

The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

Growing Your “Penmanship”

I am often asked by up-and-coming penturners what they can do to accomplish that next big leap in their penmaking skills—“what can I do to make my own mark” or “how can I become more recognized as an accomplished penturner?” Though I don’t profess to have the answers to these questions, I certainly have some suggestions that I think will help to achieve those goals. By the way, even though I write this column under the banner of penmaking, you may find that most of the suggestions will be applicable to other styles of turning as well.

BRANCH OUT INTO OTHER DESIGNS AND MATERIALS

Getting into a comfortable area and staying there limits your skill building. Therefore, if you have mastered a favorite material or you can make kit-style “XYZ” blindfolded, I recommend striking out for new territory (see **Fig. 1**). Even if you have no long-term interest in working with new material or style, forcing yourself out of your comfort zone and learning how to use new materials—and ultimately mastering new styles—will add to your skill set. Changing materials will force you into different cutting, sanding, and finishing methods. Changes in kit styles will teach you new design and process techniques (see **Fig. 2**). That growth will ultimately give you the talent that lets you go to the next level.



Fig. 1

Now what? Repeating this style forever is production with little growth potential.



Fig. 2

“Branching out” can include many things.



Fig. 3

Create a low-cost method of practicing your processes.

PERFECT YOUR PROCESSES AND TECHNIQUES

Even though I’ve suggested that you branch out, I still suggest that you perfect your processes and techniques regardless of the material and design. Your cutting technique requires a light touch and sharp tools, and these are good skills to master regardless of the end goal. Sanding and finishing should be a repeatable and perfect process; you shouldn’t have success one time and failure another, because true mastery is demonstrated by repeatable, on-demand, perfect results. Figure out where you need improvement and practice until you get it right all the time. Don’t be afraid to make practice pieces—something that isn’t a pen, but just a method to repeat something over and over again. **Fig. 3** shows a finishing stick with various finishes. Do a batch of them and compare them side by side to see the variation between “identical” segments from stick to stick.

FAIL! LEARN FROM THE “REACH”

If you don’t have a box with failures around the shop somewhere, you probably aren’t trying anything new and stretching yourself. Think about it. If everything you try is successful, what reach did you make and what did you learn? Try things differently, not with the intention of failing, but with the intention of doing things better, faster, easier, more accurately, more uniformly, or just plain differently.

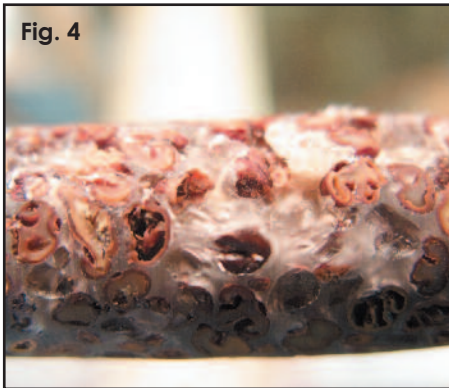


Fig. 4

Here is a failed experiment using grape seeds as a filler for polyester resin. The seeds cut well, but are too porous and don't bond extremely well to the resin.



Fig. 5

Turning something different will expose you to various techniques and processes.



Fig. 6

Even if you have no intention of making many pierced eggshell ornaments, can you see where mastering a bit of delicate finial turning will add to your sharpening skills, tool control, and work-holding skills?

Learn to use every tool in your kit. If you always use the spindle gouge, try the skew or parting tool or roughing gouge. I assure you that any of these tools will make just about any pen you wish once you are the master of that tool. Sure, you can get good with just one tool, but doesn't having the skills to use any tool in the box give you new-found skill sets? Experiment with the materials (see Fig. 4). "What if" is a great question to ask yourself. From every failure, you should learn something and that knowledge is valuable as your capabilities grow.

