presentation not only helps attract the attention you would like your work to get, but helps set the stage for the pricing.

Q: What Is the Best Finish for My Pens?

A: In my opinion, the best finish is the toughest finish possible. A pen lives one of the hardest lives of any woodturning. It will be dropped, tossed around, left in the hottest or coldest of places, clanked with keys and coins, and worse. Even a pen that will live on an office desk in a penholder will be subject to hand oils and general wear and tear for many years. Most of the friction finishes go on fast and look wonderful, but they don't have the staying power necessary for the long haul. Most are comprised of shellac and wax.

For durability, I recommend two finishes. Pick one or the other depending on your mood. A cyanoacrylate adhesive (CA or superglue) finish is about as tough as they come. It is easy to apply and can be built up as desired. To learn how to apply a CA finish, review the tutorials posted on the Penmakers Guild at www.penmakersguild.com. An alternative to a CA adhesive finish is a lacquer finish. Regular rattle-can spray lacquer will do quite nicely. However, proper prep and application go a long way—thin and repeated coats will let you build a very pleasing and tough finish. Once mastered, either of these finishes will provide years of protection for your creations (see **Fig. 3**).

Q: How Do I Fix "Fill In the Blank"?

A: One of the common mistakes that I see is that a maker won't let go. They will have a flaw in the pen that was created somewhere in the process. Some can be fixed; others can't. Often a small crack can be repaired with CA glue. Pinholes in the finish can be repaired. Breakouts of small pieces of burl can be sanding dust and glue filled. There are a host of things that can be fixed, but is it worth it? If you are right at the end and it is something that can be repaired without being obvious or a ticking time bomb, go ahead and repair it. If you are out of that material or part, you are sometimes forced to make due. Perhaps there is no time to redo from the beginning, so the only option is a fix of some sort. Barring any of these situations, I almost always opt for the "redo" method. I want it right and if there is a question in my mind about the durability, reliability, or the quality of the finished product, I trash the part in trouble and begin again. Accept the fact that you will make mistakes. Don't have just one of a critical kit or component. Your time is far more valuable than just about any part, so don't waste time working on something that will be mediocre at best when you are done. Trash the problem and move on. In the long run, you'll be money ahead if you account for your time at it's true worth.

Another factor in your decision on a repair or redo is the target market. If you are making slimlines for the weekend craft fair, doing a repair on a pen is probably acceptable. If you are making a pen that will be sold in the high-end market, such as a pen show or an upscale gallery, repairs are probably out of the question. The quality level of a pen in this market is expected to be flawless and usually repairs aren't flawless.

Q: What Kind of Glue Should I Use to Glue In the Tubes?

A: Done properly, almost any adhesive will work (see **Fig. 4**). I know makers who use epoxy, CA, or polyurethane and swear by each. My own preference is for *Gorilla* brand polyurethane glue for bonding the tubes to the cladding material. I use this regardless of whether it is plastic, wood, metal, or other material. It is only my preference. I like the foaming, gap filling, and compliance of the finished glue. I plan ahead to have plenty of time to allow it to cure and usually have overnight at minimum. If I don't have that much time, I'll opt for medium CA. I don't think there is a wrong answer to this question. Use what you feel most comfortable with. All will work with the proper preparation and application. And once again, we are back to preferences. I know people who have never had a failure gluing directly to the tube with no scuffing of the brass to help provide a mechanical bond. Personally, I scuff every tube with abrasive paper. Ask three people and you'll probably get three different answers. I think it is okay to answer a question with "it doesn't matter."

Fig. 3

There are a host of finishes available for the penmaker, ranging from waxes to lacquers. With the tough life a pen faces, there is no such thing as too tough a finish.

Fig. 4

Properly used, almost any adhesive can be employed to bond the brass tubes to the pen barrel material, although most makers have their favorite.

