

"An Introduction to Critique for Wood-turners"

by Jim Christiansen and David Buskell

This is the first of two articles exploring the topic of critique, which seems to have been “a thorny issue” in wood-turning for many years. This article will give a background to critique and its relation to wood-turning today and in the second article we hope to advance a practical scheme to overcome some of the many issues that critiques present. If we can open a dialogue so that we can advance to the point where critique becomes an effective tool for all, that is an extra benefit.

Our research for this article has included contributions from a number of internationally known wood-turners and we thank them for their thoughts.

Historically, critique has been well established in the fine art and literature fields for several centuries.

Wood-turning has expanded greatly over the last 25 years and much has been published on the skills we need as wood-turners but very rarely has “critique” been mentioned. Stephen Hogbin's 1980's book (Stephen Hogbin: Evaluating: The critique in the studio workshop. The Ginger Press, Canada) is the first reference to critique in relation to the woodworking arena in recent years.

In the last 10-15 years there has been an explosion of places where images can be posted and critique can be asked for or can be offered.

The internet and world wide web has given us Facebook, photo sharing sites and of course the Gallery section of the many wood-turning Forums and or wood-turning organisations sites. In addition, we have the growth of the face to face situations such as Chapter/Club meetings, Show & Tell, group reviews, international symposia and other situations in which critique can be offered,. You can see how the scope has widened in a short period of time and during which, information on critique has not been available to the woodturning fraternity.

Some issues that have emerged

Our research highlighted several important factors:

1. There appears to be no common understanding of what constitutes an appropriate or good critique.

This is probably because the skill of critique and or criticism is not part of our toolbox, Only Hogbin's work seems to touch on the subject.

There are a few books available that discuss critique for the art world and “The Critique Handbook” (Buster & Crawford – Pearson) seems to be the #1 publication filling that role as : “This text was written to address an existing gap in text offerings for art students.

Although the critique is central to all art programs, there have been no textbooks or comprehensive guides to help students navigate the critique process. The Critique Handbook fills the need for such a book.”

This seems to help substantiate that there is a need for a similar guide for wood-turners

2. Critiques need to be positive in order to avoid bad outcomes. We all know how to offer praise but we do sometimes have to bite the bullet and make a negative comment to someone. We need to think carefully about how we do this. One of our contributors suggested:

“Try to be positive rather than negative. If negative, the way you deliver the message is important.”

Ray Key offered us this anecdote: “It is my view critiques have to be for the most part positive rather than negative, the negatives have to be there but it's the way you deliver them that matters.

Years ago I was in New Zealand with a turner from Richard's (Raffan) continent, he was a damning critic who soon alienated. I chose to go second to put the show back on the road. That said, a perceptive writer commented that the one turner may have alienated, but if you listened closely Ray Key said much the same but it was gift wrapped’ “

3. Comments which are negative and given without thought can hurt the feelings of the recipient and cause anger. We have all heard members having lively discussions, some heated, around our club/chapter tables.

Good critique should provide both positive and negative comments and if only negative ones are given and badly given, this may cause resentment between the critic and the recipient, with all the attendant problems that may cause.

It may well be that having received a badly presented negative comment sometime in the past, many feel that critique is no longer a viable practice or way to receive meaningful comments from fellow makers.

Problems that are still prevalent:

1. There is a lack of consistency as to how critique is done. No training, guidance or comments can be found in recent publications (save the 2004 article in the AAW Journal) so it is no surprise that there is a lack of consistency. There is no general guidance to follow!

2. There is a lack of understanding regarding the idea that critique can encompass many approaches, types, levels and purposes

We learned from our research that critique has been given in many ways. Some prefer to give this on a one to one basis, or about a single piece of work. Other turners we consulted say they prefer to group several (say 3 or 4) similar pieces together and comment upon those. Types of critique offered vary from covering a few points of interest to a full detailed analysis of the work.

