

Creative Woodturning

Introduction

Once an aspiring turner has mastered the basic techniques, and made the customary assortment domestic articles, the way forward may not be all that clear. One answer to this problem may be the adoption of a more creative approach. There are other reasons, too, why a more creative approach should be encouraged. Thinking about design, exercising the imagination, coming up with new ideas, and using the craft as a means of self-expression, all enhance the pleasure which the turners can get from their activity. In addition, as Dale Nish has suggested, woodturners who wish to build a reputation need to make “a determined effort to develop a style of their own”.

What is creativity?

What do we mean by ‘creativity’? This question poses a bit of a problem because it is an elusive concept and one which is difficult to define in a way which will satisfy everybody. One view is that creativity can only be expressed in work which is not a slavish copy of that of other makers. Originality alone, however, is not enough; not everything which is original is ‘good’. So, as well as being original, a creative piece of work needs another quality. This quality is the ability to stimulate a special or life enhancing reaction in the viewer, such as the experience of, beauty, pleasure, excitement, surprise or amusement.

To be creative a piece of work does not have to be violently different and sometimes an object is given a ‘lift’ by relatively subtle effects. Also, many different types of turning can exhibit creativity when they are recognised as being very good of their kind. The word ‘style’ comes to mind when we encounter objects of this kind. A piece of work has ‘style’ when it is immediately perceived as looking ‘right’. The beholder thinks “that’s got *it*”. It’s like recognising sex appeal.

This leads to the concept of a personal style as referred to by Dale Nish. To have a personal style is to create a look which is characteristic of your work; a look which is as personal as your signature. This is much sought after. Since the achievement of a personal style means producing work that has distinctive characteristics then it must exhibit originality and, by my definition, it must be creative.

In search of creativity

If it is accepted that creativity is a good thing, how do we become more creative? To begin with most turners, quite rightly, will wish to improve and develop their technical skills. The better a turner’s technique the more avenues there are for exploration. Providing the turner is correctly applying the basic principles, technical skills can only be increased by practice, and yet more practice, and by gradually increasing the difficulty of the projects which are tackled.

Very often, however, the desire to attain a high level of technical skill, and to be able to emulate the performance of experts, can blind the turner to the need to acquire other attributes. There is a deadly danger in putting too much emphasis on skill and technical virtuosity. This emphasis can lead to a tendency for more attention to be given to the way in which an object is made than to the qualities of the object itself. The means becomes more important than the end. Contrast this with the attitude of those in the art world (where the crafts come under the heading of the decorative arts). Here the stress is put on imagination. This has led to a concern with innovation and the 20th century notion that ‘art’ can be created without the use of skilled technique.

There are, therefore, two aspects to creative woodturning; one is craftsmanship, the other is imagination. Most turners will need to draw a line somewhere between the two extremes. We do not, however, all have to draw the line in the same place. What is imaginative to one person may be weird to another. But, in general, we do need to be more open minded about where the boundary of acceptability is drawn. So, technical ability is one thing, imagination is something else. We may feel the need to develop the latter aspect of our creative ability, but how do we achieve it? For most of us creative skills are not innate, nor are we likely to develop them by accident. When considering all the elements that go into the design of a creative piece of woodturning (see below) it will be noted that most of them involve vision. Visual skills, like other skills have to be developed; to help this process I have compiled the following list of suggestions . I will call them the four 'L's' : look, listen, learn and labour.

Look

Look at, and handle if possible, as much good woodturning as you can. If this is not possible look at photos. This is very much second best but very much better than nothing. Look at (and read) books on design. Visit museums and galleries and look at work in other media, not only at ceramics, pottery and glass, which have affinities with turning, but also at sculpture.

Look at the world around you - at the natural world - in the garden and countryside, on the beach, or wherever you happen to be. Inspiration may be found in the shape and texture of a flower, of a seed head, of a shell, or in something else quite unexpected.

Listen

What is meant by listening in this context is paying attention, and being receptive, to the views of others even when you disagree. Seek out opportunities to discuss design with other turners, and crafts people in other media, and listen to what they are saying.

Labour

Work at it. Keep thinking about it and looking for ideas. Brainstorm, with others if possible, if not try it on your own. Consider ideas even if at first sight they do not seem promising. Do not expect ideas to come fully fledged but let one idea lead to another. Keep records so that you do not forget the ideas you have had. Make sketches - this does not require great skill in drawing. It helps to learn some elementary technical drawing skills (see under design below) which are easy to acquire. It may also be useful to take a short course in another discipline, such as sculpture, in order to look at design from another viewpoint. Above all, be prepared to experiment and take risks. We need to take risks in order to get closer to our individual form of expression.

