

# The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

## Penmaking Materials



If you can buy the same kit, the same wood, and make the same pen to perfection, why is your pen different than that of anyone else? Read *different* in any way you choose: for example, better, more valuable, more expensive, higher quality, more collectible, or any other measure you'd like to use. Basically...what is going to make your work more desirable than that of another maker? Or, in other words, how do you make your pen unique?

But before we go further, keep in mind I said perfection. As you develop your penturning skills, your focus, first, should be on developing your ability to create flawless work. It isn't difficult to accomplish, and it doesn't make much sense to worry about developing your own uniqueness if the flaws will be what sets your work apart from that of others. After you have developed the skills to produce flawless work, you can then put more focus on ways of distinguishing your work.

### UNIQUENESS

There are a variety of ways to make your work unique.

They include developing your own design and making some or all of your own components; using after-turning enhancements, such as inlay, pyrography, painting, engraving, or other surface changes; and using less common and "homemade" materials. We'll explore the first two methods in future columns. For now, let's look at some of the material possibilities that can be used to your advantage to make your pens stand out a bit.

### POSSIBILITIES

What are the materials you can use to make a pen? A better question is what can't be used to make pens? If the material is sturdy enough to hold up to handling and can be cut using high-speed steel turning tools, it is a great candidate. Virtually any wood is fair game. Most metals, other than hardened steels, can be readily cut with turning tools, so they are in play. Some of the workable stone materials have been used. Obviously, bone, antler, and other natural items work too. And add to these almost any of the manmade materials: there are a host of plastics



Fig. 1

I've used everything from coffee grounds to breakfast cereal for pens.



Fig. 3

Several iterations were required to produce these blanks.



Fig. 2

Some additional materials that can be used to make pens are shown here.



Fig. 4

Laminations of either wood and/or manmade materials often produce striking results.

that are not only suitable, but ideal for pens. For example, solid surface countertop to bowling ball materials lend themselves very nicely to penmaking. Some examples I've used are shown in **Figs. 1** and **2**.

### LAMINATIONS

While exploring the non-woods as potential materials, don't overlook the creative aspects of mixing and matching woods. Many penmakers have created unique pen blanks by assembling different species of wood. These assemblies, often glue-ups, that have been cut apart, reassembled, and reglued through several iterations can yield blanks that are truly one of a kind (see **Figs. 3** and **4**). Stack cutting, interweaving with veneer, and other mix-and-match opportunities exist. Think of the possibilities a segmented woodturner has if you want to begin to see the potential creations (see **Fig. 5**).

### COMMISSION PIECES

If you are creating a commission piece, the end user will often provide material that has sentimental value. It can be the most boring piece of wood you've ever seen, or some wood or other material that is very exotic. Regardless, it will be special to them and your creation will be treasured for many years. Often, they will want a special theme. I've had people request pens that look like sporting items, food items, and animals, among others. This often lets you get a bit creative both in the design and material selection. Use the opportunity to expand on ideas you might never be tempted to do on your own.

### NONFERROUS METALS

While many have made the "bullet" pens using brass cartridge cases, solid brass is an interesting material to turn and to be creative with, as is aluminum. Bear in mind that





**Fig. 5**  
The pens in the foreground began by making the glue-up shown at the top of the photo.



**Fig. 6**  
Diamondback rattlesnake skins suspended in polyester resin make a unique pen.

aluminum is like steel in the sense that there are many different alloys and each has different characteristics. Some alloys are much more “lathe friendly” than others. Another consideration when working with metals is the potential to have very sharp shavings. Use proper caution when dealing with them. Not only will the materials cut much differently than what you are used to, but the debris will need to be handled differently and with care.

## PLASTICS

Researching the family of plastics will give you many new horizons to explore. They range from the clear acylics to engineering resins. Not only will the colors and consistencies be a joy to explore, but there will be new horizons in finishing techniques to learn. Most plastics have no finish added to the final turning, since the parent material is polished to a high gloss. Putting a superior finish on plastic is a completely different world from that of wood and metal. If you haven't worked with the *Micro Mesh* products, you will. There are many types and colors available through the penmaking suppliers, but don't be afraid to explore other material sources. Plastics surround us in our everyday lives. Experiment with sources you find and see how they work. You will be surprised at how many wonderful materials you literally have at your fingertips.

## POLYESTER RESIN

One of the most versatile of the plastics to work with is polyester resin. (Barry Gross has an article that uses this material starting on page 28.) This family of products has a wide range of properties, so selecting the right one(s) will be important. You can start by using the clear casting resins available in hobby shops, and research the many different products available through art supply houses and other resin suppliers. Polyester resin can be colored to create plastic blanks of your choosing, but it is far more fun to use it to encapsulate other items. Casting over everything from photographs to diamondback rattler skin (see Fig. 6) to breakfast cereal has already been done.

When using any chemicals, make sure you read, understand, and follow the proper handling, ventilation, and use instructions. Casting resin exotherms while curing and the manufacturer's recommendations on catalyst-to-resin ratios should be followed precisely. This is not a case of twice as much catalyst is twice as good or twice as fast. **FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS!**

## WHAT ELSE IS THERE FROM WHICH TO CREATE BLANKS?

Using petrified woodpecker beaks as pen blank material might give you a leg up in the uniqueness category. However, I'd suggest that with the possibilities with woods, metals, and plastics, you should have plenty of opportunity to make your workmanship, design, and attention to detail your hallmarks. Don't count on wild materials to make you something special. It won't work for very long. With so many materials with which to work and so many combinations and permutations of those, your workmanship and creative design, along with materials, should do it.

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