

Improving your turning photos

Kurt Hertzog provides a comprehensive guide to photographing your turnings, which will ensure that your work looks as good as it possibly can

Rare is the turner who doesn't capture a photo of their special turning. It can be to show around to those who won't get to see it in person, or perhaps it gets sold, shipped away or the audience is many miles away and an email with the photo is their only chance to see it. Other times it is for more demanding purposes. Many times capturing the image is done under less than ideal conditions. If your work is truly a treasure and your photographic skills are less than it deserves, then by all means seek out a professional

who can do it justice. Particularly if the end goal of the image is for an extremely important purpose. For those not in that need or wherewithall to pay a professional for their services, I'll dedicate this issue to bettering your photos with minimal expense. I can't teach you the fundamentals of photography here but can certainly point out some of the very common pitfalls many of you may experience. This article will cover the simple things you can do to help yourself improve your results with whatever equipment you have available.

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WHO ARE YOU SHOOTING FOR?

There are many questions that will drive your time and efforts on taking photos of your work. The first question that should be answered is 'what are you shooting the photo for?' That answer will often dictate how much effort and time you commit and even whether you do it yourself. Your planned photo audience can be as varied as yourself, your friends and family, your club newsletter/website, a jury for event entry, potential customers, a gallery, or publication.

There are certainly some others that could be added. Capturing just a remembrance for yourself or a simple snapshot to email to your family and friends will likely be far less demanding than sending the photos in to a magazine for publication. The size, composition, lighting, editing, and more will hinge on the end user needs. If you are submitting for jurying, they will dictate size and file format. Obviously you'll put your best foot forward since your image will get

only seconds of attention without second chance. Publications will also usually specify the details of the images prior to submission. Even though they have an art and production department with capabilities to put your image(s) into shape, they can't work miracles and the better the start, the better the finish. Regardless of the end goal, let's tick through the simple things you can do that will help your photos to look better without incurring much extra time or cost.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT?

There are many things that make or break a photograph. Rarely is it the photographic equipment. More often, it is the inattention to the most basic details. The lighting, subject distractions, size of the subject, focus, camera position, and other easily controlled details will be the downfall. There is a host of things that come into the final result that don't revolve one bit around the cost or level of equipment used to take the image. That said, a top-end full-frame Nikon or Canon camera is capable of a better result than the bargain brand camera phone. But like turning tools, the magic isn't in the tool – it is in the skills of the operator. Let's take each of these simple items that you can attend to without talking about the camera you intend to use. Be aware that the acronym 'WYSIWYG' doesn't hold true with photography. More accurate is what you see isn't exactly what you get. Your eye and brain not only interpret what the scene is but also have a far greater range than your camera. We'll use only what we see as our guide for our setup, but be aware that the camera captures something different than what you think you see.



You can capture quality images with virtually any modern camera from the very expensive DSLR to the common camera phone. There is no magic in the hardware rather the attention to detail of the operator

LIGHTING

Let's think about the lighting without talking about white balance, colour temperature, mixed lighting, or any of the technical information. If you can move the turning, take it to a spot with sufficient lighting whether already available there or can be brought to bear. For the most part, you can rarely have trouble with too much light. The quality and direction of the light will matter greatly but the amount would rather be too much than too little. The gentler the light, the better it is for the photo. Direct sunlight casting harsh shadows won't do your turning photograph any favours. If you are using daylight, locate the turning in the shade out of direct sunlight. A cloudy day with diffuse lighting is desirable but not always possible. An interior location, turning located out of the



For natural light photography, an overcast day provides the most beautiful diffuse lighting. Flooding into a room and bouncing all around wraps around your subject providing soft and complimentary lighting



Added light could be garage work lights, lighting tables, sewing lamps, or simply compact fluorescent lamps in a Chinese lantern to diffuse the light. Harsh lighting can be bounced from a wall or white foam core board onto the subject to soften it

LIGHTING (CONT.)

direct sun, with lighting through the windows that bounces all around the room works nicely. If you need to supplement the light or have no sunlight, then task lighting can be used. The same holds true if you can't relocate the turning to a different location. If the existing lighting whether daylight or artificial isn't getting the job done, add additional lighting as needed. Remember that the light cast directly from a lamp can cast as harsh a shadow as the sun bearing down. It is far better to shine the harsh light on a wall and let the light bounce back to illuminate the turning than point the light directly at the subject. Don't be afraid to substitute something for the wall if needed. Pieces of white foam core board from the craft store placed properly will not only bounce the light more softly back to the turning, but can also direct it as needed for filling any shadowed areas.

