

# The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

## Learning Woodturning

From my experience, there are basically two types of penturners. First, there is the "passing-through" group who *begin* their woodturning journey by turning pens. Turning pens is a great way to start. It is easy to learn, there is little risk, it offers almost immediate gratification, and is this group's entry point into the craft. Once hooked on woodturning, these turners continue their woodturning education by mastering other techniques and branching out into bowls, lidded boxes, ornaments, and other items. They may return to pens on occasion, but they don't dwell on them exclusively.

The other group is the "hard-core penturners" and these turners are only interested in turning pens. They entered woodturning just to make pens and care little about anything else. They don't grow their woodturning experience and skills outside the penmaking arena. Of course, there are some who aren't as polar as either group, but for the most part, I usually see these two groups.

For the passing-through group, their woodturning skills will focus on other items, so their penturning becomes more accomplished, but only based on their improved turning skills and techniques. The hard-core penturners, on the other hand, will focus on the limited turning techniques required for pens and will refine their materials, fit, and finishing skills. Where do you go to explore these more intense pen methodologies? Here, we'll cover some of the ways you can start at the beginning with the basic skills and travel the penmaking path that never really ends.

There are several authors who have written books and created videos on penturning. Dick Sing, Rex Burningham, Kip Christensen, and Mike Cripps were early authors on the subject. More recently, Barry Gross has added new books to the field along with videos. Reading these books and watching the videos will give you not only the fundamentals of penturning, but also the more advanced assembly and design concepts. These include special materials, different techniques, and more advanced finishing methods. **Fig. 1** shows just a few of the reading materials and videos available, focusing solely on the subject of penturning. In addition to these sources, there is content in *Woodturning Design*, *Woodturning*, and *More Woodturning* magazines that is dedicated to penturning.

You can progress quite well using these resources and experimenting on your own. What else is there that can drive you further? The Internet has brought a huge

resource right to your fingertips. There are quite a few groups dedicated to penturning. These "newsgroups" have grown out of early chat and e-groups. They have moved the state of the art forward by light years. There are Internet groups exclusively for penturners with discussion boards, galleries, instructional files, and more. In addition to these, there are virtual clubs and guilds for penturners. Among these are the Yahoo Penturners Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/penturners>) (see **Fig. 2**), the Pen Makers Guild (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PenMakersGuild> and <http://penmakersguild.com>) (see **Figs. 3–5**), the Pen Shop ([www.thepenshop.net](http://www.thepenshop.net)) (see **Fig. 6**), and the IAP ([www.penturners.org](http://www.penturners.org)) (see **Fig. 7**). There may be more as well. The beauty of these groups is the depth of experience that is available.



Fig. 1

Here are some of the books and videos available for the penturning audience.

The newbie can arrive with little other than enthusiasm and learn from the entire range of expertise from other newbies to professionals. The amount of material available for free is extensive (see **Figs. 2–7**). With this many groups, even the most ardent of the newcomers can be satiated if they wish to partake in them all.

Additionally, many of the penturners have very helpful resources on their own websites. The curious penturner can visit the websites of other makers and see examples of their work, instructional articles, and often videos posted for the world to enjoy for free (see **Figs. 8 and 9**). The woodturning, and especially the penturning, community is a very sharing group. Even those who have an interest in monetizing their work often give away copious amounts of educational materials without charge.

The penturner can learn a lot with the virtual instructors available on the Internet. There is another source of instruction and inspiration available in the real environment of the woodturning club. Regardless of where you live, there is likely to be an American Association of Woodturners (<http://woodturner.org>) chapter within reach. With over 300 chapters worldwide and nearly 14,000 members, the penturner can often reach out and find a club, or at least a fellow turner, somewhere nearby. Not all the chapter members will be interested in pens, but there are enough that virtually every chapter has some resource for the penturner to share.

The IAP is setting up a chapter system of its own. The members of that group are congregating in various locales around the country. Photos are nice but there is a huge advantage to seeing and touching the work of other penturners. The fit and finish is something that can be appreciated much more up close and personal. The colors and the nuances of the woods don't always capture well in a photo.

Additionally, the American Association of Woodturners has an annual symposium. This three-day extravaganza of woodturning always includes rotations on penturning. The penturners in attendance also have the opportunity to gather at a Special Interest Night on the subject. At this meeting, there are penturners from around the world. The informal setting is an opportunity to meet others, show various works, and exchange ideas. Friendships are often made that will span the globe and be an ongoing learning and sharing experience.

There is another national symposium that is older than the AAW symposium. The Utah Woodturning Symposium is five or six years older than the AAW symposium and served as the model for the event. Each year, on the eve of the Utah Woodturning Symposium in Orem, Utah, the Pen Makers Guild hosts the Penturners Rendezvous. This gathering brings together nearly 150 penmakers to share their designs, techniques, and knowledge. The evening event is far too short; however, for the past eight years, it has had to fit into the time available. You can find out more about it and view past Rendezvous at the Pen Makers Guild website (<http://penmakersguild.com>).

