

Some Thoughts on Professional Development and Presentation

Although not everyone here wants to be a professional turner (and I salute you for that, doing it as a hobby can be much more fun), almost everyone has tried to sell their work now and then. This presentation is geared towards that. A friend once told me, “There is no depression that sales won’t cure.” It’s so true. And the reverse is also true, if you put your work out that you have worked hard on and are proud of, and there are no takers, it can really bring you down. I’ve certainly had both experiences, and I’d like to share with you some of what I’ve learned from it. This will come as a series of tips that taken together may help you progress in your work. Positive progress is what we all strive for, isn’t it?

To begin with, there is a basic dynamic at play that works very much in our favor. The public is engulfed in a sea of mass produced items, is saturated with pushy advertising. What we have to offer is the opposite. We make hand-crafted one-of-a-kind items, and a lot of people really appreciate that. In terms of volume production there is no way we can compete with China, Hickory NC, or CNC routers. But we do something they can’t do when we take particular care in what we make and add the personal touch. In a sense we offer ourselves in with what we make. This is something to pay attention to. It’s in the details, the presentation, and being there for the customer that matter.

So here is a list of things that come into play as you approach the field. The first part will deal with the work we do, and the second part on how we present it.

1. My basic philosophy is to try to have each bowl have presence. You want what you make to stand up on its own merits, to stand out. It’s a goal you can’t always live up to, but it’s a worthy goal to pursue.
2. Do the very best you can on each piece. This goes without saying, but that extra bit of time on sanding can make quite a bit of difference to the customer. I once had a buyer who sold most of my bowls in various galleries she owned, and one time she brought back a whole set of bowls to be re-sanded. I was much offended at first, as I had spent a good bit of time sanding them in a much more tedious fashion than I do now. But I had to admit they felt a little rough. That’s when I learned to re-sand after the first coat of finish has dried. The feel of the bowl in the hand does make a difference. This is one time it really pays to be a little OCD.
3. Sign your work with care. Initials are not enough. Put on your name, date, the wood, and a title if you are so inspired. Again, it was that same buyer who asked me to switch, and of course she was right, because it really helps the customer to connect with you as the individual artisan. (Bring statue) I once heard of a potter who was much taken by all the fine antique Japanese pottery which was unsigned, and who decided to make

unsigned ware himself. It didn't work. Sales plummeted. So back he went to signing his work.

3. Really take your time on the initial shape of the bowl. Aim for a constant fluid curve at all points of the vessel. Also, be aware that the bowl's base while still on the lathe will always look smaller than it will once it is cut off. This is an optical effect, as I believe that while on the lathe the eye projects a curve down into the faceplate area that disappears once the faceplate is cut off, leaving the bowl looking squat. That is, unless you are going for the squat effect, (which I might add is more prone to cracking).

Also, discipline yourself to stop working on a piece when the wood shows fatal cracks or flaws. A knot near the lip, a crack from the pith line in the bottom, it's hard to do, but either shrink the bowl and cut it away, or chuck the whole piece away. Time is short, and getting shorter. We only have so many hours left to turn, quite a finite number. This is also important for practical reasons for functional bowls. The crack or knot that opens up in the bottom will come back to bite you. However, artistic pieces break all the rules as such cracks may be a vital part of the bowl's presence.

If you really want to get good, “**stand in front of the lathe.**” You simply have to put a lot of time into it. After a month or so of not turning, I find I have to spend a day just to regain my touch.

PS, there is nothing like really sharp tools to make you look good and work faster and more efficiently. Don't hesitate to re-sharpen as soon as your tool STARTS to get dull, it saves a lot of sanding time in the end. And while we are at it, interesting wood also creates half the value of a piece.

4. Nurture your aesthetic tastes. Go to art museums and exhibits when you get the chance, read articles, buy a few books, and include art of all kinds. It will fuel your internal creative energies, foster your appreciation of designs and colors that work, and will be your own art personal education program. At least that's been my experience. I never went to art school and had to learn on the fly. When I was living in remote rural West Virginia, every trip to Richmond or DC was intensely important to me, and I felt tangibly nourished when I got to browse the many museums, such as the Renwick, the Hirschhorn, the Freer, Corcoran, and Sackler galleries, and of course the various exhibits at the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art. Dale Chihouli's glass can be just as inspiring as a David Ellsworth exhibit, and a room full of Van Gogh, or Edward Curtis photographs, or ancient Greek statues will feed your soul. We are lucky to be so close to DC here. The Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia is not so far away.

5. Dip your feet in the water. You've got your captive audience of friends and family, but try selling your wares at a few shows. This is hard to do at first, deciding where to apply and what to take and how much to put into it. But there is nothing like the general public to let you know where things stand. You may find like I did that you might put a lot of work into one piece you really like, and there may be some interest expressed, but **no** sales. Then there is that other piece you kind of knocked off with little thought, and it sells right away. And when that happens over and over, you have to notice.

Now, the fact is that tastes are regional, and what doesn't sell in one place might sell somewhere else. So the corollary is you have to *find your market*. Or put another way, *follow the sales*. The public is voting with their pocketbooks. If there is a type of bowl you really admire and really like to make, it's no use trying over and over to sell where they aren't appreciated. You might have to go travel to find your market.

