

The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

Focus on Importance

As I reflect on the Journey from Penturning to Penmaking column, with this being the thirtieth column, I think about the topics we've covered. Already in our sixth year, most topics have been covered at least once, if not a few times. That works well for several reasons. First, the audience is in continual change as some readers move on and are replaced with new readers. The skills and interests of the followers of the column have grown, and then the subject itself is always changing so that there is new content to include on past topics. The most important thing that I see as we revisit topics from the past is the "refresher" value. Things that were known or heeded in the past sometimes slip away as we get wrapped up in other parts of the pastime. Sometimes, being dragged back to the roots is a good way to reflect and rethink the aspects of the craft that may have slipped a bit from attention.

In my mind, there are simply two kinds of pens—perhaps we can create more categories, but I think nearly everything falls into these two categories nicely. The categories are simply the "writers" and the "lookers" (see Fig. 1). There are pens that will be used, and therefore, their writing characteristics, feel in the hand, looks, and durability are all of major importance. Doing the best that you can at all of these is the goal, but if you need to prioritize them, do so. These may be pocket pens, purse pens, desk pens, or the general have-some-where-handy pens. They will live the tough life of being used and handled often, and probably be abused more than we think (at the bottom of a purse or in a pocket with change and car keys comes to mind). Hand oils, dirt, debris, opening boxes, and more will be their station in life.

Then there is the "looker" category. Pens lucky enough to be in this category will live the sheltered life that has them used infrequently or never—being a desk ornament or placed on a bookshelf to live a life of



Fig. 1

As a penmaker, it should be fairly clear while you are creating whether your pen will be a "writer" or a "looker." The category that it will fall into can have an impact on the emphasis you place on the aspects of construction and materials.



Fig. 2

Often the categories are changed by the buyer, but that is his or her choice. More often a writer moves to the looker category than vice versa. The new owner might want to keep it pristine, so it winds up for show and is set aside safely.

beauty rather than functionality. As such, the most important priority is their looks and just about every other characteristic becomes moot. The looks and the finish need to be pretty, but since they will rarely or never touch paper or the hand, how they write or feel in the hand is far down the list. Because they will likely be displayed at a distance, chances are that the perfection of the fit and finish will be less important as well. The only thing that really will be judged by most will be the appearance from afar. It's fairly easy to succeed at that (see Fig. 2).

So let's take each of these categories and review the tips and tricks to succeed with the priorities in mind. Actually, it will be easy to cover the writers' cat-



Fig. 3

With the time and energy that will be put into a pen, the addition of a quality inkfill will add minimal cost.



Fig. 4

Usually not evident until close inspection and measurement, there are minor differences between the kit-supplied inkfill and the OEM (original equipment manufacturer) brand inkfill. Having a readily available replacement from the stationery supplier will be an asset to the end user.

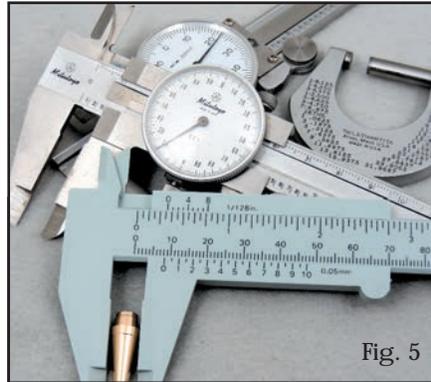


Fig. 5

Whether you use an inexpensive pair of verniers, dial calipers, or micrometers, get in the habit of measuring the parts and matching fits. The step from turning to bushings to measuring and matching dimensions will move your work to the next level.



Fig. 6

Get into the habit of turning, sanding, and finishing by understanding what will happen to your dimensions. By learning this part of the process and always being just slightly undersized on the body, you'll be able to tune the fit precisely.

egory and then just say don't be as worried about the features that are not critical to the end goal for the lookers' category. Before I get accused of telling people to do less than perfect work or get sloppy, I do encourage everyone to make each pen as if it is the most important pen you'll ever make. Give it your best in all the various aspects. Knowing that is nice to say, but difficult in reality, given the constraints of time and price points, I accept that the looker for the top shelf of the doctor's bookcase might not get the attention that the one in his pocket requires.

