

THE FRUIT OF FOUR

By Steve Blenk

Where do turners get their ideas? How do they put them into practice? Conversations about what inspires those whose woodworking focuses on woodturning tend to either begin or end with one of these questions. The answers never cease to surprise. The four turners (of varying degrees of expertise) whose work is shown



Woodworker's Journal sent four identical blocks of butternut, 6" x 4" x 12", to four turners of varying degrees of expertise. The charge: let the wood inspire you and send us the results.

on these pages were each supplied with a block of 12" x 4" x 6" butternut. Their task? Be creative and turn — something! One thing, or several.

No rules ... well, just as long as it was made on the lathe, and mainly

out of the wood we supplied. And then, tell us about why and how you arrived at the



TURNERS

creations you produced. As the *Journal's* turning columnist, I got the call to be the one doing the asking. We got back a great primer on how to get the creative turning juices flowing!

Our first step in this experiment was asking Mary Lacer, managing director of the American Association of Woodturners, for the names of our other participants (one of them, of course, was Mary herself). This article is our chance to share their turnings and creative insights with you.



Amelia Redig:
Five years turning.
Fresh creative perspective. Amelia has the advantage of sharing equipment and knowledge with her mother, Mary Lacer (below).



Jean LeGwin:
six years turning — part-time.
A very gifted amateur turner with a creative artistic approach.



Mary Lacer:
25 years turning experience.
The AAW managing director turns vessels, spindles and small-scale work. Professional woodturner.



Linda VanGehuchten:
30 years turning.
Craft items, furniture, vessels, industry demo's (with JET equipment).
Professional woodturner.





Jean used our experiment as her own chance to explore aspects of turning she'd never tried before, including split turning. "I had never done a split turning before, and at first I couldn't get it apart! The joint didn't want to open up when I was finished!" She persevered and succeeded. The piece was painted for contrast, red in the recess and black outside, using acrylic paints.

Her second piece, a lidded box, was turned and then textured by woodburning before being painted. She used an undercoat and then a blue wash to get this effect. The handles were part of a raised band that was then carved away, leaving just the visible pieces remaining. "I also used a bit of maple for the top knob piece on this one to give a real contrast," Jean said.

The final form was done as a split turning ... two pieces laminated with a paper joint, turned, and then opened and joined at the end.

Why three new techniques? I asked. "I wanted to try something completely new for this, to check the creative process for myself.

The carved one was a nice surprise ...

finding out that butternut carved so well," Jean responded. *What usually determines your choice of forms?*

"The piece of wood. You can have a form in mind, but the wood will be the big factor." *Where do you find your forms?* "I get ideas for shapes everywhere — natural forms, ceramic shapes, glass, metalwork ... A beginner could get ideas from all the above and by looking at the work of other turners and emulating them to build skill level;

look at all the round objects in the world in all media and imagine how they could be turned."

Has your work been influenced by other turners?

"I have been particularly influenced by David Ellsworth and John Jordan because I have done workshops with them. David has an exquisite sense of elegant, minimalist shapes, while John is doing wonderful work with textural effects."

Turner: Linda VanGehuchten

Linda took a different tack with her piece of butternut. Her idea was to produce a deep endgrain vessel. To add a bit more of a challenge, she did it by mounting the blank on three separate axes, giving an ovoid effect to the piece. Her reasoning for this technique was to show as much grain as possible to best advantage. Then she went



Jean LeGwin

Turner: Jean LeGwin

Jean took our challenge to the limit, and also challenged herself as far as she could. As she produced her items, she used in each at least one technique she had never attempted before. She told us that she decided to make three separate turnings from our blank, and resawed it accordingly. Her first object was a hollow vessel with a basket-like carved surface. She admitted the butternut gave her some trouble, and she had a catch while turning the top. "I found out it carved better than it turned," she told me, "so I decided to carve the outer surface of the entire piece after turning." Jean then burned the surface for color and contrast.

Linda VanGebuchten



to the center axis and cut the lip using a skew, and did her hollowing. Finishing was done by burning with a propane torch, and then brushing the char. Linda immediately discovered that butternut was easy to burn, and easy to control where she wanted the wood to be lighter or darker. The charred effect gave depth and color to the wood, making the grain really stand out. For an additional accent on the rim, Linda applied a layered effect of Golden's acrylic copper and green interference paint with an airbrush.

I asked Linda, *What are some of the woods you really like to work?*

"Western maple burl, cherry and Eastern hard maple. I make many items out of these, and they cut quite well." *What do you look at when you are deciding on a form?* "It's usually about the wood. You have to decide how to show what's there in the best way possible." *Why do you turn wood?* "Because it's fun. I enjoy turning even after 30 years of it. You never run out of new approaches to try." *Advice for other turners?* "Keep the chips flying. Try new things. Keep it fresh."

