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As the World Turns

Torben Lorenzen
Bridgewater State University, lorenzen@bridgew.edu

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As the World Turns

Toby Lorenzen
(Photographs by Frank Gong)

When I walk through a forest, I do not see “trees.” I see a red oak or white oak or black oak. I see a sassafras or an ash—rarely, a surviving elm. I pass beech, walnut, apple, cherry, red maple or sugar maple, moosewood, yellow birch or white birch. Sometimes a young chestnut—soon to die—presents itself. Looking at tree bark patterns, I see if the underlying wood promises to be curly or straight-grained; if that “bump” is a true burl or some wonderful feather grain; or will a bark inclusion or crack run the length of the log? Will the muse trace the outline of a beautiful shape hidden in the wood or whisper the way an imperfection can be transformed into a unique feature of beauty? Or will the turner force his preconceived vision onto the yielding wood?

To create some of my shapes requires a mastery of solid geometry, the creation of many jigs, and meticulous planning: all left-brain functions. If you look at my cherry natural edge bowl (Image 1), you might notice that the bark rim has two lower-rim points also of identical height and two wing tips of identical height and width. Which one will the turner attempt to free? A heavy, loud, expensive chainsaw with an unforgiving 20”-long bar rips the log down to the pith into two mirrored halves. That initial cut consigns many potential bowls to a premature, sawdusty death. It’s a cruel job to be a turner. With bated breath, we look at the released center surfaces of the tree. Will there be a beautiful heartwood picture peering out at us or some wonderful feather grain; or will a bark inclusion or crack run the length of the log? Will the muse trace the outline of a beautiful shape hidden in the wood or whisper the way an imperfection can be transformed into a unique feature of beauty? Or will the turner force his preconceived vision onto the yielding wood?

Other bowls are creations of my right brain. After the bowl blank is mounted to the lathe and turned round, I watch forms evolve under my gaze. I focus on any area that doesn’t seem quite right to me; I stop cutting when a shape seems right to me. My subjective experience is very much that of being an observer to a sequence of unveilings. If pressed, I would agree that I created the bowl in question, but I feel more like an explorer or a prospector for beauty than a creator. Things don’t always progress straightforwardly. Sometimes I experiment on an imperfect piece of wood and make something very different from my previous bowls. If the resulting form isn’t attractive to me, I won’t sand or finish it. I set it aside (I can’t quite bring myself to throw it on the firewood pile) and start another bowl. Invariably someone proclaims admiration for the bowl in question, but I feel more like an explorer or a prospector for beauty than a creator.

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“Parting is such sweet sorrow.” Each piece of wood is unique and every bowl is one of a kind, never to be seen again. How do I part with my unique creations? “Let me count the ways.” At first, when I had completed only a few bowls, it was hard for me to give one away as a present—even to a family member. Would it crack in its first days away from home? Would some unfeeling visitor put it in the dishwasher or on top of the fireplace mantel? Would I ever make one like it again? Would halfs. That initial cut consigns many potential bowls to a premature, sawdusty death. It’s a cruel job to be a turner. With bated breath, we look at the released center surfaces of the tree. Will there be a beautiful heartwood picture peering out at us or some wonderful feather grain; or will a bark inclusion or crack run the length of the log? Will the Muse trace the outline of a beautiful shape hidden in the wood or whisper the way an imperfection can be transformed into a unique feature of beauty? Or will the turner force his preconceived vision onto the yielding wood?

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Then the owner of a local gallery asked for bowls—bowls she wanted to sell to strangers. After I got over the initial horror of the idea, I was flattered. And I now had dozens of bowls. But, then, how to price a bowl? The obvious answer was to ask as much as I could get. But if I charged at my computer science consultant rate multiplied by the ten hours I spend in all aspects of turning, I should only make $10 an hour. That’s reasonable, I suppose, but playing starving artist out of resentment. When I heard about small businesses, something clicked. I wished to give cleanly, without resentment. When I heard about the craft of micro loans granted to women in the developing world to create small businesses, something clicked for me. Those loans were reportedly repaid 90% of the time. It is the gift that keeps giving!

I knew the following: no one would pay me what I was used to earning as a computer professional while I turned. Over the years I have collected and repaid 90% of the time. It is the gift that keeps giving!

My turning has opened other doors for me beyond the simple pleasures of creating and sharing the beauty I discover. I had been giving to a variety of charities, but it was never cleanly done. I felt the money was just going down a bottomless pit and supporting no lasting benefit. It is the gift that keeps giving!

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I knew the following: no one would pay me what I was used to earning as a computer professional while I turned. And I didn’t want to work for “free.” I want my art to be somewhat affordable so those who aren’t rich can still invite beauty into their homes. Then I put it all together. Now, I barter my bowls for tax deductible contributions to micro loan organizations. Instead of earning a little for each hour I turn a bowl, I earn nothing. But turning feeds my soul and makes a difference to those women. Finally, it’s all cleanly done.

I deeply appreciate those artists who create the beauty that I then bring into my life. Perhaps I was slow to appreciate in a similar fashion. It took a long time for it to dawn on this pragmatic computer scientist, but creating beauty is a fine thing to do with the rest of my life. As Emerson almost said, “If eyes were made for seeing, then creating beauty is a good reason for being.”

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Photography is all about light. One of the advantages of working in a studio is that one has complete control of light. I began by making the studio room as dark as possible, then put my white, seamless background in place and proceeded to add back light in a carefully controlled manner. The lighting set-up used here is a standard one, employing two lights, plus a reflector or two. The goal is two-fold: deliver even, non-distracting light on the background and uneven, “interesting” light on the bowls to give them depth. I placed one light to illuminate the background without spilling it onto the bowl. The second light was placed at camera left of the bowl and just a bit in front of it. Thus, one side of the bowl is well lit while the opposite side is in shadow. Reflectors were used to add light to the shadows on the dark side and into the interiors of the bowls. None of the lighting equipment is high-tech or photo-specific. I used LED lights that are designed for use under kitchen counters. The reflectors are rectangles of cardboard, some white, and some covered in aluminum foil. The camera (a Nikon D300 fitted with an 18-70 mm zoom lens) was mounted on a tripod. For each new bowl, I adjusted both the camera and lighting to fit the new shape. Each bowl was photographed at different angles by turning the bowl and moving the camera. The photos you see here were selected from a total of seventy exposures and “polished” in PhotoShop.

Frank Gorga is an accomplished photographer whose nature photography has been featured in Bridgewater Review. He is also Professor in the Department of Chemical Sciences.

Behind the Images

Frank Gorga

Photographing wooden bowls indoors in a “studio” is far outside the usual realm of my photography... landscapes and wildlife. However, I do like a challenge. The challenge in this type of photography is to document a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional photograph. I began by borrowing a bowl from Toby and experimenting with approaches in my basement studio at home. Toby and I spent an hour last fall choosing bowls and talking about what he was looking for in the photographs. In early January, I set up a “studio” in a Conant Science and Mathematics building laboratory and spent a day making photographs.

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