

# The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

## Penturners Get No Respect

At the 2012 SWAT symposium in Waco, Texas, I was invited to sit on a penturning panel discussion. One of the questions posed to me from the audience was: "What could the American Association of Woodturners (AAW) do to get more respect for penturners?" Being a member of the Board of Directors of the AAW, the question seemed to be really more: "What could I do to influence the AAW to help with getting more respect for penturners?" My answer, perhaps not what was hoped for: "There isn't any magic solution to getting respect. Respect will come with continued effort and accomplishments showing the achievements of the craft." Other than perhaps becoming a judge or other elected official who gains respect based on the office they occupy, respect is not magically anointed, but, rather, is earned.

### JUST A PENTURNER?

Even as a woodturner who turns everything, including pens (in contrast to a penturner who exclusively turns pens), I fully understand the question and the reason for asking it. During all my years as a woodturner, I have often felt the stigma of being "just a penturner" (see Fig. 1). For many in the woodturning community, a penturner is often

perceived as someone without sufficient skills to become a "real woodturner." In their eyes, it is a form of turning that is best suited for an introduction into *real* woodturning, or a learning topic used for teaching the Cub Scouts or for demonstrating at the county fair. There are those who think that including pen demos at woodturning events cheapens the event and should be directed at kids and wannabes. Though I think they are mistaken, I believe I can understand their train of thought.

Penturning is a unique wing of woodturning, because it is done on a lathe using a woodturning tool; other than that, there is less association with woodturning than you might believe. Since the kit-style pen requires a straightforward drilling, gluing, and removal of wood (or whatever material) until round, and often uses only a friction finish, it doesn't need extensive turning skills. And though many become quite proficient at the task, their expansion into using a huge array of the many thousands of wood species available or including other kit styles, really doesn't expand their skill set. Glue it, make it round, put on a finish, and assemble it. Sure, you might achieve perfection, but it still includes only drilling, gluing, making round, sanding, and finishing a small object without much detail that

Fig. 1



Just what does it take to be a "real woodturner?"  
If you only do pens, are you excluded? Do  
you need the whole bag of tricks? Who decides?

Fig. 2



Sure these are basic pens; some are newbie style  
and others a bit further along. If they are made  
well, are you part of the woodturning community?



Fig. 3

Even staying within the pen family, there are many materials and techniques that can be explored. Don't get stuck in the 7mm rut for fear of failing at other versions.

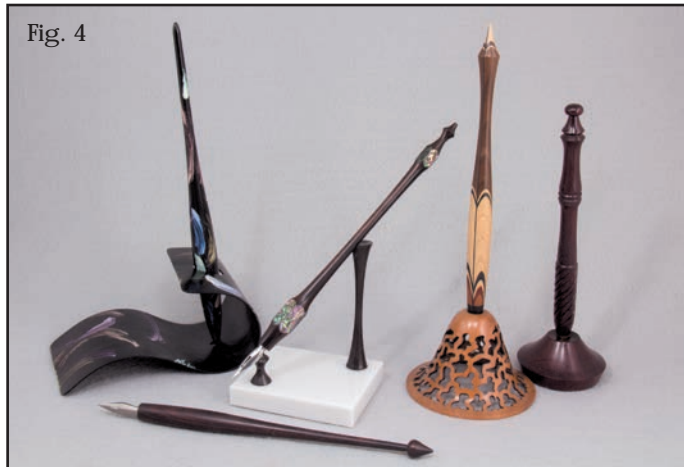


Fig. 4

For bowl turners, virtually every bowl is a new idea, design, and potentially new material. Why not make each of your pens new in idea, design, or material?

requires difficult turning skills. There is not much in the way of design or creativity in their eyes (see Fig. 2).

Please make no mistake—I intend no disrespect to anyone making pens; I consider myself a member of the clan. I only make the observation that the turning skills and creativity involved for those cranking out kit pens is, for the most part, rather limited. When Cub Scouts are taught to make pens and they become fairly proficient in the short time you work with them, it isn't an extreme accomplishment in the woodturning arena.

### ADVANTAGES

Penturning does offer many advantages, however. First, the fact that it has immediate gratification is a huge plus, and being low mass and easily done on a small lathe is just icing on the cake! As a teaching tool, pens offer a quick method of teaching all the basics of turning from tool selection and usage to speeds and feed, and it incorporates every aspect of roughing, turning, sanding, and finishing. And perhaps that is why penturning seems to draw the scorn of many of the "real woodturners": it is fairly easy to learn and offers a relatively quick journey to the endpoint, and is, therefore, not very difficult from their perspective.