Turner: Mary Lacer

Mary told me she had considered this project for quite a while before actually getting the wood. She had thought about making an oval form, but was challenged immediately by the narrow 6" dimension of the blank. She solved the problem by resawing the blank and edge gluing it back together. This gave her approximately 12" x 12" x 2¼" to work with. Lots of area, but not much thickness. Her next move was to mount the blank



Linda went with a three-axis approach to her piece, in part because she admires Stoney LaMar's work. "He's great. I like his forms and his techniques. Using that approach on this blank gave me a bigger vessel, more area to work with." In addition, she used a burned surface on the vessel "to try and bring out some character in what was a somewhat bland surface."

on a waste block, to retain as much of that 2¼" depth as possible. "I didn't want to waste a bit of that blank. I wanted as much depth as I could get on the form.

Laminating it gave me the area, but I had just enough thickness," she said.

After turning, Mary decided to paint the rim black as a contrast to the center. "The idea was to give it an appearance of more depth." She used acrylic paint to get that effect, and put a number of grooves in it for a unique accent.

I asked Mary, *How did you get your start in woodturning?* "I took a class in woodworking, and my goal was to use every machine in the shop. The lathe kept my interest."

How do you decide on forms and shapes? "The grain of the wood usually indicates a direction you can go with a piece. You want to show grain and figure to the best advantage."

Mary Lacer



Mary resawed her blank and edge glued it back together to create a greater area for her ovoid platter of a larger dimension than we would have thought possible from that blank. The ideas for many of her turnings' shapes come from glass. "I seem to be drawn to that media and find shapes there that I like."

Where do your ideas for the forms come from?

I get ideas from other media and then adapt them to come up with original designs. Books on ceramics are an excellent reference for woodturners to look for unique forms and designs."

Has your own work been influenced by the work of others, and if so, by which turners? "Over the years, I have been influenced by Michael Brolly and Michelle Holzapfel. I love the playfulness of Michael's work, and the imagination in Michelle's work just draws me to it."

What about tools? "After a while, you get it down to two or three that you really use. A good bowl gouge, a spindle gouge and a skew are a must. Buy good tools and a good lathe, and you'll only buy them once."

Any advice for other turners? "Lessons," she said. "There's a lot of good instruction available these days, but you have to match the class to what you need. Be sure to get a class that will teach you what you want to learn. Learn from other turners, and then apply your own style to what you've learned."



Turner: Amelia Redig

Amelia took her piece of butternut to new heights ... literally. She produced a tall, lidded form. "I don't often get big, solid stock like this to work with, and I wanted it to be a tall form," she said. She turned a tenon on the end of her blank between centers, and then held it with a Oneway chuck and went to work. "I try to let the wood develop while I'm turning it," she told me. "I have a form in mind, but the wood determines where I go. I don't fight the wood." She finished the piece with walnut oil, and used a spray lacquer on the painted sections. She also applied a shimmering metallic powder to some interior sections of what she calls her "Gem Box," and applied a copper wire wrap as an accent below the pull. Upon lifting the pull, "You are rewarded with a fun, shimmery surface. It's the perfect place to keep small gems and treasures."

Why do you turn wood? "I love to work with wood. The textures are wonderful. I tried carving, and even took a class, but I cut myself! The lathe is pure fun."

Amelia Redig

What do you like most about it? "It gives you control of the shaping process. You're not just working with a cutting tool; you ARE the cutter." What is the important part in choosing a shape to produce? "The wood. Your form has to complement the grain pattern."

Where do your shapes come from? "Mostly from nature. I try to deal largely with balance and proportion in relation to meaning and intent. The ideal form for a beginner is one that comes naturally. Doodle for a while, either 2D or 3D, and find out which types of curves, beads and coves appeal to your senses."

Have other turners influenced your work, and if so, who? "The work of other turners is simultaneously necessary and dangerous. It is all too easy to fall in love with someone else's style or concept and continue in that vein. The challenge is to borrow, expand and create your own style. Matthew Hill's pieces have greatly influenced my own ideas about woodturning. His precision and attention to detail are amazing. Each of his boxes has a certain harmony to it that initially attracts the eye and then pulls the viewer in to explore its subtle nature."

Do you have any advice for other turners? "Keep trying new things, and don't fight the wood. Don't be afraid to change your design mid-creation, or scrap it altogether and go in a completely different direction."



After achieving the desired profile for her "Gem Box," Amelia hollowed the endgrain of the form, and then turned the lid from pieces she laminated back together from the resawing process. "I carved the curve connecting with the hollowed area so that when you look at it you anticipate something hidden within. That's where human curiosity takes over, and you just have to lift the lid to see what's inside."

Closing Thoughts

The takeaway lesson from these four capable turners who started with (nearly) identical wood and achieved results as varied and creative as we could possibly wish? That artistic woodturning is a largely subjective creative act, and that we all engage in it from differing perspectives. The wood is one determining factor. We each bring our skills and our unique point of view to the work. At its best, the result is some part wood, some part technique and some part self. The tree lends us its magic, and we use our tools and knowledge to blend it with our own. Techniques can be learned, and there are many good suggestions here from these turners. Forms and shapes are where you find them. Keep looking at the world around you, and keep turning. All those shapes are out there.