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SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE

This is for all you slackers out there. Sometimes half measures work just as well as fully rounded efforts. I'll show you how to cut your work in 2 and double your creativity.

Split bowl turnings are an interesting and creative alternative to regular bowl turning. By cutting a traditional turning in two and joining the 2 halves together, you can create a unique distinctive work that will stand apart.

The first step is to mount a round blank on the lathe. Remember that the finished work will be $\frac{1}{2}$ the size of a conventional bowl so plan your design accordingly. One of the advantages of this kind of work is that you can use flat boards from the local lumberyard or hardwood dealer. You don't have to necessarily use specialty turning blanks. If the board is too narrow for you, you can cut the board crosswise and join the 2 sections to double the diameter of the piece. Since each half is visible from just one side, you don't have to worry too much about matching grain patterns.

You do want to make sure the board has the same coloring across its width. If there is a pronounced variation in color from one side of the board to the other, or if the sapwood is on one side and heartwood on the other, the difference will be apparent at the seams of the piece.

The following is a step by step process of how I make these split bowl turnings.



The blank has been mounted to the lathe. In this case, I'm using a solid piece of wood rather than gluing together 2 separate pieces. I've used double sided turners' tape to attach the blank to a waste block. This allows me to use the

entire thickness of the blank, in this case about 7/8". Normally I use a waste block around 1/3 diameter of the blank itself. It's important to use double sided tape made for turning. Carpet tape will only work on small pieces where there's not much chance of the blank flying off the lathe. If in doubt, err on the side of caution. Be aware, though, that this stuff holds really, really well and sometimes it takes a lot of patience to release the turning from the waste block, especially if it's a little thin. Experience will show you how much tape to use.



This is a side view of the blank mounted on the lathe. It's important to note that the side of the blank facing the headstock will become the outside of the vessel, the opposite of the way you normally turn a bowl.



I've drawn up the tailstock live center to secure the blank. Since the blank is held in place with just the double sided tape, I don't want to take any chances that it

will fly off the lathe. Now I'll turn the blank round and start working on the general outside shape.



Here I've roughed out the outside of the vessel, up the point where it reaches the mounting block.



Most of the inside of the vessel has been turned away. Note also that I've kept the tailstock engaged for safety reasons. I don't want to take a chance of the turning coming loose from pressure placed on the outer edges of the bowl where there's no backing support.



The inside of the vessel has been turned with a wall thickness of around 3/16". The thickness isn't critical. It should be thin enough to resist cracking and give the finished piece a light feel but you don't have to try to impress anyone with how thin you can make the walls. Since it'll be covered completely when assembled, there's no need to do any sanding. Note that the rim is fairly wide to provide an adequate gluing surface.



I've now reversed the blank and mounted it to a set of Coles jaws. This will allow me to finish turn the outer face without having to use an elaborate vacuum chucking system and I can leave the tailstock out of the way. You could also make a large jam chuck, but the Coles jaws are much simpler to set up.



The outside of the vessel has been turned to its final shape. The goal is to maintain an even curve around the bowl since it'll be visible once the top is glued on.



I've added a set of grooves and lines. The grooves are an incised detail and the lines mark the area that'll be textured. I use a parting tool ground down on the sides to make it very thin, around 1/32", where it enters the wood. You can use a skew instead, but there's less chance of the tool catching and skating along the surface with the thin parting tool. The parting tool makes a straight-walled channel instead of a v-shaped one, so if I do any sanding, the grooves will stay the same width.

Now I prepare to cut the piece in half. While the piece is slowly spinning on the lathe, I mark the center with a pencil dot. I then draw a line parallel to the grain through the center using a flexible ruler that will conform to the curve of the piece. You can also use a piece of cardstock or any material with a straight edge.

I make the cut freehand either at the bandsaw or scrollsaw. The scrollsaw makes a thinner kerf. Given that even the most accomplished bandsaw artist probably can't cut a perfectly straight line, the 2 halves will have to be sanded so the edges are straight and perfectly lined up. I usually tape the 2 halves together (no glue) and either hand sand or use a stationary belt sander.



This is a piece of black dyed veneer I cut to act as a detail strip where the 2 halves are joined. This strip also helps conceal the differences in grain pattern from one side to the other. On larger pieces, I'll use either multiple layers of veneer or solid wood cut to 1/16" or so thickness.



After the vessel is cut in half and the edges sanded, I proceed with whatever detailing I want, in this case a design made of pierced little "squiggles".



Once the detailing is done, I glue together the 2 halves with the divider strip in between. After I apply the glue, I tape the halves together with several pieces of masking tape. It isn't necessary to do any smoothing or finishing on the inside since you can't really see it once the top is on. I often paint the inside black so nothing shows, giving the interior a bit of mystery.



The outline of the top has been traced on the blank, here a 1/8" piece of wenge. I've drawn a line through the center, using marks I made where the center spline is located. I divided the line in half and marked where the center of the hole will be.



The hole for the top finial has been drilled. The measurements I took earlier will insure that the hole will be in the center of the finished top. Don't make the hole wider than the distance between the 2 sides of the vessel at its center point.



The top has been glued to the vessel and the edges sanded smooth. It's important to not sand too aggressively and sand away any details. The base is held to the vessel with a 1/8" brass pin epoxied in holes drilled in both the base and the center of the vessel. To find the center, I wrap a cloth tape measure around the outside curve of the vessel and divide the measurement by 2.



This is the completed vessel from the front, with the base and top completed.



This is an angle view showing the unique shape the split bowl technique offers.



I like to add little surprises, so I put a small finial on the underneath side of the top.

The design possibilities are endless with this kind of vessel. You can make quarter round pieces or even narrower ones. They can be oriented in different directions and different size turnings can be combined to make unusual sculptural pieces.

These are example of pieces I've made using this process.

