

The Look of Things — Handout

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Vocabulary

The words that we use when speaking of the design of a turning is important in two ways. First, a common vocabulary allows us to understand what another person is speaking about. Vocabulary allows us to learn what has evolved over long periods of time. The quest for good design is a journey that started with the first vessels created by ancient man. We do not have to discover on our own what constitutes good design. We can learn from what has gone on before. Understanding the vocabulary allows us to communicate with each other.

The second reason is the concepts behind the words allows us to create good looking turnings faster than if we had to rediscover each concept.

2-D vs. 3-D

In preparation for my first art show I had called the organizer to ask what I needed to do. Her first question was, “Are you a 2-D, or a 3-D artist?”. I was stunned. I never had thought of myself as an artist. Once I gulped the artist thought down, I was left with the question of 2-D versus 3-D. I answered “I do wood”.

So let's clarify this bit of vocabulary early on. A 2-D work is a work of two dimensions – height and width - as in a painting or a photograph. A 3-D piece has three dimensions – height, width, and depth. Wood-turnings are three-dimensional. Hence we are 3-D artists.

Shape and Form

Shape and form are cousins to each other. Shape is the two-dimensional line of what we do. Form is the three-dimensional view of the same thing. One of the great issues that wood-turners face is that when we are turning, we are concentrating on the shape (2-D) view of the piece. When a piece is completed, it will be viewed as a form (3-D). This change of view from creating a shape to viewing a form is one reason that a piece can look so good on the lathe, but look poorly off the lathe.

Foreshortening

As the point of viewing changes, the scale of an object changes and becomes distorted. This is a concept that we encounter with every piece that we make. We created things in a horizontal plane, yet the pieces will be viewed, and used, in a vertical plane.

Another way to explain this concept is to think about a forest. When we view a forest from a helicopter a thousand feet in the air, what we see is a broad expanse of green. As we descend we begin to see that the expanse is not a flat floor of green, but has peaks and valleys. As we approach ground level, we can see silhouettes of each individual tree. As we leave the helicopter and walk beneath the trees, we see the web of branches, the main trunk, and the individual leaves. The tree has not changed, but our view of the tree has undergone dramatic changes.

Foreshortening is a concept we deal with each time we complete a piece. We take a final look at the piece on the lathe and make the decision that it looks good and is finished. We remove the piece from

the chuck and set it down on the workbench and magically the piece no longer looks as good as it did on the lathe. This is the practical world of foreshortening in turning.

Fare Curve

This word is not found in modern dictionaries, but the concept is the foundation upon which all good turnings are based. A fare curve is an arc or curve that flows smoothly without interruption. A fare curve has no flat spots, valleys, or ridges. A good example of a fare curve is the french curve template used in drafting - one continuous curve without interruption.

Balance

An object is considered to be in balance when its elements are of equal weight. Balance is the sense of equilibrium displayed by an object. Elements in art include texture, form, shape, color, tone etc.

Negative / Positive Space

Positive space is solid. Negative space is space that is empty – or open. The positive space in a turning is where there is wood. A negative space would be a void or hole in the wood.

Balance and the use of negative space is illustrated in Image 4. This bowl is from a piece of black walnut with a sharp contrast between the sap wood and heart wood. To my eye it was very successful piece until I showed it to my wife. Her immediate comment was that it didn't look right. After stewing a bit, I realized that the light color of the sap wood on the rim on one side had unbalanced the piece. The resolution of this design error was to use negative space. I drilled a two inch hole through the rim and used negative space to bring the piece back into balance.

Image 4 Balance and Negative



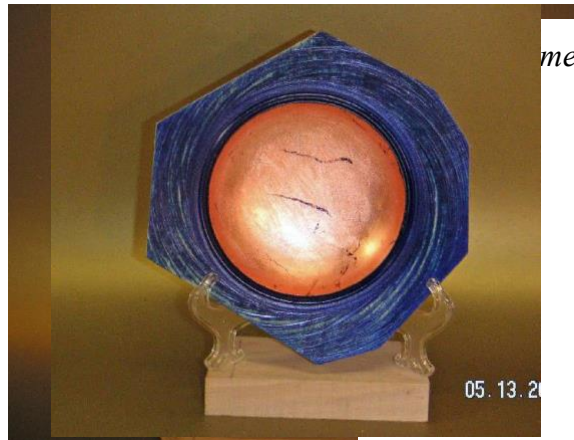
Image 4 is an excellent example of what looks good on the lathe, fails when it is off the lathe.

