

The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

Making Your Own Pen Blanks

There is a host of things you can do to make your pens unique, including the size, shape, components, presentation, personalization, materials, and more. The easiest and most common option for the penmaker to pursue in search of uniqueness is material. Most often, it is in the selection of the blank itself as opposed to manipulating fittings and components; however, pawing through the boxes of blanks to find that special one-of-a-kind blank wears thin after awhile. Pretty wood is wonderful, but chances are your fellow penmakers will have access to the same sources you do. As I note in one of my presentations on uniqueness: "If your competitors have access to the same materials and do the work to the same level of perfection as you, what makes your pens more desirable, worthy of a higher price, or more unique?"

That comment takes you down the path toward creating your own blanks, whether from scratch or by altering something that was originally unusable, nontraditional, or bizarre. Though there are those who offer blanks that are off the beaten path, once they are offered to you, they are probably available to others; so now it is only the frequency of occurrence rather than being truly unique that sets your work apart. Whether they are feathered,

fossilized animal parts, or a complex glue-up, if you can buy them, so can others. It might make you unique in your own geographic sphere, but it really does little for you in the macroscopic view. It is a big world, but you must remember that, for nearly all of us, it is only a mouse click away.

I'll dedicate this column to planting seeds for just a few of the avenues you can follow to create your own unique blank. Obviously, there are so many options that we can only explore a few, but these should get you thinking a bit out of the mainstream. There is a world of opportunity to experience that not only allows you to stretch your creativity, but to also set yourself apart.

CAUTION PLEASE

Some of the ideas presented here might be new to you. If so, take heed. My caution is that you fully understand what you are embarking on PRIOR to getting into it. Also, if there is anything that is beyond your capabilities or comfort level, don't do it! Pressure pots, vacuum chambers, jigs and fixtures for processing small parts, chemicals, exotherming (heat generating) processes, and other ideas presented here should be done properly with the caveat



Fig. 1

The easiest way to make pens that are special or a bit unique is to use limited-supply woods or those with sentimental value for the recipient. Here, seating from Yankee Stadium is used to make pens for the faithful.



Fig. 2

You can always say that the wood is authentic, but it certainly helps to have the authenticity validated by one of several outfits that will certify the origin.



Fig. 3

Step out of the box a bit. Here, a pen and stand made in plain-Jane maple were carved, pierced, painted, stippled, and more. It's a collaboration that I made with Binh Pho a few years ago.



Fig. 4
Though special blanks can add that uniqueness to pens, creating things from scratch also has that potential.



Fig. 5
Casting offers a lot of potential whether it be snake skins, dyed rice, toothpicks, breakfast cereal, or your daughter's pom-pom materials.



Fig. 6
This is a pen by Seamus Rooney. Seamus has a variety of blanks that feature bottle-tops, coins, foils, images, and more.

of using personal protective equipment, adequate ventilation, and proper procedures to be successful and safe. Have fun and explore, but certainly do so from an educated and safe perspective.

THE EASIEST UNIQUE SOLUTION—SENTIMENTAL VALUE

I can't think of an easier way to make a unique pen for folks than to make it from something that has sentimental value, whether it be from a tree in their yard, a piece of decking from their family cottage, or seating from a stadium long since gone that is part of their memories of a favorite sports team. That pen or pencil will bring them memories every time they see it, much less use it.

A few personal examples should illustrate the point. I had a request for a pen and pencil set for a father-in-law gift. He was a retired architect from the old T-square and drafting table era. The tree his family planted at his birth finally had to be brought down. Though it was a plain-Jane walnut tree, the completed pen and pencil set brought tears to the eyes of this elderly gentlemen

because of the memories of his parents, growing up with that tree in the yard, and that tree now passing to posterity. Likewise, imagine the joy of a Yankees fan having a pen turned from a piece of Derek Jeter's bat that hit a game-winning run or one turned from the original Yankee Stadium seating wood (see Figs. 1 and 2).

ENHANCE THE ORIGINAL BLANK

Another method of creating something unique is the enhancement of a more subdued or previously unusable blank; let's start with an enhancement. This can take many forms, but a few that jump out immediately are using the base wood as a canvas to paint, pierce, carve, or burn on. This allows you to take an unattractive wood, and not only add value, but make it truly one of a kind. Regardless of how many times that theme is used, each rendition of it will be slightly different (see Figs. 3 and 4).

If you aren't artistically inclined and don't feel comfortable painting on the blank or using some other free-form enhancement, you certainly can incorporate a photo,



Fig. 7
This feather pen by John Underhill was a winner in one of the recent Best of the IAP pen contests. The key to success with casting blanks is not only the creative selection of materials, but also the attention to detail and perfection of execution.



Fig. 8
This unique pen was created by Eric Beuker. Eric's casting contains cherry pits and his pen was another winner in the recent Best of the IAP competition.



Fig. 9
Segmenting can take many forms. Whether regular or irregular, the amount of uniqueness can be controlled by colors (species or dyes), shapes, coverage, and more. Here is an IAP winner from Bruce Robbins.



Fig. 10
Uniqueness can not only be segmenting in less regular form, but also in the mixture of materials. This winner in the Best of the IAP contest by Brian Gisi contains woods, plastics, and precious metals, both wire and cast.



Fig. 11
The methodology of cutting and gluing up segmented work can take many forms. This blank in progress is by Joe Schneider.