As someone who teaches classes in penturning, bowl turning, and spindle turning, I don't see much difference between the various disciplines at the entry level. My beginning bowl-turning class attendees leave the day's class with at least one bowl. All the same basics are covered—from safety to sharpening to the ABCs to sanding and finishing—just as they would be in a penturning class. I don't see much difference from a difficulty standpoint, since it is a one-tool task much the same as turning a pen. Is taking a beginner's bowl-turning class any more of an accomplishment than taking a pen class? Are those turners who pursue bowls more accomplished than penturners? I think the answer really lies in how far past the beginning you ultimately go (see Fig. 3).

### GROWTH IS ESSENTIAL

Perhaps the most telling part of the story is the number of people who get started in pens and then stagnate at that beginning level. Most entry-level pen classes are based on learning the basics with the 7mm kit. Once hooked on turning, many beginning penturners believe that a huge box of 7mm pens made from every conceivable species is a major accomplishment for which they should strive. Once they've accomplished that, they often never progress any further in their turning exploration. The pocketful of pens to be sold is the blinding item, and they fancy making a great deal of money by mass-producing these and selling them to everyone they meet. That might bring the disdain of the turners who aren't into production turning and pride themselves on their progress: they have fewer completed projects, but often have more variety



Fig. 5

Doing something that other woodturners aren't doing sets you apart. It can be carving, painting, lacquering, gold powders, or special finishes. Make something unique.

and growth from their beginnings (see Fig. 4).

### IS "RESPECT" THAT IMPORTANT?

If penturners, in general, believe they don't get "respect," I might ask the question, "Why is it important to you?" Do you feel a sense of accomplishment and enjoy your turning endeavors? If so, will you enjoy it more or feel more accomplished if you are awarded this missing respect? Have you earned the respect of fellow penturners? If so, with the respect of your peers, is it important to have the respect of other members of the woodturning community? If it is important to achieve this recognition, are you doing something that is deserving of it? That is, what are you doing that is setting you apart from the masses? Are you doing something that is new, unique, and difficult, or stunning, or something that they can't do (see Fig. 5)?

Let's imagine that you desire this recognition. The 752 different wood species of 7mm kit pens probably won't get you there, but if you are content with that as an accomplishment, good for you; there is no shame in it. If you enjoy it and get satisfaction from it, that is all that matters. However, chances are that your fellow penturners (and for the most part, fellow woodturners) aren't going to be overly impressed. If you want to be set apart a bit, I can offer a few suggestions that might help. These distinctions are also what I use to separate the penturners from the penmakers.

### SET YOURSELF APART

First, you need to excel at what you do. Until your work is flawless, whether 7mm in wood or any other pen in any other material, there is room to improve. Close really isn't impressive and a "sort of" good sanding job under a "sort of" good finish won't win praise from many. Fit joints need to be imperceptible and finishes need to be flawless. If



Fig. 6

This is a custom design and fabrication by Brian Gisi. It is virtually a one of a kind and certainly sets a new standard in penmaking, as well as creates a unique space (photo by Brian Gisi).



Fig. 7

Metals, plastics, and woods are all used to make a specially designed pen by Brian Gisi. I'd think it would be well respected, since very few turners are capable of playing in this sphere (photo by Brian Gisi).

not, continue to work your craft until you can achieve that standard; moving on to more difficult work that is still mediocre really isn't an accomplishment. After you've become proficient enough to do flawless work, you can begin to make a niche for yourself (see Figs. 6 and 7).

There are areas that are ripe for exploration and include materials, design, and process. From the materials aspect, can you work with something that isn't commonly used? Is the material something unique or has value been added by you? Sure, the feathered blanks can be bought and made into a beautiful pen, but unless you are the one who created the concept or can expand it into something more advanced, you are one of the followers. Don't get me wrong, there is no shame in buying or making feathered blanks, but accept that you aren't being set apart from the crowd; you are perhaps only joining a smaller segment of the penturning community. The same is true of polymer clay (see Figs. 8 and 9). Blanks can be bought and beautiful pens can be created, but if you are the artist creating the blanks, then you've set yourself apart from the



Fig. 8

Just using a polymer clay blank can create beautiful work; however, the fact that Toni Ransfield creates her own polymer clay blanks makes her work that much more impressive (photo by Toni Ransfield).



Fig. 9

Though these blanks are available to others, the kudos go to the maker, Toni Ransfield, because the real creativity is located there. The end user can still make beauty, but... (photo by Toni Ransfield).



Fig. 10

Easily recognized as the *Navigator* by Rich Kleinhenz, this pen is not only a unique design, but also sports the entire theme from the ropes to the map (photo by Rich Kleinhenz).



Fig. 11

The complex plastic pen blanks, along with the silver inlay and cast silver parts, have become the signature of Gisi's work and is easily recognized throughout his offerings (photo by Brian Gisi).

