

Change, Growth and Choice in the Turning Field

by Bob Marsh

THE FIELD

Wood as a medium and the lathe as a tool have always been and will most assuredly always be an integral facet to the field of object making. Objects are a medium through which we as a culture show our values and share our ideas. We revere them, discard them, use them, embellish them, give them as gifts, investigate them, and collect them. Any object (and especially one made by hand of a once living material) has the ability to demarcate an individual's mindset at a particular moment in time. It is through these made and procured objects that we come to grips with our environment, our society, and ourselves. The multi faceted nature of turned wooden objects can and should be seen as a mirror to the society that they exist within.

The turning field has gone through numerous changes and iterations throughout its history and is still a vital form of production, communication and engagement. Turners and lathe artisans should feel a kinship to those who have used a pole lathe in the woods to turn green wood spindles, those who have dropped 4 x4 blanks a dozen at a time into a production lathe on the factory floor, and those that exhibit their lathe turned sculptures at a Chelsea gallery. It is these and multiple other possibilities that make our field ripe with possibility and often hard to define.

The field of woodworking and turning specifically is in the midst of change. It has been since it's inception and will continue to be as long as it is seen as a viable manner to meet needs, express ideas, produce objects, and reflect desires. It also offers a special place to gain insight, gather together, define oneself and think outside of preconceived notions. It challenges all that enter it on both a technical and philosophical level. And those that are currently working in it are also passing along knowledge to others who will in turn formulate their own considerations about it.

EDUCATION WITHIN IT

Education is a tenuous activity that necessitates open communication between educator, pupil, maker, and material. It asks those who disseminate information and those who are receptive to it, to balance the success and failure of their endeavors with a trust not unlike that of working a large-scale piece of wood on the lathe itself. Acuity in both the making and viewing process is the prerequisite for acquiring information

about an object's path from inception, through construction, to perception. This balance also includes the emotions associated with learning processes and concepts, and having them refute or replace preconceived notions. It can and should be a gratifying task undertaken with the understanding that at it's best it is self-perpetuating.

Now more than ever there is a plethora of information available to the academically trained student who wishes to undertake turning. Fine Art, Craft, and Material Studies departments all house variations and iterations of the turning field. The assignments within these programs run the gamut from purely technical investigations to concept and content driven physical manifestations. Verbal, visual, and technical vocabularies are learned in the studio, classroom, lecture hall, apprenticeships, craft schools, and publications. The process of learning to speak with these acquired vocabularies is a challenge, but then defining what one wishes to say becomes paramount. The end goal of an education is the requisite technical mastery where students feel capable of expressing ideas and interests fully. Eyes are opened and ideas discussed with each given its due and no one particular method espoused above all others.

Instructors and students develop at differing rates with differing agendas. Emotional and psychological connections to physical out-pourings are the beginnings of a non-linear process that is often hard to quantify with a more descriptive term than "growth". One of the unifying facets of a desire to grow is a willingness to share, and an interest in understanding. These student makers often times define what they choose not to do, as opposed to what they have done.

THIS PARTICULAR EXHIBIT

This particular show comes at a time when media specific programs are evaluating what they offer in comparison to ones that are more focused on concepts/content, which allow technique to play second fiddle. It shows a criticality towards what both young and seasoned practitioners are willing to speak about and how they are choosing to say it. It has the uncanny ability to address the multiplicity of the present woodworking /turning field and is certainly a barometer of its interests. This should be tempered with an understanding that the turning field (whether past, present or future) extends well beyond any one singular exhibition and group of makers.

Even with the best of intentions some pieces will be taken out of context, imbued with qualities they did not previously possess, and located in

relation to an object that intentionally contradicts it. But, an exhibition of this nature is the best way to understand objects intimately, to see the choices a maker has made, and showcase an array of approaches. This exhibition shows the relevance of turning as a method of communication and speaks of its certainty of continuance. It also speaks of its relevance now more than ever in a society where many choose to purchase their identities; these makers choose to construct a facet of their surroundings. It displays a culmination of activity that values individuality, creativity, and communication more than ever.

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