MAKE IT A GREAT WRITER

The phrase seems vaguely familiar. If you need the topic in depth, revisit *Woodturning Design* (WTD) #19—Fall 2008 (the first column in the series). (Note: All past columns are posted on my website at www.kurthertzog.com in the articles section if you can't find that issue of the magazine. Back issues of WTD are available at www.woodturningdesign.com/backissues.) Regardless, in a nutshell, that column says to go and spend the money needed to make your pen write as well as it can. The kit makers need to be cost conscious at every step to be competitive, so the inkfill provided with the kit usually isn't the finest available. My choice is to go to a stationery supply and buy the genuine Cross, Parker, Sheaffer, or whatever brand is needed for the pen you are making (see Fig. 3). That solves two problems. First, it gives you an inkfill that will have more emphasis on the writing characteristics than the kit inkfill. Second, it will allow the recipient to buy an exact replacement when the time comes. If you assemble the kit and tune everything for the factory inkfill, where will the customer be when they need that brand of inkfill and its specific dimensions for a refill? Believe it or not, while the kit ink-

fills are close to the brand-name inkfills, there are minor variations that can make a difference (see Fig. 4). If how well it writes is important, don't scrimp on the part that matters most!

FEEL IN THE HAND

This term encompasses at least two characteristics, and first and foremost is the interface at the nib—assuming it is a kit or is scratch-built where there is an interface at the nib to pen body. Using the 7mm kit as an example, the fit at the centerband and at the clip end are important, but will not be felt every time the pen is picked up and used. Every time the pen is grasped, the nib-to-body fit will be felt and be evidence of the maker's skill and attention to detail. If you skip the bushings, you have to deal with the agony of trying to turn and finish to the perfect matching dimension. The best way I've thought of to make things work out perfectly with a minimum amount of equipment and agony is detailed in depth in WTD #30—April 2011: lose the bushings and get a pair of dial calipers (see Fig. 5).

Learn the process well enough to know what dimension you need to turn to so that sanding will reduce the diameter by X-amount and putting on the finish will add so much to the dimension. With all that under your belt, make that interface a bit undersized on the pen body side so that when all is said and done, you can tune the fit to perfection before assembly (see Fig. 6).

Along with the fit at the nib, the overall feel in the hand has a lot to do with the pleasure of using the pen. With a kit pen, the overall weight distribution, the length, and the width are largely determined by its design. That said, making the kit out of soapstone rather than a lightweight acrylic can make a difference. Also, if you've ditched the centerband, as I hope you have (WTD



Fig. 7

With a 7mm kit, the elimination of the centerband will give you freedom to control the length and diameter to your choosing. The selection of material and the weight distribution is your choice, letting you tailor the feel to your end user's desires.

#21—Spring 2009), you'll have control over the length-to-width ratio. You now can get creative with those dimensions based on balance in the hand with respect to the material being used (see Fig. 7). For scratch-built pens, the designer and maker have total control over these features and it will behoove them to mock things up for the appearance and feel-in-the-hand interactions. Top heavy or too fat to be comfortable or both come to mind as stumbling blocks when penmaking. Also, the size of the hand and the personality of the user will play a large part in size, weight, and balance. Envision, if you will, the far extremes, such as a dainty young lady user as opposed to the sumo wrestler. Both have different needs in their writing instruments, and so will everyone in between. Your marketing method also has a big impact on where you go with this, since the middle of the road for mass appeal will more likely sell better in a gift shop (see Figs. 8 and 9).

A nice writer, if it is ugly, even if it fits together well and feels nice in the hand, probably won't be very desirable. Looks are likely the next most important feature of a pen and can encompass the material, after-turning treatment, finish, and the size, shape, appearance, or balance. With all these factors impacting looks, there is little to offer other than perhaps that the maker should heed the following advice. If the materials speak, let them talk and don't compete with shape (see Fig. 10). If the materials don't speak, then after-turning, treatments, size, and shape can be the attractive features. Nothing is more disheartening than seeing a wonderful piece of wood being overshadowed with other distractions. I think that simple elegance is a desirable end goal. Making things pleasing and eye-catching without clutter and "screaming" features is more difficult to do, but an admirable goal in all your turnings, pens, or



Fig. 8

Here are two pens that fit into the same stand yet have very different looks as well as a dramatically different feel in the hand, not because of the grip, but because of the weight balance. For "lookers," weight balance might not be important, but for "writers," it is key.

anything else (see Figs. 11 and 12).