6. I might add here, when exhibiting in a booth, the "less is more" dictum really seems to hold. Over and over I've been seen the un-crowded booth do better than the crowded one. And the same holds for the styles you are showing. It is good to focus on just a few styles or forms, and play with variations within that field. You will find plenty of creative room there, plenty of challenge for your skills, and you will end up with a pleasing display that is not a scattered smorgasbord. I now think one of the underlying effects of the simpler display is the public gets the sense that you are really mastering it, you really care with the details. If you have a lot of salad bowls you naturally want to put them all out to give people the choice, but try not to pile them in too much.

7. Take time with the presentation of your work. You naturally want to put as much as you can out on display, and you naturally want to focus on that and not on the display. But a few fold-up tables with some kitchen tablecloths on them don't cut the mustard. You've simply got to put some time and effort into it, along with some careful thought about the effect, not forgetting the traffic flow.

8. Pricing. Enough said, eh? It's a difficult subject. At the end of the day you charge what the market can bear. Start low and keep raising the prices until they don't sell. But you can't just rest on the shoulders of others and price what they are getting. It's not as simple as that. If I turn a bowl just like David Ellsworth that does NOT mean I can get a price like he does. No way. He worked hard to get where he is. You have to build up your own name and reputation, and then the sales will follow.

9. Don't be afraid to charge a good bit more for pieces you are really proud of and put a lot of time into. They may not sell right off, but they will help sell the less expensive pieces. And they will reflect that you believe in yourself and in what you are presenting. I once got to go to a nifty little restaurant in lower Manhattan that had a lot of \$35-55

plates, and then one that was \$225! I was impressed. It was something like a huge haunch of meat exotically prepared with great side dishes, and there was no doubt that it would be a memorable meal for a special occasion. I was inspired by the chef's confidence to proudly price high on the special. (though I didn't buy)

10. General PR:

A. Get some business cards. These can be fairly simple, contact info is what you want there, but if you can come up with a catchy image, go for it. Just remember to keep it simple so it easily reads graphically.

B. The next step is to come up with a good card to go with each sale. This is worth spending some time on, as this is what will connect you as a person with the bowl once it gets home. A photo of yourself is essential, as well as something showing you at work, hands to wood as it were. Spend time on the text as well, because people will be studying over it. My bi-fold cards cost me \$1.00 each where I have them printed, so I hand them out judiciously, but it is well worth the expense to be liberal if someone is passing through but looks like they might buy in the future.

C. If you are looking to expand your exposure and your reputation, get a website too. This is indeed a whole separate topic, so much to it, but there are numerous programs out there for the novice, as well as specialty ones like WordPress or Weebly. You can pay someone to do it for you, or spend the time learning it yourself and spend A LOT of time doing it. Check out Roger Chandler's new website. It is stunning. Artisticwoodtreasures.com. The website is your universal business card now.

11. I might mention, the alternative to shows is to sell in galleries, and that can be an excellent alternative. Although you may blanch at the 50% markup most of them charge, it is indeed their cost of doing business. When I have calculated how much it actually costs me to do a show it comes out to 30%. And that is assuming my sales are good enough so the booth fee is only 10% of sales (the basic rule of thumb). It certainly doesn't always work out that way. You could have been home turning all that time. And once again, you have to find your market, find which galleries work for you.

12. Document the best of your work. Take time to make some good photographs. This is a whole separate topic, but if you get a decent digital camera and some medium grey backdrop paper you can get some good images. Avoid colored cloth backgrounds, unless they are black felt or such.

13. Keep track of yourself. This is a rather ambiguous statement, but it is all too easy to get stuck in patterns you might not recognize at first. I like to come into my shop and go into the finishing room and take a look at what I made the past few days, and see how

things are going. This gives me a fresher perspective, as you spend all that time looking at the bowls sideways as you turn. Or take a look now and then at photos of past work, and you might be surprised how certain pieces look different to you now. You might even be surprised how good some of them look, inspiring you to move back that way.

14. If you apply to exhibits, and for that matter to high end shows, be prepared not to get in. But you must not let you get this down. There is so much that depends on the individual jurors, and not your work. It really can be random. A friend who is now quite well known as an artistic spoon maker, Norm Sartorius, was rejected when he first applied to the Smithsonian Show. The next year he sent in the very same slides and got rave reviews for them. I believe this is accurate, and he's been a staple exhibitor there ever since.

15. One basic principle is that the more you keep exposing yourself to the public the more you will become known for what you do. When that begins to happen people might start seeking you out, and that will build up your confidence as well as encourage you to continue. As you hone your skills and develop your own style, you will become better and better until you drift into being an expert!

16. If you end up being really serious about it, it will pay to get involved in the larger woodturning scene. IE, attend the symposiums, get to know the big name turners, and publish. Barbara Dill is here as an example of that. I've done poorly in that field, and tend to keep to myself. I keep thinking of articles to write, but just thinking is never enough, is it?

17. Be prepared to spend a good bit of time on the business end of the enterprise. Record keeping, filing taxes, website, filling orders, preparing PR ... you'll spend a lot of time at the computer in addition to at the lathe.

18. And my final bit of advice is to take it easy. Sure, go with your ambition. But also grow slowly, grow organically. Keep your day job for sure, right? Buy your tools carefully, as you find you need them and not when you learn about the latest thing, and buy the best you can afford. Quality will always pay you back. And grow your exposure and your market in a similar fashion. Just keep at it, and before you know it, you'll be the expert on call!

c. Fred Williamson
July 15, 2014