

The Turners' Challenge: Year Three

By Betty Scarpino

In our third annual "Turners' Challenge," four amateur turners were provided with identical soft maple turning blanks. The diversity of their output speaks volumes about the possibilities inherent in turning.

What better way to encourage friends to do more woodturning than promise them a free chunk of wood and a chance to show others what they've made! The Women's Woodworking Guild of Indiana meets every month, but I often cannot attend their meetings to talk turning, so I invited four members to participate in this year's Turners' Challenge. The challenge for three of the women was their limited experience using a lathe, particularly for turning a large faceplate form.

Jennifer Shirley, Myra Perrin, and Paula Mann all live in Indianapolis. Anne Shellabarger lives in Mooresville, just west of the city. I arranged to deliver a 16-inch square by 2-inch thick piece of soft maple to each woman: easy enough for them to get started, or so I thought. Right away came the realization that only Jennifer's lathe could turn such a large piece of wood, and Anne doesn't even own a lathe! Several e-mail messages later, and I had visitors to my shop. Myra, Paula and Anne would use my lathe. Even better, a bit of instruction would be included in the deal.

Jennifer, Myra, Anne and Paula approached the challenge in entirely different ways. The end results were varied and outstanding! Photographer Shawn Spence and I met at Jennifer's home early in the morning. Myra was

there, too. It threatened to rain the entire day, but we were fortunate that Shawn could take some of the photos outdoors.

What follows is the result of interviews, as well as personal knowledge — I have known these women for several years. When I need flat woodworking done, I call them. In turn, they rely on me for advice on woodturning.

Furniture Maker: Anne Shellabarger

Anne Shellabarger is admittedly a novice woodturner, but she is no stranger to woodworking tools and machinery. She began her career as a carpenter, and she built her own home! She now makes custom furniture, small boxes and hanging shelves, which she designs herself. Her work sells through the Art in Hand Gallery in Zionsville, just north of Indianapolis.

From the beginning, Anne had in mind to make a puu-puu platter. She likes to make utilitarian objects, and she intended this platter to be used. The large diameter of the wood allowed for a center cup for salsa, which could be surrounded by corn chips.

Anne's previous experience using a lathe was limited to spindle turned elements for furniture. Her ability to work with her hands gave her the advantage of being a quick learner. The result was successful!



Anne used the glue-block method to attach her turning blank to the lathe. She first cut the wood into a circle using the bandsaw, then she hand planed a flat spot for the 2"-thick glue block. A quick application of CA glue held the turning blank and glue block together. The next step was to screw the

faceplate onto the glue block. Because the wood was large, Anne used six substantial screws to insure a secure hold. Using the glue block method allowed Anne to get full use of the two inches of the turning blank. She would need that to accommodate the depth of the salsa bowl.



Anne Shellabarger



Paula Mann



Jennifer Shirley



Myra Perrin



Anne Shellabarger began her career as a carpenter and now sells custom furniture for a living. Her previous lathe experience was limited to turning spindles.



Paula Mann began turning a few years back after taking a class. This Minister-to-be advises new turners to “let the tools do the work. If the gouge seems to be fighting, try visiting the grinder.”



Anne started turning by roughing the blank into the largest diameter available. Because the inside diameter of the receptacle for the bowl was critical, she turned that first, making sure the bottom area was flat. As she turned, she learned. I gave her pointers here and there. Anne’s advice for other beginning turners: when turning a large piece of wood, take the prep time to cut it round and to make sure the bottom is flat where the glue block is attached. And, most important, use sharp tools!

A bit of sanding, then Anne was done. She used a parting tool to reduce the diameter of the glue block, and with a mallet and chisel popped the platter from the glue block. She sanded the bottom using a sanding disc. An application of salad oil brought out the beautiful grain of the maple. Add salsa and chips and serve!

Turner: Paula Mann

Paula has been turning wood for a few years, ever since taking a class at the Indianapolis Art Center. Over the past two years, Paula has been making chalice and paten sets and increasingly receives commissions for them.

Paula has a BS in Mechanical Engineering and a Master of Quality Management degree. A major career move happened two years ago when she quit her job and went back to school to obtain her Masters of Divinity at Christian Theological Seminary. She intends to become a Presbyterian minister.

Not surprisingly, Paula’s project is a baptismal font. It has a peaceful, serene look when filled with water and river rocks. Paula finished it with oil, like the finish on a cutting board. After use, she dries it with a soft cloth.

The lathe Paula owns is a Shopsmith 510 model, which she bought new in 2002. Its slowest speed is 700 rpm, making it a challenge to turn large objects inboard — the turning can be accomplished, but sanding is a problem. For that, slower speeds are necessary. Like Myra and

Anne, Paula headed for my shop. She also used the glue-block method for attaching the wood to the lathe.