Other skills

As well as developing visual skills, and applying these with our conventional turning skills, complementary techniques can be considered, eg, shaping, carving, texturing and colouring. These might include one or more, but probably not all, of the following: wood carving tools and techniques; the router; the chainsaw; the Arbotech tool (or similar devices which can be used on an angle grinder); engraving tools, such as the Minicraft drill; punches, drills, the wire brush, and other texturing tools; sandblasting; and painting techniques and airbrushing.

The analytical tools

In order to develop one's appreciation or to have a meaningful discussion of the aesthetic or artistic value of the turned object the necessary analytical tools have to be acquired. When considering turnings which you admire ask yourself this question: why do they have that power over me? In considering this question the following elements can be considered:

- Form
- Line
- Decoration
- Texture
- Colour
- Contrast or harmony
- Dynamics
- Composition
- Tactile qualities
- Volume and weight
- Fragility
- Selection of material
- Beauty of the wood
- Technical virtuosity
- Style

There are couple of points to be made about these headings. In this context, the term form refers to the overall three-dimensional aspects of the object. Line is a two dimensional concept which can be provided both by the profile of the piece and by decoration.

When considering the beauty of the wood itself there is a question which needs to be asked: to what extent can we, or should we, rely on this? Even when the wood is beautiful the above factors are still important, particularly form, tactile qualities and style. The wood itself may supply elements such as decoration and colour but all these qualities must be brought into a harmonious whole. It must be said, too, that not all wood is inherently beautiful; when this is the case the turner must make up for its deficiencies by techniques such as those suggested earlier.

Design

Up to this point I have made little mention of the concept which, ultimately, is the most important of all, that of design. Design is the process by which ideas, and the products of such ideas, are developed to the stage that they can be expressed in a physical form. In a sense design is unavoidable. Even the most crude pieces of work do not emerge by accident; the people who made them must have had some idea about what they were trying to achieve.

Prior to putting a piece of wood in the lathe and switching on the power the turner may produce some preliminary drawings or, as is common, may hope to proceed directly from a mental concept to the physical form. Unless the design is similar to pieces made in the past, or the turner has an exceptional visual imagination, the latter is likely to result in a flawed piece of work and a considerable waste of time and material. The lack of clarity in the preparatory process is often betrayed in the results.

Under the heading of 'labour' I made some suggestions about making drawings and keeping records. It is worth trying to sketch ideas. These are an important aid to preparation and the development of ideas. Sketches do not have to be brilliant works

of art to be useful and one's skill improves with practice. Drawing instruments can help. Recourse can be made to the obvious implements such as a pair of compasses, a ruler and set squares. Straight parallel lines can be drawn by sliding a set square along a straight edge such as a ruler. As most of the lines are not straight the French curve is an indispensable tool. A small collection of these curves should be acquired. Most good stationers stock them.

Turnings are symmetrical; drawing both sides to look the same can be a problem. This can be overcome by drawing one half of the profile, folding the paper along the centre-line, holding it against a window (or a light box) and tracing the original lines onto the blank half.

In trying to judge if the shapes produced by these methods are satisfactory cut them out of black, or brown, paper; the cut-outs give a better impression than just lines on paper. If the design has more than one element, such as a pedestal bowl, then different ideas for the various parts can be cut out and tried in alternative arrangements. It should be borne in mind though, that a piece of turnery is a three dimensional object which is not usually observed in profile. As a consequence shapes conceived on paper in two dimensions may have to be modified during the turning process as the form becomes clearer.

As far as the aesthetics of design are concerned there are some basic principles of which every turner should be aware. These are often called 'rules' but in practice they should be regarded more as rules of thumb, as guides, which should not be followed slavishly. An example of such a concept is the 'Golden Mean'. There is no need to go into these any further here because they, and other suggestions, are competently covered in the chapter on form in Richard Raffan's book on 'Turned Bowl Design'

Another book which provides an excellent introduction to these matters is a little volume by G. T. James with the title 'Woodturning Design and Practice'. This was published in 1958 and will have been out of print for ages; however the local library will probably be able to find a copy. I will leave James with the last word. Design is the heading of the first chapter in this book. He makes no apology for this because, as he says "...an essential prelude to making any piece of craft-work is to have a clear idea of what one is trying to do.... technique is only a means to an end...".

Suggested reading:

Richard Raffan: "Turned Bowl Design" (Unwin Hyman)

G. T. James: "Woodturning Design And practice" (John Murray)