

The "Universal Truths" of Woodturning

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1 - There are only three ways to become an accomplished woodturner, and they are practice, practice, and more practice.

2 - It takes years to become an expert woodturner. Standing in front of a lathe, all day, every day, for 20 years would be a good start. Others may be faster than that, but most of the real experts have a lot of gray hair.

3 - Woodturning is both an "art" and a "craft." The "craft" is in how the wood is cut, the tools we use, and how we use them. The shape of the finished piece is the "art." Learning about other art forms (pottery, glass, sculpture, etc.) will improve the "art" of our woodturning.

4 - Continue being challenged to learn new things. One year's experience repeated ten (10) times is not the same as having ten (10) years of experience.

5 - Never lose sight of the customer/user. Anything that is intended to be used must be usable.

6 - You can't cut wood with dull tools. The corollary is that the sharper the tool is, the better it cuts.

7 - Consistency is more important than the actual profile of the cutting tool. Otherwise we are using a different tool after every trip to the grinder. It doesn't matter what the grinding wheel is made of, how fast it spins, whether the tool is held in a jig or freehand, or if we use a belt sander or a rock, so long as the same edge profile is repeated every time we use it.

8 - The speed of the grinding wheel doesn't matter. They all remove metal. The faster wheel removes it faster. There is some justification for the new woodturner to use the slower wheel.

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9 - It doesn't matter what color grinding wheel is used. It can be pink, gray, white, violet, blue, green, or whatever color. It can be made from Aluminum Oxide, Silicone Carbide, sandpaper, or a rock. They all remove metal. Some may be softer and require dressing more often to make them flat again. Others, like the hard gray wheels that came with grinder, will require dressing more often to remove the glaze of embedded metal and "sharpen" the wheel.

10 - The color of the grinding wheel has no meaning. While all white wheels may be Aluminum Oxide, not all Aluminum Oxide wheels are white. They also come in a pale green, violet, pink, blue, and yellow, depending on the manufacturer and the dyes they use in the binders that hold the abrasive particles together.

11 - There is no truth to the myth that the gray wheels will damage the steel.

12 - A cheap grinding wheel is a cheap grinding wheel, whatever color it is. Good quality is more expensive. Lacking any other knowledge and specifications, the price is a good indicator of quality.

13 - A 46-grit is a coarse wheel, and a 120-grit is a fine wheel. Take your pick for those in between. There isn't enough difference between 60, 80, and 100-grit to worry about it.

14 - Getting HSS to turn blue or even red-hot while grinding is not a problem. But, if you do, let it cool in the air. Don't shock it by submerging it in cold water because that can start microcracks in the thin cutting edge.

15 - Getting carbon steel hot enough to turn blue is a problem. That temperature allows the Carbon to move around in the steel and it loses its temper.

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All is not lost when this happens, just get it hot again, immediately dip it in cold water, and then grind away the blue steel, keeping it cool this time with frequent dipping in cold water.

16 - Real woodturners do use scrapers. A scraper is a cutting tool, and it does remove wood. I can do everything with a scraper that can be done with a bowl gouge. It will take me longer, but the wood surface will be better.

17- You can turn an entire bowl or anything else, inside and out, with a scraper. It just takes longer and there is no reason for the tooled finish to be any different from that of a gouge.

18 - Any wood can be turned. Some is just easier than others. On a scale of 1-to-10, I have yet to find a "Zero", but I have had some that came close.

19 - Don't turn bad wood. There is good wood and there is bad wood. Experience will teach us the difference. And, a high purchase price is not a measure of wood quality.

20 - Some wood will crack, no matter what you do with it. Neither soap, nor bags, nor magic potions, or prayer will save it. And you will never know until after it happens.

21 - Cracking in wood started long before we turn it in the lathe. How it was handled before is more important than what we do with it after it is turned.

22 - There are only two kinds of people. Those who are allergic to Cocobolo and those that will be.

24 - Learning to use a skew chisel will teach us how wood is cut, and that will make all other turning tools easier to use.

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25 - The walls of bowls and other vessels will become thinner and more uniform with practice, automatically. We will know when we are getting there because we "just know it" and can hear it. Cracking and other drying problems will start to disappear at the same time. Some folks will never get there, and that's OK too. There is nothing wrong with using calipers.

26 - Don't make turning tools from old files, even if you understand the heat treatment of steel, know how to do it, and have the facilities for it. Every groove on the surface of the file is a stress concentration waiting to crack. Many will have already started to propagate microscopic cracks through the file. No amount of grinding the grooves away, annealing or tempering the file will weld these cracks back together.

27 - Sanding is important. No finish can be any better than the surface that it is applied to.

28 - The finish will accent your mistakes and torn grain. It will not hide them.

29 - Sanding and finishing takes at least as long as the turning, and often longer. If it doesn't, you are either very good and don't need to be reading this, or your standards are too low.

30 - Wood cannot be made into something that it is not: waterproof. If you want waterproof, consider making the vessel from glass or porcelain.

31 - Before using Mineral Oil, keep the customer in mind (again). Ask yourself if you would want to use a salad bowl that was covered with the same thing that your mother gave you as a laxative when you were a child.

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32 - That didn't do it? If you wouldn't put motor oil on the wood, why would you want to use Mineral Oil? They are the same thing. (This one always gets an argument!)

33 - There is no such thing as a "food-safe" finish. Somewhere, sometime, someone will be found who has an allergy to anything that we can put on the surface of a piece of wood, or to the wood itself. If it is considered as being safe, it's because that person hasn't been found, yet.

34 - Woodturners and chemical companies are the only people who believe that, "All finishes are food-safe after the solvents have evaporated." Try explaining this logic to a generation of folks who believe that their health has suffered from "Better living through chemistry."

35 - If the bottom isn't finished, the piece isn't finished. And, a flat surface from a belt sander, or a glued-on piece of felt, is not a finish.

36 - If it isn't signed, it isn't finished. If you don't think enough of it to sign your name, nobody else will think much of it either.

37 - Always wear face and eye protection, even while sanding. You never know when a piece of wood will explode, and the heat from sanding can be enough to do it.

38 - Do not sand without covering your nose and mouth with a respirator or air filter that is approved for fine wood dust. A cheap paper mask is neither. If you think that this isn't important, come back in 20 years and tell me again that it isn't.

39 - I have never met a woodturner that I didn't like. There have been a few that have pushed that statement to the limit, but in the end, they are all good folks.

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40 - Never do anything that you wouldn't want to read about in the next morning's newspaper.

Many thanks go to Russ Fairfield for his kind permission to reproduce this article. You can read more about Russ at www.woodturner-russ.com