

# Alterations after turning

Kurt Hertzog explores some different methods of adding decoration after turning

## KURT HERTZOG



Kurt is a professional woodturner, demonstrator and teacher and writes for various woodturning and woodworking publications in the United States as well as contributing to *Woodturning* magazine. He is on the Pen Makers' Guild Council and is currently president of the American Association of Woodturners (AAW).

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Taking your nearly completed piece and intentionally altering it may seem like heresy. Carving, piercing, painting, pyrography, distressing or other after-turning alterations may seem like degradation after you've taken the time and trouble to make it flawless. With beautiful wood, you can create a simple turning allowing the beauty of the wood to speak for itself. However plain,

boring woods can usually benefit from a little help. Past articles have touched on painting, piercing, inlaying and other after-turning ideas. This month we'll explore carving, pyrographing and minor distressing. These are just a few additional things you can do to add a bit of interest. While there are artists who have taken these techniques to a pinnacle rarely reached by the rest of us, my goal is to plant the seeds of simple things with which you can begin to experiment. Like most woodturning, there are tools that can be bought to ease the tasks but we'll focus on the simple tools yet show some of the available tools.

## Safety

In addition to the usual cautions about eye protection and PPE as needed whenever you are in the shop, please take special care with the tools suggested for these modifications. Carving tools need to be incredibly sharp to be effective, so using a carving glove as appropriate is a wise idea regardless of your workholding method. A slip with a carving



Carver's gloves from Kevlar protect your hands from sharp carving tools. A welder's glove may be helpful when using a torch

tool is always a possibility so protect yourself from any mishap. For our pyrography, especially with a torch, use caution where you perform this. Be certain you do this in an appropriate place and keep an extinguisher handy. Protect yourself as needed against the potential for burns. Working in a safe environment that is clean and fire safe and taking care with these hot items is paramount. The burning materials should always be done with plenty of ventilation to avoid breathing the vapours.

## Key points

- Use woodburners and torches in a well-ventilated, fire safe, clear area.
- Avoid breathing the vapours of burning
- Protect your hands with PPE when using sharp tools or heat.

## Marking your turning



A blunted, soft lead pencil along with your indexing head will help with marking out pattern spacing



A good artist's eraser can remove layout lines provided you haven't indented the wood fibres

You can work in a totally random manner if you wish. On occasion, it can be a very attractive solution. More often, a carved or pyrographed pattern in a selected area offers interest and imparts that 'handcrafted' feeling. While you'll try to make things fit the pattern, the minor variations that are almost impossible to avoid lend to the 'done by hand' impression. Laying out your pattern or design ahead of time is a good idea.

Pencilling in your plan will let you see how best it will work and lets you make mistakes that are reversible. I use the indexing head on my lathe and a pencil laying on the toolrest to mark out my plans. Until I'm content with the plan, an eraser is all that is needed to get back to ground zero.

Most of us don't have the capability to create artistic patterns freehand. If you do, good for you, but I find I need to layout or trace my plans onto the turning. If it is a simple fluting or rotationally laid out pattern, I use the indexing head on my lathe as an aid. Locking the turning at the various angles

of rotation, I can mark the turning using the toolrest. *Woodturning* 267, June 2014, has a wealth of information on using the lathe as a marking aid along with methods of layout if your lathe isn't equipped with an indexing head. Even with a regular pattern, you have the opportunity to vary it slightly to make it less perfect. You can also use flexible protractors, compasses and printed patterns to aid with your pattern creation and application to the work. My preferred marking device is a dull, soft pencil. I want to place markings that can be seen but don't make any indentations on the wood. That allows for erasure of the marks should I change my mind, not use all of the marks, or remove marks when done. A soft artist's pencil works great. You can sharpen it to a point and then round it on a bit of sandpaper. If you wish to draw or trace a pattern or design on the wood, Saral paper, used by artists, works extremely well. It is a graphite paper that will leave a visible design yet can be removed if needed. Should you wish to use

a more exotic pattern and have a photocopy or computer printed version, attach it to the surface using rubber cement. You'll need to relieve the paper pattern with slits to allow for attachment to a curved surface. You can cut or burn right through this attached pattern. An alternative idea is to attach the pattern to some Saral paper and then trace the pattern allowing the paper to impart the graphite to the surface.

### Key points

- Use a dull point, whether pencil or rubbing device, to mark the wood.
- Do not use carbon paper! It is difficult to remove should you change.
- Use artist's Saral paper for tracing patterns. It is expensive but reusable.
- The internet is a huge source of designs and design ideas.
- Scaling of designs/patterns can be done via the computer or photocopier.
- Keep the wood clean by wearing clean gloves if necessary.

