

Learning Curves

I generally don't want to write about myself in these monthly columns. And, although I'm not an impartial judge, I think that I've been pretty good about staying away from the topic of me. This time I'm going to start with me. Hopefully I'll end up with a message that is not only of broader interest but also generally useful.

Along with seven other club members, I took Mark Sfirri's class in multi-axis turning last month. It wasn't my first class with Mark. Several years ago, I took one from him at the Woodworking Center in Rockville. After the first go-round, I kept what I made in the class on a shelf in my shop. There are a couple of miniature baseball bats with his signature distortions, a rolling pin with off axis handles and a bump in the middle (the "mother-in-law" rolling pin), and some squiggly figures. They accumulated thick layers of dust -- along with other turnings from other classes and objects from assorted failed or abandoned projects. I never knew what to do with my Sfirri class souvenirs since, although I'd turned them, they were never really mine. I recall pondering how I could make them my own. Tool handles has been a recurring idea. But I never moved forward on that. The forms are too distinctively his. Even if I were to finish them for display in the privacy of my home, they would have become my Sfirri copies at best. Fun to contemplate, but not the real thing.

When Mark came last month, he toured my shop and we blew the dust off these old pieces. He encouraged me to bring them to the class to share or, perhaps, to compare with what I made this time. Appropriately, the old pieces received scant attention. And, at the end of the class, I had more Sfirris to add to my collection -- one squiggle figure, one baseball bat, and a candlestick. Only one new piece was directly comparable to an old one. Was it better -- Was I better? Probably so, from a technical standpoint. I think this is true for all the pieces that I completed this time around. As a testament to that fact, my wife suggested that I finish them and set them out for display -- strictly for our private enjoyment. They are, after all, inventive and amusing. But I have yet to do so. I'm still troubled by the question of whose work this is? Mine, but only in a limited sense. I essentially followed step by step instructions to reproduce what is recognizably Mark's work. For the moment, my new Sfirris share a box with my old Sfirris. They're all still waiting for an inspiration that will change them sufficiently for me to claim them as my own. But this time I don't foresee that they're destined for long term storage in the box. Each are, after all, an object lesson in how to achieve a curve, or turn an oval, or a squiggle, or a tilt -- specific and useful references. They make me think of the work of a sous-chef in a restaurant, preparing essential ingredients under the direction of the chef but not creating the new entrée on the menu. So, if I am to be my own chef, I must use them in my own way.

While awaiting an inspiration about what to do with my box of Sfirris, I've come to realize that Mark really taught me something entirely different than how to turn a squiggle. His class, ultimately, was about process. And this has opened a realm of new creative possibilities. Few classes that I've taken before have done that. This lesson was surely there years ago, but I missed it. My goals during the earlier class were strictly technical -- to imitate as faithfully as I could and to come away with objects that closely resembled what Mark made -- albeit smaller. This time, although the exercises were similar, what I've taken away has been quite different. In order to graduate from sous-chef to chef, I need to envision what I want to make and then develop a strategy to make it. This means visualizing an object with a specific shape, figuring out the cuts I'll need to make to create that shape, and laying out the axial

lines that will allow me to make those cuts. I don't draw well and have historically planned projects in my mind. Here, I think that paper will be better. Ultimately, I'll have to give it a try – expecting initial disappointment or failure. Through repeated tweaks and trials, I figure that I'll ultimately make what I've envisioned. Or I'll make something that I like better.

I've since seen a demo by Rudy Lopez. He turned a delicate natural edge winged bowl. Rudy clearly knew exactly where he was going and how to get there. He has, I'm sure, turned hundreds of examples of this very bowl. His moves were well rehearsed and performed with precision. I'm sure that every person in his audience wished that they could make that same bowl with the same degree of craftsmanship. Some, with practice, may be able to do so -- safe in the knowledge that no two will ever be exactly the same and that the winged bowl is not a form "owned" by any one individual. I watched Rudy make an elegant thin walled winged bowl and it was his to the extent that he was its maker – just as every future maker of a winged bowl can claim his or hers as their own.

But Mark's stuff is Mark's. It can never become mine. My goal is now to take what I've learned about multi-axis turning to create what is uniquely my own. I believe I've found an initial project that is unique, or uniquely weird. (Would you expect anything else?). I'm creating a new body for the head and hands of an antique doll. Its torso is laminated and then turned on four axes. I turned arms and legs on two axes each. As predicted (above), they were failures. So it was back to single axis limbs – "something that I like better". She has a single axis cap, salvaged from the hole that I cut out for her heart. Her feet will be carved. As I write this, she's unfinished. I can only hope she won't emerge looking like Dr. Frankenstein's Monster. And as I imagine my finished doll to be a weird, funky, charming creation, I begin to think of my series: "Rejects from the Doll Factory." ... Oops, that too belongs to someone else.

Returning to that missing inspiration for my box of Sfirris, perhaps it's time to re-visit my collection of Useless Tools. That is mine. So, how about the handle for a baseball peen hammer?

Rich