

REFLECTIONS OF THE RICHMOND WOODTURNING SYMPOSIUM, June 2008

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As we know, woodturning is an ancient and honored craft dating back through the centuries when men and women first realized how shapes could be formed by the turning of wood. Picking up on the overall metaphor of the great wheel of life, the round dance of time, one can better appreciate the history and tradition of this rewarding craft after attending symposiums such as the recent one in Richmond.

And so it went when I first entered the Richmond Convention Center on 20 June to register for this year's show. I was personally acquainted with some of the big-name turners and familiar with a number more, so when I planned to attend specific seminars or spotted some of the 'celebrities' behind their lathes in the vendor's area, I felt the sense of tradition and learning passed on from master to student.

In this vein, I later read a passage from Robert Lipsey's book "An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art" which helped me better understand the concept of tradition and how we grow in whatever art or craft can become our passion. Beyond just getting better at what we do, there is always the potential to go even further, to open ourselves to a greater appreciation of the art as well as the process of movement from student to journeyman to teacher to possibly "master."

Borrowing from Lipsey's thoughts, I would like to leave you with some of his ideas of how tradition can be passed on to our betterment, but even more so to the work itself. As he states it, 'the mystique of tradition is complex.' We came to turning as neophytes, learners, almost as beggars asking for guidance. With few exceptions, we appreciate the difficulty we had in conquering our fear of failure, gaining the self-confidence to guide the gouge in order to create simple shapes and later duplicate our efforts. No one wants to brag about a design by accident.

The "code of creative dissatisfaction" that Lipsey describes as we strive to improve and become better at what we do is part of what drives so many of us, this participation in a strong tradition. This code is inviting, even perhaps a necessity in our lives, if we are not content to rest on our laurels and be satisfied with mediocrity. But this sense comes with forbidding, since there is always risk of failure.

Applying these ideas to what I saw in Richmond, a new meaning to Lipsey's 'liveliest paradoxes' emerged in the backdrop of this serious encounter with gifted artists who are steeped in their traditions. What I interpret through Lipsey's writing is that turners of most skill levels should inhale what they've seen and learned and subdue their anxieties when measuring their works against the 'masters.'

We must embrace the stages of initiation into our remarkable tradition and, by extension, into any tradition that demands effort over long periods of time. When we realize our responsibility and proceed, we can be introduced into a hitherto unknown world of ideas and methods. In Lipsey's words, "learning itself is redefined as an assimilation not

only of external methods and intellectual concepts but of attitudes, custom, history, sensibility. The apprentice enters into a tradition as if into a great house with innumerable rooms, each to be visited and memorized, each containing a test of his or her substance and adding to it."

So as I think of the men and women who have mentored me, I am most grateful and respectful. When Lipsey traces the origins of the word 'mentor,' he finds that its root is 'mind.' In other words, a mentor is a mind-maker. Attending the lectures and talking with the demonstrators, one can feel their personal influence. We as journeymen know many of the techniques in our craft, although there is obviously much to learn. If we're fortunate to be in the company of true teachers who are selfless with their time and generous in sharing their knowledge, then perhaps we can learn that the tradition we have embraced exists in and through the people, not in the abstract, and that it must be carried on in Lipsey's words 'through this fragile human medium; hence a dawning sense of responsibility..."

As I end these thoughts, I do not want to lose track of the ultimate lesson we can learn from such rich experiences presented by gatherings such as this past symposium. It is the tradition, the respect of others who have come before us and those to follow, however elevated or flawed so long as their pursuit is clear. And although a final level of mastery will probably always remain out of reach for most of us, we must recognize the growth we gain in ourselves and our willingness to share our path with others as being the far greater prize in this journey.