SUBJECT DISTRACTIONS

When you think of attention grabbers, what comes to mind? A red sports car certainly gathers more attention than a grey hatch-back. If your turning is supposed to be the most important feature of your photo, why would you put it in competition with anything else? If you think of setting the stage and you set your prize turning on a table with a multi-coloured tablecloth or a distracting background, what do you think the audience will be keyed in on? If you can place your turning anywhere and on anything, pick a spot with the least



A bowl lit with a few compact fluorescent lamps in Chinese lanterns from overhead. Notice the foam core scraps propped up to bounce the light underneath the rim, which will illuminate what would otherwise be an unacceptable shadow



Not really a 'finished' image but you can see the three sources of light reflected in the upper part of the bowl. The point of the image is to illustrate the bounced light from the foam core bounce cards on the under portion, making it viewable



Try not to have your foreground or background compete with your turning for attention. Plain is good as is a colour that won't interfere with your camera's metering values. Blue is notorious for being unflattering to wood colours



You aren't forced to use grey. Pick any colour that suits you. A trip to the fabric store will give you a host of solid colours to pick from as well as various naps. Blacks, whites, varying greys and sometimes other colours will suit your needs

The same subject in the same situation with only the cloth changed. The distractions now removed let you focus in on the features of the turning rather than your eye being attracted around the frame by competing colours and designs

◀ SUBJECT DISTRACTIONS (CONT.)

intrusive backdrop. Control your foreground and background with something that doesn't compete, either in interest or colour, if possible. If needed, a plain cloth, preferably in a neutral colour, such as grey, draped under and behind the turning can mask distracting items and help to make your turning the centre of attention. The plain nature of the cloth doesn't draw attention and the grey colour doesn't help to fool the exposure light

meter in your camera. Regardless of the camera you are using from the least expensive phone camera to the highest end DSLR, they all use a light meter to either indicate or control the actual exposure. Don't be afraid to roll that grey cloth up and take it with you to show your turnings at the club meeting. Your turning(s) will show much better on a neutral grey cloth than they will on the tables or wooden benches. Will other solid colours

SIZE OF SUBJECT

If your turning is the star of the show, why not fill the frame of your photo with the star? One of the best suggestions I can give you is to fill the frame. Get as close as you can, physically or optically, and allow the bulk of the photo area to be filled with your turning. You may have limitations based on your

equipment, in terms of how close you can get and still focus but don't let your turning be just one of the things in your photo. Make it the centrepiece of your photo. You should have a bit of border so the photo has some breathing space, but there should never be any doubt as to what you are showing. Make certain that it



work instead of grey? Yes, but depending on the colour, it may clash with the look of the wood as well as potentially interfering with the meter reading. Most famously, blue will be a troublesome colour for a background of a woodturning, often casting a funny tint on the look of the wood.

has the benefit of being pleasingly large. If you have some special detail on the turning that requires additional shots, take those in addition to the overall shot. The close-ups of the special interest areas can then be showcased within the framework of the entire turning.

The difference between something in the frame and something 'filling' the frame can be dramatic. Move as you need to allowing you to get the largest image you can within any focusing limitations your equipment might have



Not only does filling the frame make the turning far easier to appreciate, but it also provides more to work with should you need it for other purposes. Enlarging an image from something small usually provides dismal results



FOCUS

Poor focus or blur might be the most common flaws seen in turning photos. There can be several reasons for these and these are usually caused by the issues discussed on the previous pages. Insufficient light may force the shutter speed to be slow enough to cause movement or shake blur. If not that, it can be just poor autofocus function based on the lack of light. Your background can help cause focus problems based on fooling the exposure meter or not providing enough contrast to let the autofocus work properly. Turnings are notorious for

being autofocus problems based on their shapes and lack of contrasting edges. Filling the frame, while admirable, sometimes gets you too close for the ability of the camera to focus. Working through the suggestions above will usually remedy these issues from a focus perspective. With those addressed, the other focus problem can be you. For the best quality shot, getting you out of the handholding is directionally correct. With sufficient light and appropriate camera settings, handholding might not be an issue. However, the more you prevent any camera movement, the less likely

you'll have focus problems, especially in less than ideal photographic situations. If you have and can use a tripod, do so. If you don't own one, there are a myriad of ways to fake it and get the benefits ranging from a beanbag to clamps and other contraptions. Unable to do that, brace yourself against something whether it is a wall, table, another person, or similar. There are more suggestions such as use of the self-timer that can aid during hands-off methods, but those get more into hardware and are therefore more complicated.



