

The Art of Critique

By Jim Christiansen

My development as a woodturner followed a typical pattern. Cheap dull tools, overuse of sandpaper, a reject pile that was large enough to be a fire hazard all resulting in a series of misshapen, thick-bottomed work given to relatives—pieces that are still around today as a haunting reminder of the early years.

Then, I had the opportunity to meet the only two other turners in my remote area of Idaho. We formed a group and met weekly to give each other feedback and to develop new ideas.

I had my first chance to attend a woodturning symposium. While touring the instant gallery, I saw John Jordan near what I thought was my best work to date. On impulse, I requested that he give me a critique. What followed made a life-changing impression on me. After a careful examination, he provided me with a list of possible changes.

The suggestions he made in one short session led to significant progress in my work in a very short time.

The importance of critique was made very obvious to me.

Later, when I joined a woodturning club in a nearby city, I discovered that for most woodturners, critique is a big problem. I heard many horror stories where a “bad” critique resulted in hurt feelings, turners giving up the hobby, and, in one case, threatened physical assault. Because critique has been such a positive experience for me, I decided to find a way to make it a helpful experience for everyone.



Ben Swartz, an AAW member from Des Moines, holds his 10" x 5" purpleheart and cocobolo bowl for critique.

Photo: John Hetherington

The original plan I developed has undergone a number of revisions. The following outline represents my current thinking that will undoubtedly evolve and change as I receive feedback and suggestions.

Overview and goals of a woodturning critique

A good critique provides feedback that can improve future work and assist in developing new ideas. Without constructive feedback, the turner is not only destined to repeat past mistakes but to not see new ways to improve his or her work.

A critique—poorly done—can result in discouragement, anger, and a possible loss of enthusiasm and creativity. It is important, then, to make sure that when critiques are given, they are “good” ones that enlighten and inspire. It is important to remember, however, that good evaluation is not easy. It is a process that requires shared understanding, sensitivity, and good communication. The first step is to develop an understanding about what we expect from the process.

The following goals represent what we hope to learn from critique:

- To develop an awareness of special factors that determines the quality of your work.
- To enhance your ability to perceive subtle elements of shape, form, and design.
- To expand your range of

thought by becoming more aware of new options, possibilities, and directions for your work.

- To discover better ways to produce your work.
- To develop a basis for effective self-criticism.

The critique process

Although the details for the process may vary to some degree—depending on the type of critique being given—I believe the process is a starting point for all types of critique. Simply put, the process requires the evaluator to look at a piece of work and then to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the piece through his or her perspective.

Unfortunately, in the real world, there is much to consider. First, the manner in which you “look” at a piece of work is important. As the person whose work is being judged is likely watching your every move, it is important to take time to look at the work in a careful, systematic manner. Holding the work carefully, even gingerly, communicates respect for the work.

Many research studies support the view that non-verbal communication constitutes 80 to 90 percent of the shared meaning in human interactions. Therefore, the evaluator should be careful not to communicate the wrong message by an expression of disinterest or a scowl or grimace. It is possible that a sensitive observer will be unable to “hear”

what you actually say if you have set a negative tone through your non-verbal communication.

Put what you see into words as you examine the work. Describe specific characteristics rather than providing judgments. For example, say, “...this line flattens out here” rather than “...this is a poor line” or “...this shape is awkward.” Liberal use of “I feel” statements or sentences that begin with “In my opinion...” helps people understand that points being made are the evaluators subjective opinion. Others may have a different view. Such statements are less likely to elicit a defensive reaction in the turner whose work is being evaluated.

The Quality Indicator Checklist

The content of the critique is another element to consider. I believe that providing the beginner with too much information can be confusing or defeating. A critique of the advanced turner’s work that does not provide enough depth also is problematic.

I have developed a more or less hierarchical scheme where the critique starts at an appropriate level and then proceeds until enough elements are identified to give the individual enough to work on for the next project. For many turners, an important part of the process will be to provide suggestions for taking the work to a higher level. I have developed a Quality Indicator Checklist for this purpose.

Continued

Quality Indicator Checklist

The checklist provides a guide to focus on elements that are appropriate for the beginning and the advanced turner. The checklist does not contain information related to the quality of the overall design. That is material for my next article. I hope others will join me in promoting effective critique as an important next step in the development of the field of woodturning. Effective critique provides us with a way to see our work through the eyes of others and to develop a heightened sensitivity for subtle elements of quality design. The process can also help us become aware of new ideas and possibilities in our work.

This evaluation form and checklist are available on the AAW web site.

LEVEL 1

Beginning woodturner

Finish Elements

- Torn surface (wood fiber broken rather than sliced cleanly).
- "Bruised" surface (dark area in finish indicating damage beneath the surface of the piece).
- Sanding marks (visible scratches or lines).
- Tool marks (ripples, break in line continuity, gouge, spirals, or chatter marks).

Form/line Elements

- Inside lines are inconsistent (inside and outside shapes are inconsistent).
- Flat or high spots (lines that do not flow smoothly or transition smoothly).

Thickness

- Too thick (a judgment call; form does not relate to function or

where object is not aesthetically pleasing).

