

The End of Woodturning

While it has, in many respects, been an indolent summer – often too hot and humid to be “productive” in the sense of working on the lathe or tackling other shop projects – it has, for me, been a summer in which I’ve found myself thinking about the End of woodturning. But before you begin to believe that I’ve succumbed to some apocalyptic vision for our craft, let me reassure you. The “End” of which I speak is an end in the sense of a goal or ambition.

Thoughts about this were first prompted at June’s meeting of the AAW in Portland. The meeting was the fourth that I’ve attended since starting to turn and first joining the organization. Unfortunately far from our mid-Atlantic home, understandably only a handful of club members were able to make the trip. But for me, it was probably the best meeting I’ve attended. This is not so much because of the specific demonstrations or the content of the galleries which I can’t say were better or worse than in years past. But, rather, because I’ve gradually learned to appreciate the meeting as an opportunity to look carefully at what the professionals are teaching, what other turners at the meeting are making, and what attendees are hoping to learn. And while, like others, I attend demonstrations with the hope of nailing down the “how to” of a new technique, I recognize that I’m slow to challenge myself to try something entirely new even after watching someone show me how utterly easy it is to do.

Prominently featured at this year’s meeting were color, complexity, asymmetry, carving and embellishment. Despite the fact that I’ve seen these trends emerge over the past few years, works and techniques on display were amazing; and I’m sure that I muttered “How did she do that?” to myself more times than ever before.

The untimely death of our colleague, Phil Brown, also has prompted me to think about his contributions to woodturning and how they influenced others, including myself. In fact, years ago I first saw one of Phil’s “classic” vortex or trumpet bowls at a show at the Strathmore Mansion in Bethesda. At the time, I think I’d taken my first woodturning class and was inspired by that bowl to try to elevate my elementary turning to Art. Phil’s bowl was smooth, and thin walled, and elegant. But most importantly, it was “simple”. How hard, then, to replicate something so simple. The clunky bloodwood vessel that resulted from my effort continues to reside on a shelf in my living room. Aesthetically saved by the serendipitous presence of a bark inclusion that was initially hidden, it is an early reminder of how hard it is to achieve simplicity.

These two events have highlighted for me the creative tension in the world of contemporary wood art. I know that I am drawing somewhat artificial lines between the “craftsmanship” of traditional spindle and production turning that give us elegant things to use (think Rude Osolnik candlesticks or Richard Raffan and Mike Mahoney bowls) and the “art” of turners who make things solely to look at and admire. But it is in this realm of wood art that I feel the tension between the “classic” turners whose work emphasizes the elegance and simplicity of form, natural surface, and inherent color (David Ellsworth, Philip Moulthrop, Christian Burchard, Phil Brown, Cindy Drozda) and the work of “contemporary” turners whose work emphasizes complexity of form, applied color, and carved and textured surfaces (Jacques Vesery, J. Paul Fennell, Bin Pho, Dixie Biggs, Mark Sfirri). The lists of artists in these groups goes on and on. And of course there are outstanding individuals who don’t fit neatly into either category (Al Stirt, John Jordan, and Betty Scarpino come immediately to mind).

Right now we are in an era in which complexity is ascendant. Patterns are not only complex, they swirl. Airbrushed colors shade from one to another. Negative space becomes emphasized. And three, four, and more woods are combined. It is exhilarating and exhausting – not just for the maker but also the viewer. All of these trends have gained momentum in the past decade, an era in which the phrase “round and brown” is too often an expression of disparagement.

Interestingly, the world of interior design seems to have moved exactly in the opposite direction. Modern interiors are now plain, and sleek, and gray. And, ironically, this style forms a more suitable backdrop to the visual and emotional complexity of the current popular style of wood art. While decades ago, when woodturning was emerging as an art form and natural wood grain and color and simplicity of form were celebrated not just in turning but in furniture, jarring colors and patterns of Guccis and Puccis seemed to dominate the worlds of fashion and interiors.

Presently, at a time when our world is overwhelmed by conflict, displacement, and uncertainty I’m starting to think that a suitable End for wood art might be found in the peace that comes from the soothing elegance of classical forms, uninterrupted surfaces, and natural grains and colors. Watch for this shift in the years ahead.