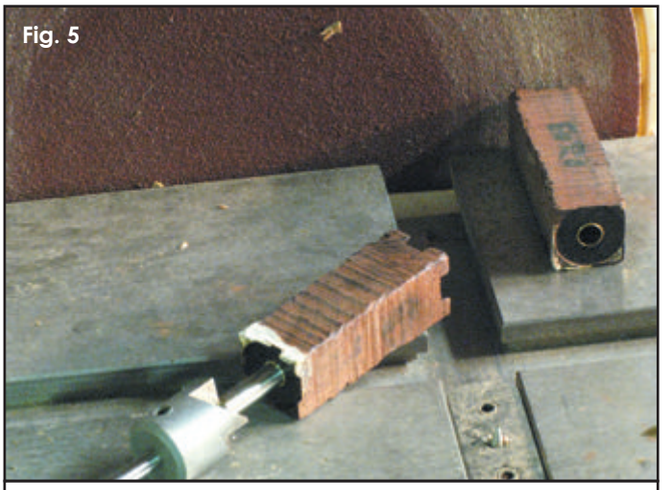


Fig. 5

Sanding the pen barrels on a disc sander without an alignment system yields less perpendicular facing results than a pen mill.

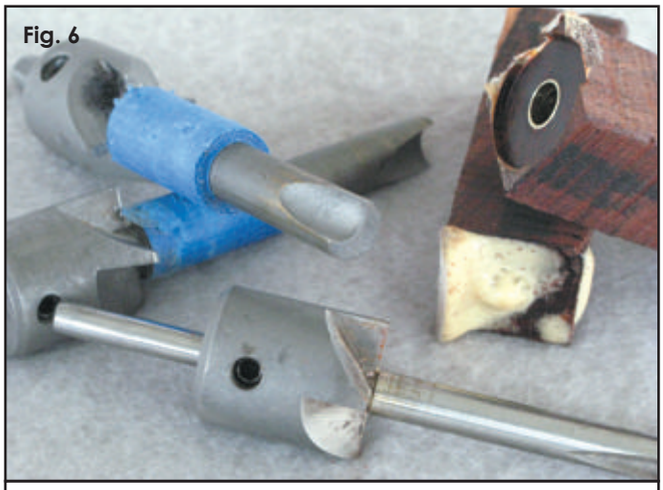


Fig. 6

A pen mill will pilot on the brass inner diameter, assuring that the faced end is perpendicular to the turning axis.

Q: Should I Use a Disc Sander or Pen Mill to Square the End of My Glued Tubes?

A: There are people in both camps (see **Fig. 5**). I know many penmakers who use a disc sander, with and without a squaring mechanism, to properly face the glued tube ends. I personally use a pen mill. A pen mill is a relatively low-cost tool and is easily kept sharp. Using it in a drill press works nicely for me, and it lets me control the amount of stock removed to provide a full brass tube wall thickness with a perpendicular wood surface flush to the tube end.

Most detractors of the pen mill cite the number of fittings required to pilot properly on different tube diameters. Actually, a few wraps of painter's tape work as well as the extra pilot parts, so you have the infinitely flexible pen mill by having a 7 mm mill and a roll of masking tape (see **Fig. 6**). You can be content that either the pen mill or disc sander method will work well, once mastered. Pick one and be comfortable with it.

Q: Additional Questions?

A: I always try to answer questions posed to me by e-mail with a prompt reply directly to the sender. Feel free to e-mail your pen-related questions to me at kurt@kurthertzog.com. I'll give you a response, but I will also share those questions and answers with our readers here on a periodic basis.

Kurt Hertzog

Kurt Hertzog is a professional woodturner who enjoys everything from making his own turning tools to photographing his finished turnings. A frequent demonstrator and instructor on many facets of woodturning, he particularly enjoys teaching tool sharpening, work-holding, and advanced penmaking.

Kurt is a regular feature columnist for *Woodturning Design* magazine and one of the five Council Members of the Pen Makers Guild. He was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the American Association of Woodturners. His woodworking interests also include flatwork, and he is a past chairman of the Rochester Woodworkers Society.

Kurt's work can be seen at www.kurthertzog.com, as well as www.penmakersguild.com. You can contact him at kurt@kurthertzog.com.