

Pricing – A Topic About Which I Know Nothing. Does Anybody?

I took my first course in woodturning at John Campbell almost ten years ago; but didn't start making anything for myself until after I got my first lathe a couple of years after that. The old Rockwell was a solid but simple machine with four speeds that were changed by lifting the motor and manually moving a drive belt (but that's another story). I've since taken a bunch of woodturning classes. No one at the first course nor anyone since has ever said anything about selling what I make – or, more importantly, setting prices. It reminds me of medical school where, over a span of four years, no one ever said a word about the business of medicine. After graduation and several more years of residency we were, I guess, expected to just know how to set fees, manage expenses, and prosper. Little wonder that most newly minted physicians look to be employed by someone else. Unfortunately, that isn't an option available to most woodturners.

This topic, setting prices, is fresh in my mind because I just packed a few boxes of small bowls and some kitchen utensils to take to a holiday sale where I'm promised that eager holiday shoppers will be looking for hand-crafted gifts. Items priced under \$100, "sell best."

I first sold some small bowls at a similar holiday art show and sale in 2012. I remember agonizing over pricing then. The agonizing, I figured at the time, came with my inexperience. Uncertainty wasn't so much about overhead costs. Wood, sandpaper, polyurethane, wax etc. didn't amount to much. The problem was valuing my time. What hourly wage should I price into my work? As a neophyte turner and a neophyte vendor valuing the time invested in each little bowl was problematic. Minimum wage in 2012 was \$7.25 per hour (I just looked that up). Paying myself the minimum wage probably would've pushed my prices just a bit beyond what I will charitably call "reasonable". Valuing my time six years later remains problematic. I've gotten a lot faster but the minimum wage – now \$15 per hour at Amazon and heading in that direction nationwide – has outpaced my improved speed and efficiency. Paying myself the minimum wage will still probably push my prices beyond "reasonable". So I no longer think about the time I invest. Its current dollar value is set at zero.

This turns out to have several benefits. For one, I don't suffer so much over time spent filling cracks and sanding. For another, when I manage to finish something, I can more easily look at it from the perspective of a buyer. I can say to myself: if I WANT this thing (not if I need it -- since the stuff I make to sell is seldom needed), what would I be willing to pay? Or, more realistically, if I explicitly DON'T NEED something (so I'm buying on a whim) what would I be willing to pay? I admit, it can be a little painful to think this way. It also helps to put some time between the making and the selling, so I can more easily forget how much time it took me to complete something. Better still, it helps if it's the second time I'm trying to sell something that didn't sell for the first price I set.

My "Art" presents a different set of problems. First, this is the stuff that represents not merely an investment of time, but an investment of ego. And, typically after I've devoted A LOT of time to the making, I've gone through a range of emotions including hope, frustration, disappointment, determination, and affection – even love. Best to price such works to NOT sell – something I've been quite successful at over the years. I've taught myself to aspire to having a sculptural piece shown to an audience -- Ideally in a juried show which gives some "expert" validation to my work. And on the occasion that someone buys one of these, well...it's a thrill. Mostly, I continue to enjoy the company of

those art pieces in my home -- at least the ones to which I've grown attached. Unfortunately, the available display space in my house is down to only a few inches. Works are metastasizing to one or another closet.

There's also another fairly satisfying way to move my art into the hands of collectors -- by donating it to arts organizations who hold fundraisers where collectors can choose it. Such opportunities are growing. The Maryland Federation of Art gives me a couple of opportunities to do this every year. Other club members also regularly donate. It always carries the hope that someone who "discovers" me at a fundraiser, may someday buy something else directly from me. This would, of course, plunge me back into dilemma of what to charge. But it's a happy thought.

Lou Rudinski, when asked (and sometimes when not), offers this advice about pricing: "If something sells, the price you set was too low." Others have told me, "I always put the highest price on whatever it is that I don't want to sell. And the crazy thing is that that's, usually, the only thing that sells." Which, when you think about it, isn't crazy at all since we most like our best creations.

So what of the stuff that I just took to my "holiday sale". The most expensive item is priced at \$95.00 -- a pretty sculptural piece that needs to go since its space in the closet has been claimed by something else. The prices then drop, mostly to \$20.00 and below. There are even some pretty, small bowls you can grab for \$5.00. It's what I'd be willing to pay for something I might want but don't need. A better way to think of it is that my stuff will become nice handmade gifts that brighten someone's holidays. With luck, I'm going to get a return in the range of 2012's minimum wage -- enough to buy glue, polyurethane, and sandpaper.

A final thought -- My father was a medical lab scientist. He used to quip about how, through his research, he'd found ways to BOTH publish AND perish. I can never quite shake my sense of history repeating itself.

GOOD LUCK TO ALL with your holiday sales.

Rich