Fig. 12
Though extremely attractive, one of the critical features of these designs is the absolute precision required. Anything less than absolute perfection, regardless of how minor, is usually apparent.

drawing, bottle cap, odd materials, or some other method of improving the interest level of the background blank (see Figs. 5 and 6). Pictures of grandkids, drawings by yourself or others, or a soda bottle cap pounded flat and rolled to conform to the curves can be the addition. Most often, these items will need to be protected and “submerged” under epoxy or polyester resin. Another simple enhancement could be feathers or some similar addition to the blank. Whether the enhancement includes autumn leaves, natural or man-made feathers, or another item that can be layered on top and protected under resin, it will certainly draw interest and make the blank stand apart from the masses (see Figs. 7 and 8). (For a primer on casting polyester resin, visit my column in WTD #31 *The Magic of Polyester Resins*—www.kurthertzog.com/articles/wtd31penmakingcolumn13red.pdf.)

WOODS AND WOODS

There is a whole host of methods to glue-up woods that will make them more interesting than being a solid piece.

Stack cutting and assembling, separating species with veneers, segmenting, and more are all available to those willing to do a bit of work to create a blank with a different look (see Figs. 9 and 10). Many of these are available commercially, but you certainly are capable of making them yourself. Complex segmented designs can be created by processes ranging from making laminations and then rearranging them or fabricating complex herringbone patterns (see Fig. 11).

Don’t always assume that the complex patterns were planned and made with an “artistic flair” in mind. Many times, it is a convenient way to use up scrap bits of wood that would otherwise wind up in the trash. By gluing them all together into a usable blank, you’ve not only created a different-looking piece, but also made some use of otherwise unusable small bits. There is a wealth of tutorials for many of these techniques on the IAP website at www.penturner.org and the Pen Makers Guild website at www.penmakersguild.com.

To be successful, you really need to be meticulous in



Fig. 13
One solution for any geometric pattern, segmented or otherwise, is to be obvious about the intention of no perfect match. This is a collaboration I made with Bob Ireland.



Fig. 14
I find that intentionally skipping the entire “perfection” bit lets me create interesting ideas and designs without that agony.



Fig. 15
Irregular patterns are actually more interesting than perfect shapes.



Fig. 16

These are some of my pens, ranging from the store-bought kit to combinations of homemade and kit parts to totally homemade except for the inkfill or nib.



Fig. 17

If you want unique, you need to move from the store-bought kit and the store-bought blank into something a bit different.



Fig. 18

Whether you make your own blanks by cutting and gluing, casting your own with or without underlayment, get them from a limited-supply source, or do some doctoring after the fact, explore the other side of penmaking.

your efforts. The eye is drawn to the most minute flaw, so if you create a complex pattern, be certain that it doesn't contain any deviation that will immediately draw the eye (see Figs. 12 and 13). There are some penmakers who specialize in creating these blanks and do offer them for sale. And once again, if they make and sell them to you, they are probably offering them to others. The uniqueness certainly suffers if you are one of a group of people making these pens (although it might be a relatively small group). It's certainly your choice, but usually your mates aren't terribly impressed if you just purchase a slick blank and crank out a kit (see Figs. 14 and 15).

WHY BOTHER?

You might ask, "Why bother with all of this?" That certainly is a valid question and there are two answers. First, if you really want a one-of-a-kind pen, make it yourself, because buying from others isn't going to get you that uniqueness. Second, are you searching for that special blank to create a special pen or are you searching for validation of your accomplishments from your peers? Of course, I really believe that it's going to be rare that you create something that someone else hasn't already thought of. There are a lot of creative people out there who certainly have shared the same desire to branch out from the norm. Chances are fairly good that someone else has already either done it or at least tried; but you might not be aware of that. If you haven't seen it or heard of it, that should be good enough, although be cautious about too much bragging to the world about it—just because you aren't aware doesn't mean that others are not. The real reason that rings true for me is that it adds so much to the penmaking process. It doesn't take long to become proficient with the penmaking process and then what? Continue to crank out various-style kits with some other species of wood. Even that gets a bit old. By branching out into the other areas of woodworking, casting, painting, piercing, pyrography, and whatever, you open a whole new shop of endeavors to explore and to be challenged by. Personally, shop time is enjoyable whether you are making

blanks or turning them (see Figs. 16 and 17).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Do not allow yourself to be stuck in the rut of cranking out every kit version in every species of wood and call it the end point of penmaking. Let the creative juices flow and explore the artistic methods of adding your own personal flair to the blank or finished product. Bring other wood-working specialties into the mix and don't be stuck with just turning. The question of what can you bring to bear really should be phrased as what can't you bring to bear. Success isn't always immediate; anything truly new and creative has a road to success and failure is only another step in the learning process. If it was easily done, chances are there would have been many doing it before you (see Fig. 18).

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Kurt is a regular feature columnist for both *Woodturning Design* and *Woodturning* magazines, one of the five Council Members of the Pen Makers Guild, and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Woodturners.

Kurt's work has been featured in the American Association of Woodturners "Rounding The Corners" Exhibit, and he has been published in *Woodturning Design*, *American Woodturner*, *Woodturning*, *Pen World*, and *Stylus* magazines. You can see his work on his website at www.kurthertzog.com.

