

# The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

## Photographing Your Work

In this issue, the column is dedicated to photographing your work. I need to make a few disclaimers right up front. First of all, this is not a treatise on photography, so though I'll touch on much that you should consider, my goal is to make things as simple as I can, yet give you good results. I'll mention some topics that you may wish to look into to continue your learning of the subject (see Sources). However, it isn't all-inclusive—just some things that you may want to delve into if you find the subject interesting and fun. And even though this is a pen column, there is nothing covered here that wouldn't apply to everything you photograph, from bowls to nephews. Fundamentals and good practices are fundamentals and good practices! And if you think a boat (or woodturning) is a money pit, you haven't begun to truly understand the term; once you have been bitten by the photographic bug, you'll know. I'll show some equipment that is pricey and some that is incredibly inexpensive only to give you options. You don't need to spend a great deal of money to get good results, and I'll cover as many simple, inexpensive techniques as I can. Once the photo is done and it is a quality image, nobody will know whether you used a carbon fiber tripod with the best Arca-Swiss ball head or a plastic sack of dried beans as a camera mount. I try to teach my students that the magic isn't in the tool; the magic is in the hands of the user.

### WHAT IS IT FOR?

Probably the first thing to be determined is the intended use of the photo. Depending on your planned end goal, you probably will spend the appropriate amount of time getting your shot. If it is planned for posting on Facebook, a camera snapshot with existing light and any unobtrusive background will probably due quite nicely. If it will be published in a print magazine or book, it will need additional attention to detail. Anywhere in between will require the appropriate level of care based on the planned end use (see **Fig. 1**). Some of the other reasons you might want to take photos of your work include documentation for your files, advertising of your turning for sale on a website or in a catalog, application to a show or gallery, and more. Things that I want you to think about and to pay attention to include lighting, composition, framing, stability, and the usual common sense.



### WHAT CAMERA IS NEEDED?

There is an old photographer's saying that goes something like this "The best camera is the one you have in your hand right now." A great deal of words that really mean "use what you have." In today's world, almost any modern camera you can lay your hands on will do an exceptional job (see **Fig. 2**). Yes, you need to use it properly, but even the camera in your phone is actually quite good. How

many of us have our cell phone close by at all times? If you need a photo and all you have is your cell phone, take the shot! Take a number of them if it is important. Digital photography has revolutionized our way of taking photos. First, everyone can be a photographer or videographer. With little training or effort, images and video of anything and everything is being captured at virtually no cost. My suggestion to take a number of photos is because you can delete some later, but by having many to choose from, you'll find the best of the batch to use. You don't hit a home run with every swing, but swing often enough and you'll hit one. Another reason to take a number of photos of your piece, sold and gone, is now of interest for an article in *Woodturning Design* magazine. Wouldn't it have been nice to have some well-lit, high-resolution images to choose from? Use the best camera that you can lay your hands on, but don't get in the rut of not taking pictures because you don't own a Nikon or Canon DSLR.

## SETTINGS?

My recommendation for the photographic newcomer is to use all the advantages your camera offers. Do not be afraid to read the manual. Believe it or not, it wasn't written for you to ignore! It really has some helpful information about your camera's capabilities, what the suggested settings are, and helpful suggestions to get good results. Take the time to read it with your camera in hand. There is so much power in that small computer hidden inside. For most applications, using auto-white balance (AWB) will work nicely right now. Later, we'll talk a bit about color temperature and lighting, but right now, AWB is the ticket. Since memory is so cheap and getting cheaper, don't be stingy. Crank up the size of the image, and the resolution if it has a selection, to the largest and finest setting you've got—RAW if you have it. If you don't know what that is or don't have it, don't worry, use the largest JPG you can get. You can always dumb down an image, but you can't create data that doesn't exist. Will it reduce the number of shots you can store? Sure, but off-load them as needed. Also, additional memory modules are physically small and

relatively inexpensive. If you need to, e-mail your images to your Dropbox folder and clear the space on the card for more. Most cameras have a program or automatic setting that will let you put it on "autopilot." It will determine the best aperture setting and shutter speed based on the current situation. Unless you are knowledgeable and want to take control, let the camera give you some help. It may automatically set your ISO (film speed for us oldsters) or it may not. If you need to mess with this, read up a bit on trade-offs of different ISO settings, particularly with respect to image noise if you need top-shelf images.

