



AS THE PEN TURNS

Kurt Hertzog

BY SUSAN BOWEN

Spring 2009 was colder and rainier than usual in Rochester, N.Y. As Memorial Day approached, the weather finally turned balmy. When I visited pen artisan Kurt Hertzog that weekend at his home in suburban Henrietta, he was in his backyard fine-tuning a new pen. He brought me into his workshop, a converted enclosed back porch overlooking a spacious yard dotted with lush, green willow trees. A metal pen shaped like a pistol was on his work table. It was the latest submission from an amateur penmaker hoping to be admitted to the Pen Makers Guild, an organization reminiscent of the medieval guilds that was established in 2003 to advance the art and skill of penturning.

“This pistol pen is an awesome piece in regard to its fine machining and the way it operates with magnets,”

explains Hertzog, a retired automotive engineer. He pulled the trigger, which disengaged the handle to expose a ball-point pen. “This is a unique idea which is very well executed.”

Hertzog is one of five Guild council members who judge the submissions of new applicants to the Guild. It was his turn to receive the submission, photograph and evaluate the sample and forward the information to fellow council members Richard Kleinhenz, Mike Roux, Pat Lawson and Jay Pickens, who vote on membership. Council members look for perfection in fit and finish, along with novel applications in materials, construction and design. I later learned that the maker of the pistol pen was welcomed into the fellowship of about ninety members worldwide.

Hertzog showed me samples of his craftsmanship on display in his family

room. In addition to pens, he had a selection of beautifully turned bowls, vases, platters, salt and pepper mills and lidded containers—many with unusual shapes—as well as novel ink and pen stands. He has an amazing collection of delicate pierced ornaments composed of wood or eggshell. The intricate lace-like designs are cut out with a dental drill.

Hertzog has fun with his pens—like the pair he named Jekyll and Hyde, a glittery pen with fanciful twists and turns partnered with a stately blackwood pen with a graceful pointed dome crown. His favorite woods are cherry, because of its flexibility, and African blackwood, because of its density and subtle grain patterns. In addition to woods, Hertzog likes to experiment with a variety of materials in the composition of his pens. He mixes polymer resins with household



items such as dyed rice, coffee grounds, colored toothpicks, egg shells, glitter and even tassels from his daughter's cheerleading pompom.

To feed his inner engineer, Hertzog enjoys finding solutions to challenges and devising more effective methodologies for his woodturning creations. For pens, he typically uses a short, stainless steel mandrel on his wood lathe. "This method of fastening the pen as it is being created on the lathe gives the maker great flexibility and freedom during the turning and decorating process," he explains.

Hertzog usually doesn't sell his work, preferring woodturning for his own personal enjoyment and the learning experience it provides. Being an active woodturner himself also keeps his skills in top form, the better to teach others the fundamentals. He

writes for various woodturning journals, including a regular column in *Woodturning Design* titled "The Journey from Penturning to Penmaking."

Hertzog began teaching classes about eight years ago to help others experience the same joy he derives from woodturning. He's always learning from his students, whether it's a technique they learned elsewhere or created for themselves. Most of his classes take place at the Woodcraft Store in West Seneca, N.Y., and Lee Valley in Burlington, Ontario. He also teaches at the Annual Penturners' Rendezvous in Provo, Utah, and has lectured at Buffalo State University and at the annual meeting of the American Association of Woodturners.

"I set out to demystify what at first appears to be an extremely difficult challenge," he explains. "It's an

incredible feeling to see a student light up once he or she has mastered the fundamentals and discovers how easy it really is. Woodturning is a straightforward process built on a few fundamentals. Once you have mastered those, your horizons are limitless. Woodturning is a journey with no end. Regardless of where you are with this journey, there is always more to be learned and mastered. It's not the tools but the magic in your hands and heart that makes penturning such a fascinating journey."

For more information, visit kurthertzog.com and penmakersguild.com.



clockwise—Egg ornament on a wood base; Jekyll and Hyde pens with wooden pen holder; wooden pen embellished with metal.

opposite—The penmaker with a student and with his daughter, Kelly, who offers a youthful perspective on color and design choices; a colorful ballpoint.