Symmetrical vs Asymmetrical

Symmetry occurs when both sides of a form are equal. When one folds a piece of paper in half and then cuts a shape, the result will be symmetrical when unfolded. Pieces that flow from a lathe are naturally symmetrical.

Asymmetrical is the opposite. When the sides are not equal, it is said to be asymmetrical.

Image 5 Symmetrical Disk



metrical Dish

The concept of symmetry is illustrated by Images 5 and 6. Both are eight sided shallow dishes that have been dyed, textured, gilded with copper leaf. The symmetrical disk has eight equal sides. The asymmetrical disk also has eight sides, but of varying lengths. Ask yourself which is more interesting to your eye.

Tactile

Of, or connected with, the sense of touch. People like to touch wood. The feel of wood is quite different from pottery, metal, or glass. The tactile warmth of wood objects resonates with many people. When our finishes are so thick that the tactile warmth of the wood is lost, we have diminished the tactile attraction of the piece. When our material changes from wood to man made materials, the tactile sense of wood is lost.

Profile

The overall silhouette, or shadow, of a form as viewed from a specific viewpoint.

Volume

The sense of fullness or mass enclosed by the surface of a form.

Mass

The perceived physical weight of a form which can be different from its actual weight – ie, the turning looks to have a great mass, but is actually weighs little. This happens with closed forms that have thin walls.

Ogee Curve

A classical element in turning that creates elegance and movement.

Fair Curves

A curve that flows smoothly from start to finish without any flat spots or sudden "kinks." Imagine a marble rolling down the side; it shouldn't jump or thud.

Sweeping Line

Try to avoid "S" curves that look like a roller coaster unless they have a specific purpose. Aim for a continuous, intentional sweep.

The Rule of Thirds (Composition)

Don't put the widest part of your vase or bowl right in the middle. It looks "static" and boring.

Sweet Spot of Composition - Place the widest diameter (the "Bulbous Point") about 1/3 to 2/5's of the way down from the top or 1/3 to 2/5's of the way up from the bottom. This creates visual tension and interest. [.33% to 40%]

Bead

A rounded outward raised element. Beads provide emphasis and interest to a turning.

Transition

The way one curve or element flows into the next. Smooth transitions feel pleasing to the eye. Abrupt transitions interrupt the eye as it focuses on the turning.

Proportion

The size relationship between different parts of a form - height to width, base to rim, foot to body. Proportion determines whether a piece feels balanced or awkward.

Undercut

A surface that angles inward beneath a rim or foot visually "lifting" the form.

The Foot

How a piece meets the table changes its entire "personality". A small, tucked-under foot makes a form look like it is floating or light. A shadow line is created when you relieve the final 1/4" of a form. This helps create a sense of lift in the form. A wide base makes a piece look heavy.

The Rim

A thick rim increases the perceived weight of a form. It can make a bowl appear chunky. A thin, clean rim suggests elegance and fragility. The rim directs the eye in towards a vessel when slightly sloped towards the center of a bowl. A rim that slopes outward, directs the eye away from the form. A flat rim stops the eye.

Golden Mean

The ancients adopted a ratio of 1:1.618 because it made things look good. Use this rule as a guide to the height and diameter of your turnings. Create a series of rectangles from plywood to serve as a visual reference in sizing boxes, vases, and bowls. A series of cylinders of the same height and diameter as your rectangles are also excellent visual references.

In creating a lidded box, use this rule in establishing where to part off the lid.

Blind Test

Close your eyes and run your hand over the piece. Your fingers will find flat spots and bumps that your eye might miss.

Balance

The distribution of visual weight within a form. Symmetrical balance is stable; asymmetrical balance is dynamic but requires careful control.

Unity

The sense that all parts of a form belong together and serve a single intention. Unity is lost when elements compete or feel unrelated.

Tension

A controlled visual pull or opposition within a form — for example, a very narrow neck above a full belly — that creates energy and interest.