## THE STAGE

So now the camera is set to do most of the capture functions and you should try to optimize that facet. What can you do to help? Let's set the stage for best results from a composition, a lighting, and a stability standpoint. What should you be thinking about as you plan and execute the shot? The type of photography we are talking about is easily controlled. You aren't trying to grab that shot of the running back leaping over the goal line. You have time and control of every part of the situation. Plan and use every tool you have to make the best situation.

Stability of the camera goes a long way. A common sense suggestion is to never handhold your camera if you don't have to; use a tripod. You can spend anywhere from \$20 to \$1000 or more for a tripod (see **Fig. 3**). Though I have some fairly expensive tripods, the aluminum one with a nice ball head that cost me \$29 works just fine for photos such as these. If you don't have a tripod, you certainly can find a bag of beans. The kind doesn't matter—navy, black, kidney, or coffee beans will work just fine. The plan is to get the camera out of your hands and positioned properly, then held very stable (see **Fig. 4**). Stability is the key. Not only do you want the camera out of your hands, but you don't even want to push the shutter button to take the picture. Almost every camera has a shutter timer. Use it to your advantage. Most of my cameras have the choice of two or ten seconds of delay. By using the timer shutter, you can get everything set and then push the shutter. Now your hand is off the camera and it is stable on the mount (tripod or bean bag) with no jiggling when the



Fig. 2

Today's cameras, whether stand-alone economy, a bit higher end, or integrated into a phone, are all capable of great photos.



Fig. 3

There is a myriad of tripods and clamps available to mount your camera more stably, minimizing vibration and shake.



Fig. 4

This is a quick, easy, flexible, adaptable, stable, effective, and cheap method, since the beans can be recovered for use.

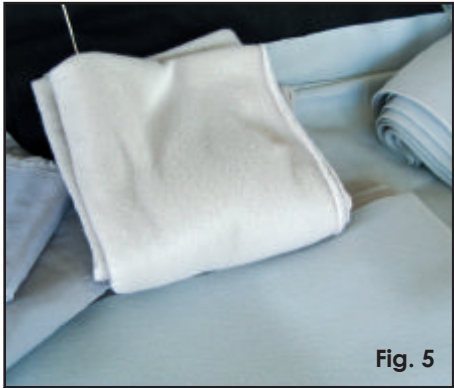


Fig. 5

**Choose what works and looks best for your application—gray, more gray, and more gray, and black.**

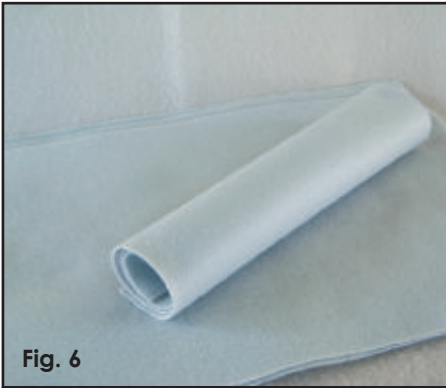


Fig. 6

**I favor this gray felt because it is inexpensive, looks good, and travels well. I can roll it up and take it along for use on the road.**

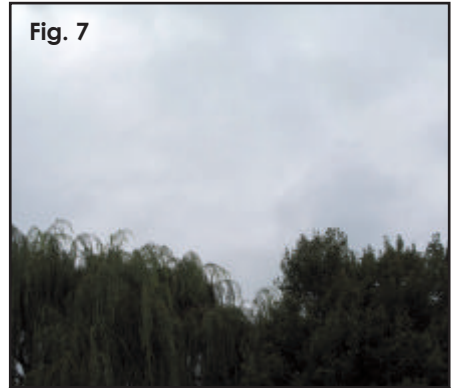


Fig. 7

**Rain is optional, but an overcast, gray day looking north out of my sunroom makes a great day for photographing work.**

image is captured. Necessary? Perhaps not, but it is easily done, costs nothing, and certainly can't hurt.

