FINIALS: AN INTRODUCTION

Richard Pikul

For most woodturners, a finial is a decorative element on the top of the lid of a box or similar hollowform.

Finials are also used as a decorative ornament on the top of bedposts, stair posts, lampshades and fence posts.

The vast majority of finials made commercially are used to top off bed posts, lampshades, stair banisters, railing and fence posts.

For this exercise, do not use sandpaper. After you have made a few practice pieces without sanding, you will be able to judge how your tool work improves.

Small diameter finials do need very sharp cutting edges to prevent tear out or poor finish. You will need to sharpen and/or hone more often than for other projects.

To introduce yourself to finials, make a small one first. Use a pen blank size piece of dense hardwood (Hard Maple is a good choice).

If your chuck works better with a round blank, start off by turning a tenon between centres that will comfortably fit in your chuck.

Securely chuck one end of the blank, hand spin the chuck to make sure the blank is spinning true.

One way to locate a long blank accurately is to gently bring up the tailstock to centre that end while tightening the chuck.

Remember to tighten ALL of the chuck key access points at least twice. This ensures the best grip between the jaws and workpiece, reduces vibration and securely holds the workpiece.

Turning a thin finial between centres is extremely difficult. You can turn 'bed post' type of finials between centres as these are more substantial.

When turning a chucked finial, start at the tailstock end and make this end the 'tip' of your finial.

If you are making a thin finial, DO NOT try to turn the entire finial at once, turn in small stages, starting at the tip (tailstock end) to minimize vibration and the chance of breakage. Watch the videos noted at the end of this article for visual details.

When parting off your finial, do it carefully and you will be able just have a small diameter 'tenon' to clean up off the lathe.

A FEW POINTERS:

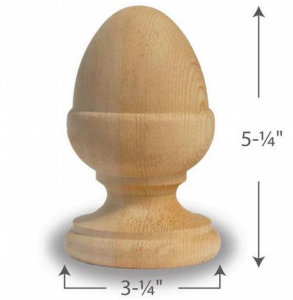
- Turn at the highest speed you are comfortable with. Some of the very small diameters require fast rotation to keep surface speed up for smooth cutting.
- The finial base does not need to be the same size as your box 'lid'. A finial made of the same or contrasting wood can be fit into a box lid. This allows the use of shorter pieces of valuable wood to make your box.
- Turn with tools you are most comfortable using, but do try practicing with those you would like to learn to work with. Skew chisel comes to mind. . .
- Sanding a thin finial can be difficult. I sand at full turning speed, but use very little pressure and do not fold the paper. As long as my finger(s) are cool, I'm not overheating the wood. Also, using a light touch pressure, the sandpaper leaves virtually no 'grooves' that are hard to remove.
- Use your finger(s) to support very thin sections (particularly the tip) while turning and sanding. This counteracts the force applied by the tool/sandpaper.
- Use minimal tool pressure when cutting.
- Do not hurry. Patience and controlled cuts are the fastest way to success with minimum frustration.

DESIGN

The basic rules of visually pleasing forms apply. Use your imagination and the rule of thirds and/or the ratio 1:1.6.

For some examples of finials, try an internet search using “finials images” as parameters.

Here are a few examples:



Further information:

Video:

"Fabulous Finial Box" by Cindy Drozda.

One of the best videos on the subject!

http://cindydrozda.com/

Recommended YouTube videos:

Factory turned finial:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPLGa6UxBL0

Watch someone who earns their living this way.

Excellent technique in this video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcELk5Z840Q

Notice how he holds the skew chisel and spindle gouge to ensure full control of the tools.

Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finial

"Finial Design" by Cindy Drozda

AAW magazine; Spring 2006

"Spindle Turning, The Art of the Finial" Keith Tompkins

AAW magazine; May 2014

Tips: jig for mounting small finials

AAW web site, document AW3101p12-12-1.pdf