Other materials being used can be something to pursue if you wish to be a bit apart from the mainstream. WTD #23—Fall 2009 (Penmaking Materials) and WTD #31—June 2011 (The Magic of Polyester Resins) will give you some idea of materials to consider to add to your repertoire. Size, shape, materials, and finish all interact to contribute to the pleasing appearance of a pen. It does little good to have a stunning material that is turned well and then have the prep for finishing (sanding) done poorly, creating flaws visible under the finish. Good words to live by are to turn as fast as is safe and sand as slow as you can. Sanding is a necessary evil that will make or break the final result and hurrying at this stage is false economy. If anything, spend more



Fig. 9

Overall heft of a pen, weight, and balance are extremely important based on the end use. The need for balance and dexterity will be far more critical in a calligraphy or art-detailing pen.

time on the sanding because you can help yourself immensely, and likewise, on the other hand, do damage to the final result. WTD #42—April 2013 has additional information on sanding and finishing that you might want to review (see Fig. 13).

Let's imagine that you create the most pleasing-looking pen that feels wonderful in the hand and writes divinely only to have it get beat up with minimal handling and become unsightly in no time. Not much of a win. I might be biased, but if you are making pens and putting on a friction finish, I think you have done the ultimate owner a disservice. Any friction polish that is wax, wax and shellac, or similar constituents will go on nicely and shine for a while, but offers little protection from use and abuse. Though shiny, it might sell, but any amount of handling will quickly wear through the surface finish only to expose the materials underneath to the vagaries of a pen's life. In my opinion, the two most durable and beautiful finishes are cyanoacrylate glue (CA or superglue) and lacquer (see Fig. 14). Which one you choose to use is your decision.



Fig. 10

Simple elegance can be something to strive for. A simple shape that is pleasing to the eye and is comfortable in the hand is far more appealing than fancy beads and coves to strut your turning prowess.



Fig. 11

Depending on the audience, simple colors and shapes may be in order. For other markets, especially the creative and artistic audience, something more jazzed up might spark more interest. You can be the best judge of what sells to which market.

Both are easy to apply, but require a bit more time and effort than a friction finish. Remember, preparation for any finish needs to be meticulous so that application won't highlight flaws in the surface beneath. With proper preparation for finish, pick either of those two finishes for a fine-looking and long-lasting finish that will keep the pen serviceable for years. WTD #22—Summer 2009 shares some additional details on using both these finishes. I use them almost interchangeably, but perhaps I use the CA more on kit creations and lacquer more often on kitless pens that I make. I'm not certain why, other than that it seems I gravitate that way (see Fig. 15). With both finishes, I make it a point to sand carefully to create the



Fig. 12

Don't be afraid to experiment with materials, shapes, and after-turning treatments. The various end uses and customers will respond to different looks. You can use nearly any material that can accept a tube and be turned on a lathe.



Fig. 13

Mingling different materials can sometimes complicate sanding and finishing techniques. Woods mated to Corian, certain wood to wood, and plastics (polyester resin) mated to metals will finish at different rates, and so will their need or acceptance of finish.



Fig. 14

There is a host of finishes available for pens, and they range from waxes and shellac to adhesives, lacquers, and more. If it applies easily and quickly, it might be susceptible to coming off just as easily, and with a pen's tough life, durability of the finish is key.



Fig. 15

Of all the finishes typically used for pens, I think that either a lacquer or cyanoacrylate finish will provide the most beautiful and durable finish.



Fig. 16

Your market may be the church bazaar, e-Bay, coworkers, a web-store, or a gallery or gift shop. The other market can be at the pen shows. These are held periodically around the country, usually catering to higher-end pens.

best surface prep, then apply the finish (building the amount that I need and then some), and finally superfinish the cured surface to level if needed and bring up the gloss.

If you make pens that are destined to be writers, you will need to focus on the four most important facets of penmaking in order to succeed. If all is done well, you should be successful with your efforts even though the dollar returns on those efforts can vary based on the location, marketing, and audience; however, targeting for your customer certainly is part of the equation and you might not have the same sales dollar point among the folks at the car wash as for those working in a medical practice (see Fig. 16).

MARKETING

WTD #24—Winter 2010 gives some additional information on marketing. For those who are creating lookers rather than writers, you can strive for perfection, but your customer might be most interested in the appearance; however, you can tailor your efforts to focus on their interests. If it will never be used to write, who cares what inkfill you use. If it will never see any handling to speak of, why not use a friction finish? It will be faster, look good, and certainly live through the minimal handling the pen will receive. Do you want to go this route? It's your call. Time and money saved there can be used elsewhere. Regardless, the point of this column is to get everyone thinking about what is important in a pen and focusing sufficient effort in each of the areas to make it successful (see Fig. 17).



Fig. 17

Depending on the market that you intend to address, you'll need to balance the materials, process times, and areas of focus to be able to hit your price point.



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A professional woodturner, demonstrator, and teacher, Kurt Hertzog enjoys the continuum of woodturning, from making his own turning tools to photographing his finished turnings.

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.