Clearing the stage is another important thing to do. You probably have seen the picture of the lovely lady standing in the garden with the beautiful trees in the background. The problem is that the branch of one of those trees appears to be growing out of her head—easily avoided if you are paying attention. The point is that if it doesn't add value to the image you are taking, don't have it in there. And if it is there, make sure it isn't distracting or compromising. I suggest you use a plain gray-colored background for most of your documentation-type images. Why plain? Any pattern will compete for the viewers' attention and draw it away from your beautiful turning. Why gray? Because it goes with almost everything and it doesn't cause a great deal of problems with automatic metering. We won't delve into the 18% Kodak neutral gray, but leave that for your homework (see Fig. 5). Can you use another color? Yes, but make sure that it helps your situation rather than detracts. Sometimes black is better. Sometimes white is better. It all depends on the lighting, the turning, and the desired "effect"; experiment

to see what works. A good suggestion is to have an assortment of inexpensive, neutral gray and other colored cloths that you can use as a background for your turning. It separates the turning from any clutter or confusion that might be in the existing background, and it doesn't have an adverse impact on the camera metering (see Fig. 6). For homework, read your camera's manual on EV settings and what you can do with that control. It will help you understand why there is a problem getting good facial details in a picture of someone standing on a sunny beach.

Lighting and how you use it can be a real advantage. You don't need to have or buy expensive lighting. You can use existing light quite nicely; BUT, I suggest you try to control it. Depending on the time of day, direction of the light, background of the turning, reflectivity of the turning, and more, you can have some real problems with lighting. If you are going to use natural light, you couldn't ask for a better situation than a midday, northern exposure on a cloudy day (see Fig. 7). It is as neutral and as diffused as you are going to get. Hopefully, you don't have purple walls that will have an impact. The key here is to control the lighting. Your camera is already set to auto-white bal-



Fig. 8

**Foam core board or inexpensive canvas panels can be used to make a light tent and the ever-handy bounce cards.**



Fig. 9

**Getting and using "daylight" in an artificial lighting situation is easy and helps maintain the WYSIWYG colors (What You See Is What You Get).**



Fig. 10

**Taking a macro shot of an X-acto knife (see *Woodturning Design #18, "Jazzing Up a Hobby Knife"*) in ambient daylight with some control of the glare using foam core board scraps.**

ance, so it will do its best to give you accurate colors with the ambient light. You can make a light tent very easily that will let you exclude unwanted light or bounce existing light around as you wish. There is an article of mine, "Do-It-Yourself Photo Tent," in *Woodturning Design* #19, Fall 2008. If you don't have a copy of that issue, you can find the article on my website in the articles' area at <http://kurthertzog.com/demos.htm>. You'll learn how to make an easily stored, low-cost photo tent from foam core board that is available at your local arts and crafts store (see **Fig. 8**). If it isn't a gray and cloudy midday, you can certainly use your own lighting. Sewing lamps, desk lamps, work lights, and other sources let you provide and control the light. We'll avoid a great deal of discussion about color temperature and leave that for you to explore on your own. Remember the people with blue- or orange-tinted skin? Think fluorescent or incandescent light with a daylight setting. It's all about color temperature, or how warm or cool the lighting is compared to what the camera is expecting to see. That will be great reading material for you. Regardless, my suggestion is to use "daylight" lighting when you can. When you buy lamps or whatever you choose as your light source for your desk, buy the daylight-balanced bulbs (see **Fig. 9**). It is much easier on the eyes and provides truer colors for your daily life. Use as many lights as you need. Use small pieces of foam core board to bounce light around or block it when required. Lighting will make or break your final image. Take some time and fiddle with it. Distracting shadows and harsh

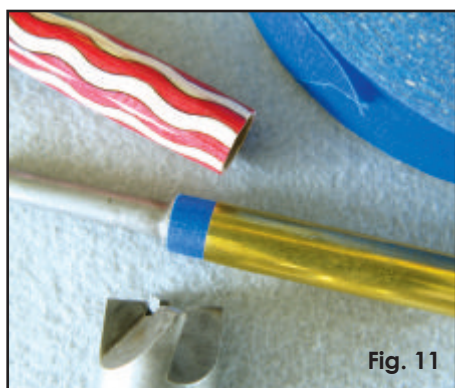


Fig. 11

**A document-type shot that will easily remind me of the technique used. This photo was planned to explain the concept to others in a tips and tricks article.**