LEARN TO TURN OTHER THINGS

If you are only interested in turning pens, why would you want to turn bowls? I'd suggest that the more turning skills you acquire, the better off you are for two important reasons. Penturning is a bit of a misnomer because there is very little turning required to make a pen; in fact, a parting tool can and will do all that is needed quite nicely. Many penturners aren't too familiar with rubbing the bevel, or creating and using sharp tools; pursuing other types of turning will help you learn and refine these skills much faster than penturning will. Bringing those skills to your penturning will improve the final product and probably enhance the enjoyment of getting there. Also, you may find that there is a big world of woodturning out there. Turn a bowl or two, and you may find that you enjoy it (see Fig. 5). If bowl turning isn't of interest, turn ornaments, baseball bats, fishing lures, or whatever mildly interests you. Again, you'll learn by using different materials, tools, work-holding techniques, prep for finish, and finishes—anything that may be a bit different and remove you from your comfort zone. Skills that you develop will add to your bag of tricks as you progress down the path of both penturning and woodturning (see Fig. 6). I believe that every skill that is refined and perfected will add value to whatever you turn.

ASPIRE TO ACHIEVEMENT VS. ACCEPTANCE

Woodturners, and penturners in particular, are a notoriously solitary lot. They may post a few pictures on the web, but

for the most part, they live a pretty sheltered life from competitive and critical pressures. If you never show your pens to anyone but your significant other and a few "customers" at work, how will you ever know how good you are, or aren't? In your own vacuum, you are the best there is. Branch out and seek constructive criticism. Strive for acceptance among your peers, but also stick your neck out and see how good you really are. Not for the sake of being a peacock, but for the sake of learning where you can improve.

There are many groups, formal and not, real and virtual, where you can show your wares and get a sense of where you stand. A local woodturning chapter is a good place to start. An Internet group isn't quite the same, because photos lie. People will not be able to judge your work from a photo as well as they can in person with the pen in their hand. Fit and finishes can't be faked well in person.

What about shows or entering competitions (see Fig. 7)? Not to be done for the prize or ribbon, but to see how you really stack up against others. Though there are many groups you can join that will give you a great deal of oohs and aahs, accolades don't do anything much but stroke your ego and don't really add much in the way



Fig. 7

Juried shows or high-end pen shows will show where you stand with respect to your peers.

of critical feedback that you can use to improve yourself. For example: Can you accept critical suggestions for improvement? If so, have you asked for a critique from



Fig. 8

Show your work along with the work of people you admire or aspire to be.



Fig. 9

Visit a glass museum, art gallery, or some other craft venue. The ideas that will come from those visits can give you fresh inspiration to apply to your work.



Fig. 10

A craft fair is a great place for ideas.

someone you think has achieved a higher level than you? Have you applied to enter a juried show? (I mean a real juried show—not the “mail your check and you’re in” kind of setup.) Have you applied to be a member of a juried guild? Getting critical evaluation is a valuable asset to you if you genuinely want to improve your skills. Just be prepared to cope with the criticism if you ask for it.

An instant gallery display of your work at woodturning symposiums will get you into the audience of your peers (see Fig. 8). But even when you are better than others, don’t rest on your laurels; driven by your own need to excel, move forward and let the others try to catch up.

LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR INSPIRATION AND HELP

There are few truly new designs, shapes, or ideas in the woodturning world; you only need look through a book of pottery from the Greeks, Romans, or Chinese. Sure, there are adaptations and new spins on ideas, but there is very little that hasn’t been explored before. To help you break

out of any self-imposed rut, look to others for inspiration. Look to the potters, jewelers, glassmakers, and others for shapes, colors, textures, or other ideas. Even if you are a dyed-in-the-wool penturner and have little use for the round and brown bowl-turning world, much can be learned from other crafts (see Fig. 9).

If nothing else, it should give you a new appreciation for balance, proportion, and color complements or contrasts. You’ll often find ways to incorporate inspiration from these other crafts into your turning—pens or otherwise. Don’t be afraid to look in the most unusual places; often, you’ll find inspirational gems where you least expect them (see Fig. 10).