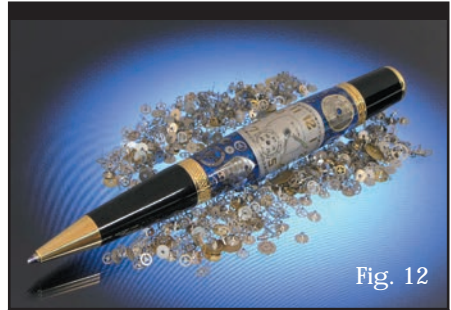


Fig. 12

There are many opportunities to create your own style with polyester resin and other castable materials. This is one of Barry Gross' signature pen creations (photo by Barry Gross).

masses. There is a host of materials to be made into pens, ranging from petrified walrus body parts to concoctions being made in your own casting tubs.

Design opens up a whole new arena beyond the kit pens. Create component parts of your own design that let you adapt kits to your own style, or you can do away with kits altogether. Granted, there may be parts that you'll always want to buy or retrieve from kits, but by designing and fabricating your own components, you can create a one-of-a-kind or signature style. For the creative sort, this can be a never-ending quest for the marriage of different materials, shapes, fastening techniques, and functionality. There are those who have their own line of pens that are easily recognized as their work (see Fig. 10). They've developed their own signature (see Fig. 11).

Process is the last of the areas where I think penmakers (notice the intentional change in terms from penturners to penmakers) can excel and create their own recognized territory. Much the same as the design aspect, process can distinguish you from your fellow penmakers (see Fig.

12). If you are doing after-turning decoration, be it pyrography, painting, piercing, inlay, overlay, distressing, or some other process, you can become recognized for your work (see Fig. 13). Not only is a much smaller segment or



Fig. 13

After turning, treatments can take many forms and be signature pieces simply based on the materials or process. Don't be afraid to let the pen and stand just be a canvas.



Fig. 14

Though penmaking can be an end to itself, don't ignore the potential to explore beyond, because skills developed there will never be wasted and will always enhance your work.



Fig. 15

A sample of superb design and execution. This pen (Mike Redburn's Pen Makers Guild application piece), with interchangeable parts, features cast silver and jeweled fittings throughout.

niche being created, potentially with only you in it, but you will be able to create your own markets. Also, don't be afraid to branch out a bit. There is no reason not to explore styles of turning other than pens. Who knows...try it, you may like it (see Fig. 14).

For all those who begin turning pens and remain turning pens, there is no reason to believe you aren't as skilled as other woodturners. I know many penmakers who are not only superb craftsmen, but also superb artists (see Figs. 15 and 16). I know many bowl makers and spindle turners who do wonderful work, but among them are many who still are learning their craft, so why fret over their opinion of penturning? Bowl turners who make mediocre bowls really don't have a leg up, do they?

### CLOSING THOUGHTS

I had a great conversation with Jerry Bennett at the SWAT conference. We spoke about penturning and the station to which it seems to have been relegated in the woodturning world. Jerry, who is one of the most creative turners I know, was adamant that his creations are glorified pen-turnings, because he began his turning journey by learning



Fig. 16

Carbon fiber, plastic, brass, and titanium are all part of this unique design and custom-made pen by Brian Gisi. The design and workmanship is flawless and I'm proud to own it.

how to turn pens (see Fig. 17). Now he has progressed into his own signature art form, but he still uses mandrels and embedded tubes to create the various segments that are the building blocks for his work. He is a huge supporter of the penturning community and professes to still be part of it, although he no longer makes single-piece pens (see Fig. 18).

One of the things that seems to cause problems is "scorekeeping" and you shouldn't equate dollars with success. I know many successful bowl makers who would trade their bowl sales for the prices that some penmakers' work demands. If you are in it for the dollars, ring the register and don't worry what people think. Do good work, excel at what you do, and make yourself happy with it. If you are bent on recognition and respect, the best method to achieve it is to earn it. Be the one of a kind who can create something that others can't and you will garner their respect.

Though there will never be a complete closure to this topic, I need to conclude the column somewhere. I would suggest turning for your own enjoyment and sense of accomplishment—if others appreciate it, wonderful; if not, too bad for them. In the words of Ricky Nelson (yeah, I am that old): "You can't please everyone, so you got to please yourself."



Fig. 17

This is *Fire* by Jerry Bennett. Can you see the many, many penturning pieces Jerry used to construct his piece? Turned on mandrels with internal tubes, they are unique pen parts (photo by Peggy Bennett).



Fig. 18

Jerry credits his start in penturning with his work today. He says he just makes fancier and curved pen parts to construct his works. Here is *Late Night Solo* (photo by Peggy Bennett).