lighting can be remedied, especially since you can see them in the viewfinder (see **Fig. 10**). Try things until you are happy with the look. If you are in the mood for shopping, there are many fabric light tents that collapse, can be lit from the outside, and diffuse the light, and some provide mounting for the work and camera. Action! We have the camera set, the background neutralized, and the lighting established, so it is time for action. Let's get the shot. Well, almost ready to shoot. Composition and framing the shot are our last issues prior to pushing the shutter button. What is important to show? Is it documentary or artistic (see **Fig. 11**)? We're going back to who's your audience (at least at this point). Don't ever forget that you may wish to repurpose the image later, so don't be afraid to plan for that now. You need to be the judge of the mood you'd like to set. It can range from none as a document to some exotic sensation if you are trying to make a gallery owner swoon. Angle, lighting drama, additional props, special background (real or artificial), ultimate cropping, focal point, and depth of field are all things under your control (see **Figs. 12** and **13**). A small turning dwarfed in the middle of a big background would set the tone of "loneliness," which may not be your purpose. The age-old mantra of "fill the frame" still holds true (see **Fig. 14**). The turning totally contained in the frame is far different from it spilling out of one of the boundaries. Again, tone, purpose, audience, and effect desired can all change the way you stage the turning.

Okay—shoot. Push the shutter button and let the timer count down until it takes the picture. Now shoot again. And again. Adjust the lighting, reorient the turning, zoom in, or zoom out. Shoot again. I suggest you get a few shots of every turning you make. It only takes moments, particularly if you have a place set up or a photo tent. You'll get to the point where you pull the photo tent from behind the china cabinet, set it up on the coffee table, plug in your lamp, stick the camera on the tripod, and shoot. A few shots and all is put away. Elapsed time? Less than sweeping up in front of the lathe. I wait until I have several things to photograph and then do them all at once.



Fig. 12

**A full frame (perhaps too full) where the stand behind is a bit out of focus (depth of field control) so that there is no confusion as to the real subject of the photo.**



Fig. 13

**This is a "look at my work" type shot (collaborative with Giles Gilson) that could have been centered better but would be fixed with the planned cropping.**



Fig. 14

The photo is a bit soft on the tip of the pen, but certainly shows the pen and stand that the customer might want to buy.



Fig. 15

A macro shot that can be a detail supplemental image or a stand-alone image, showing the custom nib-to-body fit and the paint strokes on the desk pen.

## WRAP UP

I am not sure there is a good way to wrap up such an expansive topic. I'll try to conclude with just a collection of thoughts that may be beneficial to you, such as use what you have and take photos. Take lots of photos. Practice makes perfect, or at least better. Take plenty of images of the same thing or minor variations, and then pick the one(s) you like. Take them "supersized." Don't scrimp on memory space. It is cheap. Rarely will you ever be sorry that the image is too large. You will always be sorry if it is too small. Experiment with lights and background. Be cognizant of the background. You can make things appear different by varying these things. Look in the viewfinder as you go. You'll see what the end user will see. Fill the frame and don't overlook the use of the macro feature (see Fig. 15). Use a tripod or lean against something. Stability is good. Camera vibration is bad. Use the shutter timer or delay feature. That is always a good rule. Read the manual. You'll find things in there that will amaze you. Learn from others. Examine the high-end catalogs and brochures to see how they did it. Figure out where they put their lights and how they suspended things. My favorite is the Thomas Moser catalog and website ([www.thosmoser.com](http://www.thosmoser.com))—simple, yet elegant and a superb pre-

## SOURCES

A Google search will give you more free learning sites than you'll have time to read. I've posted a few here to get you started:

<http://www.photographyhomepages.com>

<http://www.istockphoto.com>

<http://photo.net/learn>

<http://learnbasicphotography.com>

<http://www.nikonusa.com>

<http://www.digitalphotographytips.com>

sentation of their products. There is a great deal to be learned from them and others. Apply everything here to all your photography. Though silver halide may have been ditched for silicon sensors, all the photographic techniques still hold true. We haven't even touched on how to hold your pens, tips and tricks for creating displays, reducing the problem of shine, and many other things that will be of value to you. Space forces me to save those for another column one day.



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A professional woodturner, demonstrator, and teacher, Kurt Hertzog enjoys the continuum of woodturning, from making his own turning tools to photographing his finished turnings.

Kurt is a regular feature columnist for *Woodturning Design* magazine, one of the five Council Members of the Pen Makers Guild, and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Woodturners.

Kurt's work has been featured in the American Association of Woodturners "Rounding the Corners" Exhibit, and he has been published in *Woodturning Design*, *Woodturning*, *American Woodturner*, *Pen World*, and *Stylus* magazines. You can see his work on [www.kurthertzog.com](http://www.kurthertzog.com).