Paula turned three grooves in the rim, which stand for the Trinity. Each groove’s boarder is lower than its neighbor, from outside to inside, so water can flow from edge to the center. She pours water into the outer most edge, letting it spill like a waterfall into the center.

Her advice to others is to let the tools do the work. If the gouge seems to be fighting, it probably means a trip to the grinder is needed or perhaps you should try making the cut using a slightly different angle of the cutting edge against the wood. Good advice for all turners!

Turner: Jennifer Shirley

Jennifer is a part-time woodturner, works full time as a director of one of Indianapolis’ television news programs, and is the proud mother of Weston, a fine young teenager. Jennifer is mostly self-taught, but she did take a turning class at Arrowmont School for Arts and Crafts in Tennessee. She also plans to attend a class at the Appalachian Center for Crafts in Tennessee, taught by New Zealand woodturner, Graeme Priddle.

Jennifer is skilled with the use of a chainsaw, and she easily cuts up log sections into bowl blanks. Friends often dump random logs in her driveway, but that may be a thing of the past. She recently began using wood that is already dried and finds that her results are more consistent. With a limited amount of time to devote to her passion, she would rather get right to the turning, which provides balance to the stress of a full-time job.

The lathe that Jennifer uses is a General, which she bought new several years ago. It can turn 22" inboard. Her shop is a converted garage and it’s easy to tell from how it’s arranged that the General lathe is of primary importance. A miniature JET lathe sits on a workbench, which Jennifer uses to teach Weston, who’s making pens and spinning tops.



Jennifer Shirley is a part-time turner and a full-time news program director. Turning, she points out, can provide balance to the stress of a full-time job. Her advice? "Woodturning is easy to do, but hard to do well. Invest in education."



The platter she made is an excellent example of how Jennifer is beginning to develop her own style of embellishing turned objects. Her first attempts were tentative, but now she boldly covers an entire turned object, combining carving, painting, texturing, and wood burning.

Jennifer turned the back of her platter first, took it off the lathe, textured the back with a needle scaler, then added black gesso to create accent areas. She flipped the platter around and reattached it to the lathe using a chuck. Then she turned the front of the platter and left an elevated section in the middle.

While on the lathe, Jennifer painted black gesso for accents on the front. Next, she used the indexing on her lathe to lay out the spacing for the carved arches. At her workbench, she carved the shape of the rim with a power carver and carved the inner details with a reciprocating carver. Jennifer used a wood burner with a variety of pen tips to texture the detail on the rim and inner design. The circles she burned with a piece of copper pipe, heated with a torch. The small metal accents are brass BBs, glued into divots.

Jennifer's advice: woodturning is relatively easy to do, but difficult to do well, so invest in some type of education — it's a step in the right direction.

Artist: Myra Perrin

Myra Perrin describes herself as "an artist who happens to work with wood." She is a recent graduate of Herron School of Art, where she earned a BFA in furniture design. Currently, she is working at an art gallery in the Broad Ripple area of Indianapolis — she loves being surrounded by other people's work.

Myra's Delta lathe is located in her ground-level basement garage, part of an arsenal of woodworking tools and machinery which make up her studio. The lathe has



Myra Perrin describes herself as a "bits and pieces" artist who enjoys experimenting with new processes and techniques. That long spindle, for instance, is "Comp Wood," solid ash infused with water under high pressure.



an inboard capacity of 10" — not large enough for this chunk of wood, so she headed for my shop. The turning part of Myra's project was straightforward and easy: turn a disc to use as the basis for a wall hanging. The time she spent turning was minimal compared to the painting and assembling. Myra left the disc rough-turned and used that textured surface for the paint which would be added later.

Myra is a true a "bits and pieces" artist who enjoys experimenting with new processes and techniques. The wood she used for the long spindles that loop around her disc are an example of her interest in combining different elements and trying new materials. It's called Comp Wood, and she purchased it from a company called Fluted Beams (www.flutedbeams.com). It's solid ash, which has been infused with water under high pressure and comes wrapped in plastic. Myra unwraps a piece, rips it on her bandsaw, then bends it into various shapes, using clamps to hold it in place. After about twenty-four hours the wood can be unclamped, and it retains the bent shape.

After Myra painted the bent forms, she attached them to the disc, using wood pegs. They look like pieces of metal, once again a testimony to Myra's ability to experiment with materials and techniques. To achieve that look, she used an acrylic paint that contained graphite, burnishing between coats. For the disc, she used Golden Acrylics paint, charcoal stick and graphite, drawing on the disc during the painting process. The disc also has the look of metal, which compliments the long bent forms.

Myra's advice for beginning turners is to constantly experiment — it's the only way to build skills and design sense. Picasso said, "inspiration exists, but it has to find us working," so turn, turn, turn.

Betty Scarpino is a woodturner who learned her craft from workshops, classes, and self-education. Her web site, www.bettyscarpino.com has recently been redesigned.