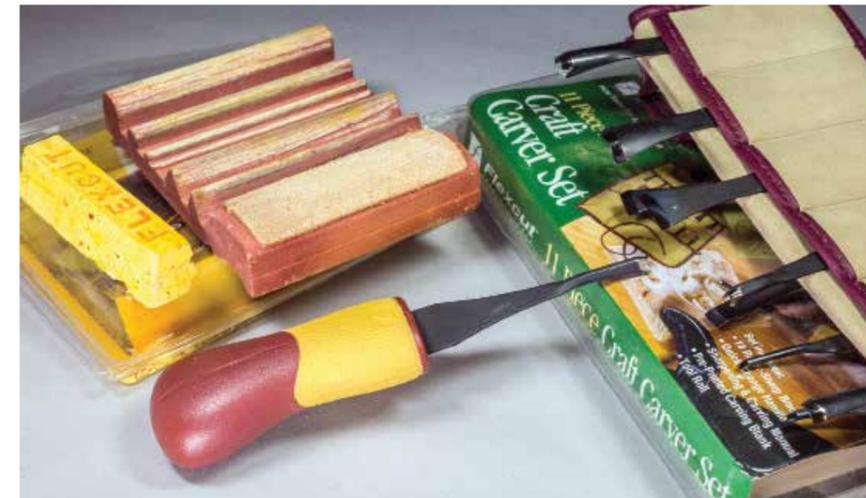
## Carving accent patterns

When I'm happy with the plan, I use the lathe as my workholder and begin my carving. A suggestion that I'll offer is to do the carving in stages. Rather than commit to any regular pattern density, I begin by skipping the marks in an organised manner to see the effect before getting too dense. I can go back and execute the skipped marks if it seems to work better. I also make my carved depths very shallow to begin with. I can always return to make them deeper when needed. If you begin with things being carved too deeply, you have no way to regroup.

Your selection of carving tools can range from the inexpensive palm carving tools to the very high end carving tools. Properly sharpened and presented, they will all get the job done. In addition to hand tools, there are power carvers



If properly sharpened, carving tools from the most modest to the highest end will work



Very capable carving tools and sharpening systems are available at modest cost

available that will accept a variety of different carving cutters. These can be either purpose built or the special handpieces that will work when attached to a rotary tool flex shaft. In between both extremes is the hand-held chisel and mallet type approach. Wherever you find yourself on this continuum, you can take this adornment to the extreme you wish – from shallow sculpting to 3D relief scenes, all options are available to you. You may find that white gloves are helpful should you become

extensively involved with carving. These clean room or photo style gloves are very modestly priced and will keep you from soiling your wood. Once the surface of the wood has been dirtied with dirt and oils from your hands, it is very difficult to remove and is very unsightly.

### Key points

- Use sharp tools for better looking results and safer operation.
- Care in selection of carving direction based



Exercise care when carving and use PPE. I make shallow cuts then deepen as desired

- on grain orientation will pay dividends.
- Use an indexing head or drafting tools to aid your layout.
- Begin with shallow depth cuts to deepen later as desired.
- Don't worry about layout marks. Erase them when done.
- Partial coverage in a delineated area usually works best.
- Don't commit to high density until you see the lower-density results.

## Woodburning accent patterns

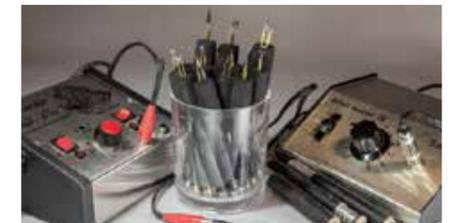
If you mark your pattern as above, you can easily use a woodburning tool to burn your accent pattern. There are a host of woodburning tools that you can use ranging from the discount store craft woodburners to the very exotic pyrographic art burners. There are also many ways to create your own burning tips. In the more modest priced burners, this is done by filing the provided tips into the desired shape. In the more expensive burners, you can create custom tips for use by fashioning nichrome wire. You can take woodburning, or more properly, pyrography to extreme levels. Our goal here is just to have some simple markings to begin with. How far you might develop your use of pyrography is your decision. It is an art form that will challenge you for many years should you pursue beyond our simple beginnings.

### Key points

- An inexpensive burner will have a much lower heat recovery.
- You can file your inexpensive brass tips to suit.
- Lower heat with more dwell produces better results.
- Practise in an unseen area to develop techniques and settings.