- Too light (piece is not usable or too fragile to be practical).
- Balance (object is too top heavy or bottom heavy to be pleasing).

Style Elements

- Consistency (style elements do not fit together).
- Size (style elements not sized correctly to be aesthetically pleasing or practical for use).

LEVEL II

Intermediate woodturner

Finish Elements

- Finish is not consistent (may vary in thickness, gloss, color).
- Finish gloss/smoothness not appropriate for piece (finish impractical or not consistent with style).
- Texture (if used) is not appropriate or texture detracts.
- Minor flaws in surface (small places where surface flaw detracts from overall quality).

Form/Line Elements

- Inconsistent style elements (features clash with the artistic style or intent).
- Shape does not achieve potential for form. A piece made in a certain style may vary greatly in the shape of its elements; certain shapes can be deemed more effective.
- Minor areas where lines do not flow (minor curve issues characterized by subtle bulging or straightening of the line).
- Form is not consistent quality when viewed from all angles. Size and execution of some elements may not add to the work's quality.

Style Elements

- Overall design below potential. Suggest changes in materials used for construction, selection/execution of design elements, color/finish.

LEVEL III

Advanced woodturner

A critique using Level III checklist items is generally reserved for well-executed pieces that generally receive no criticism on Level I and Level II checklist items. A critique at this level is more focused on helping the craftsman take a great piece of work and make it better or use it as a springboard for new directions.

Finish Elements

- A different surface treatment would likely add appeal. A different surface would add to or enhance the piece; be prepared to describe and tell why a change would help.
- Color/stain would help. Color warrants change; describe the potential effects of a color change.

Form/Line Elements

- A change in size would improve the impact of the work. Scale impacts how we view a work; describe how scaling up or down would help.
- Some changes/additions/deletions of elements would increase the impact of the work. Sometimes simplicity (and conversely, complexity) improve a piece. Identify specific possibilities and describe how they might help.

Possibilities

- Future potential. Provide the artist with some ideas for changing the work or using it as a basis for new work; this is important to advanced turners who may need new ideas to keep growing and developing as woodturners.

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Evaluation Form

Comments:

Piece Identifier: _____

Finish: Comments

- SMOOTH APPROPRIATE SHEEN
- FOR PIECE/STYLE
- CHOICE OF WOOD LOOKS GOOD
- CONTRASTS WELL

Form/Line Elements: Comments

- CURVES NOT RELATED/CONSISTENT
- CURVE DOESN'T CONTINUE
- CURVE IS "POINTY"
- _____

Style Elements: Comments

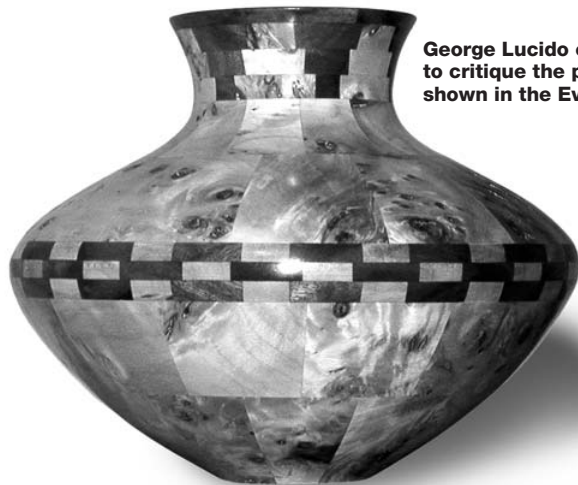
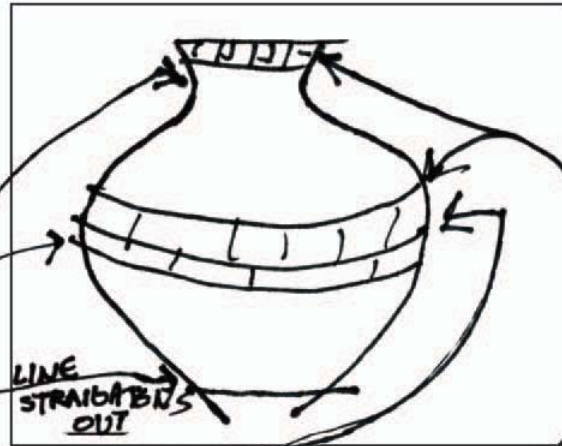
- PATTERNS DON'T MATCH
- FOR SW STYLE TOP IS TOO TALL

Evaluator JIM C.

Possibilities: Comments

- WITH MINOR FORM/PATTERN
- ADJUSTMENTS PIECE WILL REPRESENT "TRADITIONAL" STYLE.

Date 8-11-03



George Lucido of Orinda, CA, asked Jim Christiansen to critique the poplar bowl at left. Jim's comments are shown in the Evaluation Form above.



After reviewing Jim's comments, George reworked his segment bowl design and turned the maple bowl shown at right. Both bowls were on display for a show at the Valley Art Gallery in Walnut Creek, CA. George's maple bowl incorporating Jim's comments sold within an hour of the opening; the poplar bowl was purchased later.