One of the most underutilized inspirational opportunities, in my opinion, is collaboration. No one has all the answers or all the best ideas, and sharing ideas and collaborating with another turner—or better yet, an artist from a different discipline—can produce exceptional results. Capitalize on another person’s expertise to supple-



Fig. 11

Someone else’s abilities can help you in areas where you may be weaker; my daughter helps her color-challenged father make some coloring decisions.



Fig. 12

This pen and stand collaboration was done with Binh Pho as a fund-raising donation to the Educational Opportunity Grant program for the AAW in Hartford.

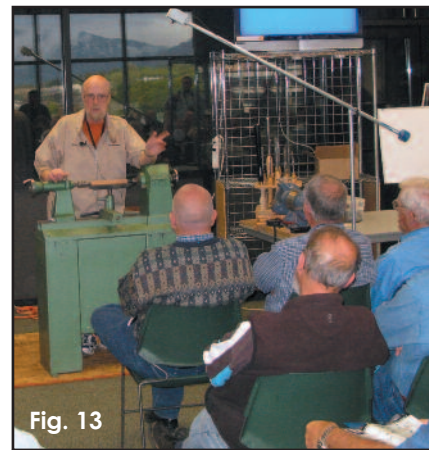


Fig. 13

Demonstrating and teaching forces you to really be on top of your game.

ment one of your weaker areas (see Fig. 11). Collaborate just for the sake of collaboration. Work with someone who doesn't do what you do, but can add some other aspect to the project. Playing off each other's strengths can produce some very interesting results and certainly opens new horizons just because of the interchange (see Fig. 12).

TEACH OTHERS

One of the most enjoyable aspects of woodturning is sharing the joy with others. Woodturners (and penturners) are very open and willing to share their talents with others who are trying to learn and improve. I've found that the ability to turn is only part of the skill required to teach. You need to refine your skills until they become second nature, and you must be able to explain why things are just so. Your personal level of understanding goes way up when you expect to show, teach, and explain to others, particularly when you need to field their many questions and to help them over any potential pitfalls (see Fig. 13). Not only can teaching and demonstrating encourage you to perfect your own skills, but it can also be one of the most rewarding aspects of the craft; the joy of sharing with others is as good as it gets. Young or old, newcomer or experienced, the "aha! I got it" moments that your students experience are almost indescribable (see Fig. 14).

Fig. 14

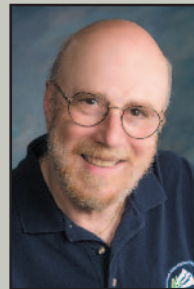


One of my most enjoyable teaching experiences was the first penturning workshop ever held at Arrowmont. Not only was it a weeklong teaching opportunity for me, but I also had my first blind student. We both learned a great deal that week.

STUDY WITH A "MASTER"

Regardless of your skills, there are probably those from whom you can learn. Make it a habit to set aside time and money to attend classes with a "master." Whatever your primary area of interest, there is certainly a school, a seminar, a demonstration, or another type of learning experience in which you can participate and move your skills to a higher level.

I make it a point to spend at least a week each year studying with a professional turner. I find that the learning environment is not only a great way to improve my skills, but also a great way to improve my teaching techniques. Watching the delivery, question-and-answer techniques, pace, visual aids, demonstration, practice, and reinforcement techniques of another teacher help me to improve my own classes. I see what works well with me as a student and I try to incorporate that into my own teaching if I believe it is more successful than my current method. If you think you have nothing left to learn, you are sadly mistaken. The joy of woodturning is that there is no end point; it is a continuous journey and the trip is the reward.



Kurt Hertzog

A professional woodturner, demonstrator, and teacher, Kurt Hertzog enjoys the continuum of woodturning, from making his own turning tools to photographing his finished turnings.

Kurt is a regular feature columnist for *Woodturning Design* magazine, one of the five Council Members of the Pen Makers Guild, and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Woodturners.

Kurt's work has been featured in the American Association of Woodturners "Rounding the Corners" Exhibit, and he has been published in *Woodturning Design*, *American Woodturner*, *Pen World*, and *Stylus* magazines. You can see his work on www.kurthertzog.com.

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