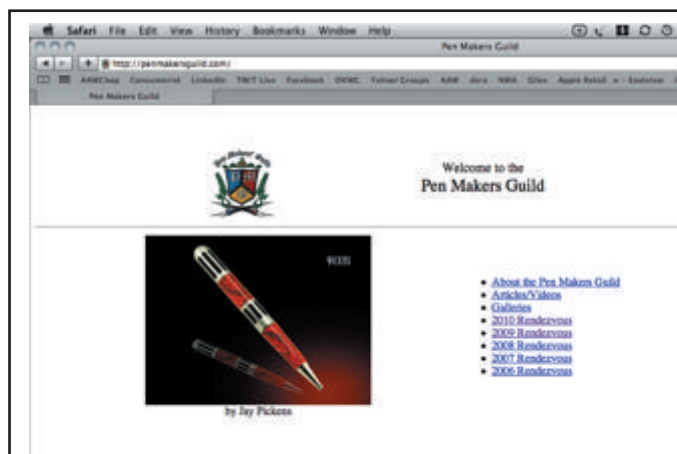
The national symposium has spawned many regional symposiums. At last count, there were nineteen regional symposiums, and I'm sure a few didn't get counted. Each of the local symposiums caters to the needs of the attend-



**Fig. 2. The Yahoo Penturners Group is an outgrowth of the original pen e-group with nearly 6,000 members.**



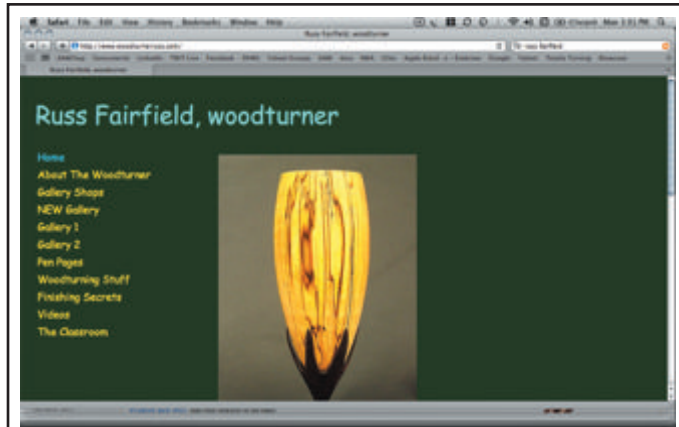
**Fig. 3. The Pen Makers Guild maintains a Yahoo presence for the forum discussions.**



**Fig. 4. The juried Pen Makers Guild also operates a website with galleries and more.**



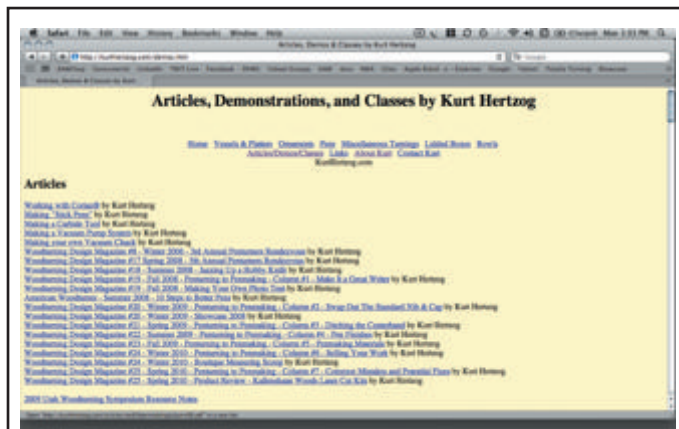
**Fig. 5. The Pen Makers Guild, like the other groups, provides educational materials for free.**



**Fig. 8. Many woodturners use their personal websites to share information freely.**



**Fig. 6. The Pen Shop is another popular destination for penturning enthusiasts.**



**Fig. 9. The author posts his columns, as well as other articles, on his website to share with others.**



**Fig. 7. The International Association of Penturners is another huge penturning community with much to offer.**

ing penturning crowd. Though only part of the woodturning crowd remains exclusively in the penturning area, there are only a few who can say they haven't turned pens at some point along the way.

"Where can I learn about penturning?" When someone asks me this question, my response is usually, "Just about anywhere there is woodturning going on." The milestones that have been made in recent years are almost exclusively due to the sharing among the penmakers from around the world. In the past, the pockets of excellence didn't spread very far. Now, a new idea, material, or technique can be shared around the world in minutes. My recommendation to every penturner is to cast the widest net you can. Watch videos and read books. Attend your local chapter meetings. Join any and every Internet group for which you have time. And last, but not least, get to all the regional and national symposiums your time and money will allow. The changes that I've seen in my time in penmaking have been astounding. I fully expect them to not only continue,

but to accelerate. You won't be part of the changes sitting in your own shop. You'll need to use every resource you can to stay abreast of them and to add your own expertise to the pool.

**DANGER, WILL ROBINSON! DANGER...**

This phrase from the 1960's TV series *Lost In Space* warns us of impending danger or that we are about to make a mistake. With the advent of the "remote" expert comes the danger that he or she will be less than accurate. Just because someone says something, doesn't make it so. This situation is even more exacerbated with the advent of the

Internet. There are those who talk a great talk, and yet are so far off the mark that it is scary. In the penturning arena, however, there usually isn't too much danger. Unless these folks are spouting off about chemistry, they really can't cause too much in the way of a dangerous situation. Not so for those who share their expertise (tongue in cheek) on woodturning. I recommend that since there isn't a good way to check the sources, be wary of anyone whose name you don't know well. There are many methods to get to an end point and rarely is there only one right way. Just make sure that the expert advice you are following is truly expert.



**Kurt Hertzog**

Kurt Hertzog is a professional woodturner who enjoys everything from making his own turning tools to photographing his finished turnings. A frequent demonstrator and instructor on many facets of woodturning, he particularly enjoys teaching tool sharpening, workholding, turned ornaments, and advanced penmaking.

Kurt is a regular feature columnist for *Woodturning Design* magazine, a council member of the Pen Makers Guild, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Rochester Woodworkers Society and the American Association of Woodturners.

Kurt's work can be seen at [www.kurthertzog.com](http://www.kurthertzog.com). He can be reached at [kurt@kurthertzog.com](mailto:kurt@kurthertzog.com).

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