The modest woodburners lack heat recovery capability. The tips are also limited requiring your modifications



The higher-cost units feature extensive tip selections, variable temperature and fast heat recovery



The initial work laying out the fields for a simple pattern. You can be very delicate if needed



With a robust unit, you can sculpt the wood if you desire. Tremendous creative freedoms



There are handles available allowing you to create your own tips from nichrome wire



Depending on your level of tip creativity, you can texture and sculpt with a woodburner

## Torching

Torching sounds a bit brutal but in reality that is what is going on. The use of a torch needs to be done with care, both how it is done and where it is done. The beauty of the torch is that you can 'draw' with it. Depending on where it is presented and how, you can create minor colouration accents to features that have been carved into the turning. You can also use the torch to contour the wood to take on any shaping that you wish. There are a host of torches that can be brought to bear for this process. Very few of us will have access to multi-gas industrial-grade torches but most of us have a home shop propane torch. Even if

you don't currently have one, they are very modestly priced and available from DIY shops and discount tool shops. Another useful torch for more focused results is the mini-butane torches available to the artist. The flame on these units can be very fine and burns very hot. You can literally write with this flame. From my experience, I don't use any torch by itself. I always use this kind of flame in conjunction with another process. Usually I accent edges, cut in features, or carving that has been done. Torching can be done on green wood but it is quite variable. I find that dried wood works best but care needs to be taken to

control the effects. Keeping a wetted cloth to stop the effect exactly where it is planned works well.

### Key points

- Torch in a fire-safe area and have proper extinguisher equipment ready.
- Green wood burns very differently than dry wood.
- A wetted cloth allows for precise control of burn areas.
- Use proper hand protection when using a torch.
- Preplan. Mark out your plan or enhance prior modifications.



Depending on your size and dexterity needs, you can use anything from the propane torch to micro butane torches



The pencil butane torch has a much smaller nozzle but still packs plenty of heat



Some practice light accenting on a rim. Ragged textures or delineated edges show the best



Just the beginning of some texturing with the scaling tool. Finish or colouring over the top can create interest



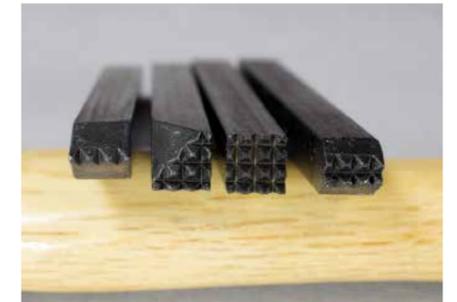
A simple ball peen hammer can be used to create that 'hand hammered' texture like metalwork



Unfinished here but stain, finish or colourations will vary nicely because of the wood differences



Use the pein end, face end, jeweller's or carpenter's hammers as well as experimenting with punches



If you are shop handy, you can try making a variety of your own punches, regular pattern or not

## Denting and dinging

When you think of denting and dinging, there are a multitude of tools that can be used and even more surface modifications that can be made. Rather than the ultra-smooth, nicely sanded surface, you can create the dinged and dented markings that will draw some interest. Not only will they draw interest but they can also put your work into the various styles that feature 'distressing'. I think of the desert southwest of the United States for its rather unique distressed Mission-style furniture. The surface flaws in the wood lend an air of years of use even when the piece is brand new. Being able to present the picture of generations of age with something just created is a very interesting treatment. Two

simple methods for doing this is a hammer and punch and an impact scaler. The hammer and punch couldn't be simpler. A hammer striking a properly positioned punch to mar the surface and then moving it to the next location is all that is needed. If you don't have a patterned punch, feel free to create one or use anything that will safely accept hammer impact and impart texture to the wood surface. Another tool that will perform this feat is a rust scaler. I have an air-driven version that is used to remove rust or welding scale from steel. With the round nosed steel needles, it will create surface dimpling when applied to wood. It is especially effective when applied to wood that has been painted. This

will flaw the wood right through the paint creating a well-used feeling.

### Key points

- A simple hammer and flat punch will allow distressing.
- Be certain your punch is safe for hammer impact.
- The effect varies dramatically with species and grain orientation.
- Nails, prick punches, drift punches and filed face drill rod will work.
- Experiment on a practice piece before committing to the final work.
- A method of sectioning off will help with visual impact.



A pneumatic scaling tool will create some interesting patterns when applied to wood

RIGHT: Like the texturing tools, speeds and feeds along with grain and species will impact results



## Conclusions

Stepping out of the turning aspects and into what would be termed the art aspects was intentional. Beautiful wood speaks for itself, standing on its own, but what about boring wood? Sometimes clever turning can enhance the final product look of plain wood. Too often we get stuck in the making chips aspect of woodturning. The final result of turning can easily be altered to add interest and a personal touch with a simple carved or burned pattern. Using a carving tool, woodburning tool, torch or even something to distress the wood can make the leap from boring to interesting. There was no intention of showing finished pieces for you to like or not. Everything was presented as just ticklers to get your thoughts going. Take them and run with them. Don't let yourself be bound by the woodturning tool alone. Experiment. Get some scraps or rejects from the burn bin and try different things. The worst that can happen is another piece on the burn pile. Enjoy the freedom of after-turning enhancement to express yourself. ●



Don't be so serious. Practise on some scraps and have some fun!