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# So You Want to Turn a Bowl...

Robert F. Lyon

**B**owls are perhaps the easiest, and at the same time the hardest, object for the woodturner to make. They are the easiest because almost everyone can make a hollow in a piece of wood and call it a bowl. But, is it a really good bowl?

The first “bowl” was perhaps the two cupped hands of primitive man scooping drinking water from a stream or lake. According to Greek mythology, the first bowl was shaped over the breast of Aphrodite. Chinese potters of the Sung Dynasty were masters of bowl making, carefully forming their wares showing a strict harmony between lip, body, and foot. Korean and Japanese bowls tend to be more informal and often use forms and textures that suggest they were made quickly, often leaving tool marks evident in the surface of the clay. It is no accident that we use anthropomorphic terms to describe bowls and other vessels and their parts. People have often sensed that these forms have a symbolic similarity to the human body. Terms such as lip, neck, waist, and foot all suggest a sensation of wholeness in a composed piece that can be felt but is often hard to describe.

Bowls have evolved greatly over time, and now come in many materials, shapes and sizes. While it’s easy to find generic, mass produced and

often ugly bowls at the local discount store, making good bowls, or making good bowls great, is something that takes years of practice. Many craftspeople have spent their entire career making similar forms over and over searching for the perfect combination of form and material. It is only through the constant repetition of bowl making will the concepts of line, shape, proportion, and feel, come through in a unified statement. However, it’s not the repetition alone, it has to be done with the eyes open, and the mind alert to the subtle nuances that make a good bowl great.

Although there are no hard, fast rules for how a bowl should be shaped, over the years certain shapes have developed and these tend to be favorites with woodturners and vessel makers in many other media, such as clay, metal and glass. The “S” curve or ogee curve creates a soft look in the finished bowl and tends to be somewhat formal in appearance. These bowls, when turned with very small feet, tend to border on the artistic rather than the utilitarian side. The parabola-shaped bowl lends itself to utilitarian purposes and can often be seen on tables holding fruit or in the kitchen laden with salad. Bowls that are fairly wide across the bottom are also often used for utilitarian purposes. A wider foot makes these bowls more stable on the work surface.

Bowls turned with very small feet, tend to have a light airy feeling, while wider feet have a more stable feeling (and in fact are more stable) lending themselves to utilitarian function.



A bowl with an ogee shape appears more formal than other styles.



The parabola shape of this bowl lends itself to art or utilitarian purposes.



Bowls that are wider at the base make good utilitarian pieces.

Of course, some bowls don’t have a foot at all and simply sit straight onto a table or other surface. The calabash bowl is an example of this style. There is an elegant simplicity in the appearance of the calabash bowl, and it is equally at home as either a piece of art or as a utilitarian turning.



The calabash bowl provides for a lot of interior volume.

The bowl turner also has choices in whether or not the bark should be left on the bowl or removed. By deciding to leave the bark intact, the turner is moving into the realm of asymmetrical design, and away from what is commonly thought of as utilitarian purposes. However, asymmetrically designed bowls, with or without bark, can still be used for utilitarian purposes depending on the makers intended function.



Leaving the bark on a turning is often an interesting option.

A few years ago, I was invited to be an artist in residence at a school in South Korea. As a gift for my host's mother, I brought a newly made wooden bowl that I thought was pretty good. I was told several days

after presenting her with the gift, that she thought the bowl was beautiful, but it didn't feel right in her hands. The Koreans have a long history of bowl making, and they use and handle bowls on an everyday basis. Her statement made me rethink how I judge bowls and other utilitarian ware. This realization comes after both undergraduate and graduate degrees in ceramics, and teaching ceramics, glassblowing and sculpture at the college level for many years. Good bowls are not as simple as they appear.

You often hear people suggest, "look through books" for form ideas. While books are helpful reminders of shape and form, nothing is as good as seeing them in person. Seeing them in person gives you a true sense of the object's scale, texture, and proportion. Instead of solely relying on books, I recommend that you look at utilitarian objects of all kinds, wood, ceramic, glass, and metal - in person.

Go to museums and galleries. Look at how the artists have used combinations

of line, shape, form, and material to form an artistic statement. Handle the pieces if possible, because picking them up will tell you how the weight is distributed, how smooth the lines are, and how it feels to be used and handled. Take a picture of those you believe are particularly good, or better yet, make a sketch. Drawing is a much better media as it helps combine the skills of the hand and eye, something that will be essential when you return to your lathe and try to make a bowl for yourself. Most importantly, learn to distinguish the best from the good, and the good from the bad. Because ultimately, you have to be the judge of what you show and what ends up as firewood.

So, do you still want to make a bowl? I certainly hope so, if for no other reason than it is a pursuit that will last a lifetime, providing countless hours of challenge and pleasure. ■

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## More on Bowls

The AAW offers members access to our complete library of publications through **AAW EXPLORE!**, an online tool to help members locate woodturning information, projects, articles, tips, and more, by quickly and easily using keywords. For more information on bowl turning, we suggest the following articles. Search **AAW EXPLORE!** using the author's last name or the first few words of the article's title.

- **"Twenty Ways NOT to Turn a Bowl,"** by Nick Cook, *American Woodturner*, vol 21, no 1. You'll learn why the spindle roughing gouge and skew chisel are not safe for bowl turning.
- **"Faceplates-A Simple Solution to Attachment,"** by Jim Rodgers, *American Woodturner*, vol 24, no 1, an overview of what you need to know about faceplates.
- **"Turning Your Very First Bowl: Old-Time Shop Teacher Demonstrates a Basic Path to Success,"** by John Kelsey, *American Woodturner*, vol 29, no 4, offers basic bowl turning setup, detailing equipment, and process.



- **"Scrapers: A Eulogy,"** by Richard Raffan, *American Woodturner*, vol 27, no 2, You'll learn methods for using scrapers for clean cuts on bowls.
- **"Turning Lumber: Bowls and Plates from Rough-Sawn Boards,"** by Betty Scarpino, *American Woodturner*, vol 9, no 2, offers several solutions to safely remounting dry-wood bowls for returning bottoms.
- **"Real Woodturners DO Use Scrapers,"** by Russ Fairfield, *American Woodturner*, vol 18, no 1. You'll learn more about the effectiveness of burrs on scraper edges explained in detail.