Plenty of light will always help. Notice my CFLs in the Chinese lanterns to soften the light. Plain grey seamless background, camera up close enough to fill the frame, on a tripod head. It seems like most of the common pitfalls have now been removed



Even using your camera phone can benefit from following the suggestions. My phone, like most, doesn't have a tripod mount. My high-tech solution of a couple of clamps and a stick of wood solves the problem



A quality photographic result can be had by paying attention to these few pointers. A photo of some pen blanks being glued up after being cut from some spectacular South African olive burl



Tripods come in all sizes, shapes and costs. If you don't own one, you can accomplish the same effect by using a bean bag or similar. A pocket point-and-shoot camera perched on a plastic bag filled with rice will work just as nicely

CAMERA POSITION

One of the hardest things to explain is the importance of camera position. Depending on your photographic situation, including turning size, shape, material, contrasts, photographic location, lighting, and more, your camera position will have the final say as to the end result of the photo. Perspective alone will make your turning squat and ugly instead of the

proportioned beauty you believe it to be. Patterns in your turning, whether materials or shape, interact with camera position and can impact on the aesthetics of the final image. Lighting will interact immensely with camera position. The use of additional lights and/or bounce cards will fill shadows and give shapes additional definition. If your turning lends itself to a certain display position, i.e.

a mantelpiece or above the kitchen cabinets, photograph the turning from the same relative position. Its lighting and overall perspective will therefore be shown accordingly. When you need to explain why a photo doesn't do the turning justice, you probably could have done a better job of prepping for and taking the image. However, following the pointers in this article will help you.

TECHNICAL

CAMERA POSITION (CONT.)

Depending on the camera angle, the character of the turning can be impacted. This pen and stand viewed from this angle is far less pleasing than what I had intended. To my eye, the desired gracefulness is missing and it looks squat

The same image with only the camera angle adjusted very slightly makes for a totally different look. The proportions are far more pleasing to my eye and I believe more graceful looking. Both the pen and base have a different aesthetic



OTHER SUGGESTIONS

In the days of film, every time you snapped the shutter you spent some money. Film, processing and prints not only took time to provide feedback to you, but also cost you money whether the results were useful or not. Today, taking photos really only takes time once you own the camera. You have the benefit of immediate feedback and virtually zero out of pocket additional costs for images. If you can control the lighting, background and situation, set things up to make your photo the best it can be within your capabilities, equipment and time. If you're not certain of the best lighting, then get some images and try some different lighting. Get more images and try again if needed. Experiment with not only the lighting but also the camera position and the background. If you can't control the situation, make the best of things. Moving as needed if changing position improves your lighting or background. Control what you can and make the best of what you are forced to accept. Take plenty of photos. The 'spray and pray' method, while used derogatorily for the most part by the snootier photographers, will pay dividends. Your image review on the back of the camera or phone will give you some indication of your success. Nothing will tell you the real results until you put it on the big screen. Every lacking item from

composition to the lighting to the focus and more will scream out about any and all flaws. With enough images you can often find something acceptable. You've noticed we didn't delve into custom white balance, RAW vs jpg

formats, ISO, shutter speed, depth of field, focal lengths, speedlights, photo editing and the host of technical issues you can spend a lifetime learning. The technical aspects of our topic were intentionally left out.



In many situations, you won't have control over the lighting, background or access. Lighting can't be helped much but changing position would have helped remove the turnings and people in view behind the subject



If your image is worth capturing, it is worth capturing several with the thought that minor changes in lighting, composition, focus, and camera position will make a difference. What you see on the back of the camera isn't always what the final result turns out to be

CONCLUSION

Are all of these suggestions presented really only simple common sense? Certainly they are. You'll hardly believe how uncommonly they are practised. Every one of these suggestions for better photos will help improve everything you take photos of. Your snaps of someone else's work on display somewhere, some bragging photos of your latest masterpiece, or images to illustrate the article you are writing, will all be improved by paying attention to these suggestions. Can you dig deeper into improving your photos?

Of course you can. There is a huge photographic world of cameras, lenses, lighting, modifiers, photo editing software and a host of other accessories to be explored. You can spend a lifetime learning about it. A good start might be your manual whether it be for your camera or your phone. These contain a wealth of information, as well as magazines, books and the Internet. But beware, the photographic bug is much like the woodturning bug! ●

Every one of these common sense suggestions can help improve all of your photo results