3. There is no thought given to the content of a critique. A critique should consider the point at which the maker is on his or her woodturning journey and temper the comments accordingly. To help this, makers should be encouraged more to discuss their work – see para 7 below – this will assist the critic to assess what topics to cover. In other words, to provide some basic common sense comments guided by the maker's own thoughts on their work.

4. There is no general acceptance of the concept that the only purpose of critique is to improve work. The purpose of a critique was highlighted by comments made by one turner who said that: "The value of critique is that when it is done properly, (it) will expand your knowledge and skill exponentially." This maker felt the purpose of a critique was to assist in improving their work and to increase their own understanding of their working process. In other words, we think more about what we are doing and thus improve.

5. There is no general understanding of vocabulary terms that critics often use in evaluating work. The wide variety of situations in which a critique is given can often lead to a lack of attention to the words used. We need to take care to provide clear, ego-less, healthy communication when conducting a critique so some thought should be put into this before we speak. Whilst criticism is generally seen as being "bad" as you can see from the quote earlier in this article, it is possible to convey a negative point about a piece to a maker but the words used are important.

6. There is no consistency in the methods used by critics. Every one has their own way of doing things in wood-turning and the same can be said for critique. This lack of a "common language" can create misunderstandings or lead to a comment being totally misunderstood.

7. We find that there is a lack of discussion by artists of their own work. Artists in many instances have not said (or even considered) their own thoughts on their work such as how the shape/form was decided upon, where the wood used originated, any special techniques used, what were their influences etc., etc.,. Knowing these and other points and talking about your work, will enable a relevant discussion and provide for better and more meaningful critique of your piece.

8. The word "Criticism" has a bad "vibe" which often causes friction. People sometimes see it as inherently bad, although this is not borne out by the definitions. "Critical" on the other hand has a definition of "Expressing or involving an analysis of the *merits* and *faults* of a work of literature, music, or art: "clearly implying an equal analysis of both good and bad points.

What is critique?

It could be useful to remind ourselves of the meanings of the words we use:

1. Critique:

- a) An essay or article in criticism of a literary (or more rarely, an artistic) work; a review.
- b) The action or art of criticizing; criticism.

2. Criticism:

- a) The action of criticizing, or passing judgement upon the qualities or merits of anything; esp. the passing of unfavourable judgement; fault-finding, censure.
- b) The art of estimating the qualities and character of literary or artistic work; the function or work of a critic.
- c) An act of criticizing; a critical remark, comment; a critical essay, critique.

d) A nice point or distinction, a minute particular, a nicety; a subtlety; in bad sense, a quibble.

3. Critic:

a) One who pronounces judgement on any thing or person; esp. one who passes severe or unfavourable judgement; a censurer, fault-finder, caviller (mockery).

b) One skilful in judging of the qualities and merits of literary or artistic works; one who writes upon the qualities of such works; a professional reviewer of books, pictures, plays, and the like; also one skilled in textual or biblical criticism.

(Source: Oxford English Dictionary)

From the above definitions, we see that a critique is generally regarded as something negative. Is that strictly true in today's world and if so, why should we still want a critique of our work?

One maker suggests that " (It) Makes you more thoughtful and critical of yourself as you make things."

and

"A good critique is from someone you trust and respect. Take the ego out of the equation."

The roots of critique stretch back to the 17th and 18th century but the word "critic" does have Latin and Greek forms, suggesting an earlier usage. The term "critiquing" seems to have come into common use as a verb in the late 20th century:

"More generally, to judge critically, to make a critical assessment of or comment on (an action, person, etc.), not necessarily in writing. Chiefly U.S."

(Source: Oxford English Dictionary)

Critique has been around for several hundred years in other areas of the arts and crafts, but is a relative new-comer in the world of woodturning. With the growth of exposure for our work comes the ability for makers to ask a wider audience to comment upon it. However that wider audience in general does not have access to generally accepted guidelines on how to perform a critique and so we have mixed messages being given with both good and bad experiences for the maker being created.

We do need some guidance to improve our knowledge, use and understanding of the art of critique – a useful tool for all woodworkers – and hopefully part two of this article will provide this.

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