

# Pens

Penturners are turning heads with new materials and inspired designs.



Angelo lafrate, Johnston, RI. Green stabilized maple burl with Gabon ebony.



Ed Davidson, Colorado Springs, CO. Tulipwood.



Jay Pickens, Ft. Worth, TX. Blue-dyed box elder with black Corian.



Angelo lafrate, Johnston, RI. Ivory scraps in resin with Macassar ebony.



Patricia Lawson, Laguna Beach, CA. Red, white and blue pearly acrylic.



Jay Pickens, Ft. Worth, TX. Steelwood with epoxy inlay of leaves and vine.



Wally Dickerman, Green Valley, AZ. Kingwood.



Angelo lafrate, Johnston, RI. Violet stabilized maple and Sandra Brady's scrimshaw.



Scott Greaves, Blackfoot, ID. Steelwood with Colorwood band.



Patricia Lawson. White acrylic and malachite.

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American Association of Woodturners



Kenn Osborne, Rochester Hills, MI. Cocobolo and turned aluminum.



Emory McLaughlin, Jacksonville, FL. Dyed curly maple.

Angelo Iaffate, Johnston, RI. Brazilian rosewood with ebony centerband.

Ed Davidson, Colorado Springs, CO. Redheart with three O rings.

Emory McLaughlin, Jacksonville, FL. Afzilia xylay.

Jay Pickens, Ft. Worth, TX. Thuya burl with filigree in a .45-caliber cartridge.

Ed Davidson. Padauk, redheart, and maple veneer

Jim Lambert, Webb, AL. Bloodwood with ivory inlay and centerband.

Kenn Osborne, Rochester Hills, MI. Maple, dyed box elder, laser inlay.

Patricia Lawson, Laguna Beach, CA. Cocobolo with pyroengraved maple.

Patricia Lawson, deer antler.

Right before our eyes, penturners have taken their work to new heights. Once considered no more than basic drilling and sanding, you'll now find collectible pens like the examples on these pages fetching prices in the \$300 range. On the following pages, read what is fueling the continued interest in turning pens. On page 9, you'll also find a report on a Penturners Rendezvous at Provo plus a list of Internet sites where turners exchange information. *Continued*

Angelo Iafate, Johnston, RI.  
Blue stabilized maple and Gabon ebony.



It wasn't until after a couple of years of turning bowls that I became interested in pens. I can't even really remember what it was that attracted me to pens. I was doing just fine with bowls, and I "just knew" that pens were a bit amateurish compared with bowls. Whatever it was, I bought a mini-lathe and started turning pens in my basement during the long, cold Idaho winter.

Now I turn pens every chance I get. I think of penturning as being quite a bit like dancing—it's something you can learn in a short time, but can take you a

lifetime to master. I still turn bowls, and I enjoy them, but pens are a great way to fulfill the "need to turn."

There are new woodturners and experienced turners alike that are coming to penturning with a new appreciation and dedication. A good part of the reason is that penturning is no longer considered to be just an introduction to turning, or "Woodturning 101" as some say.

I don't believe that you have to be *just* a bowlturner, or *just* a spindle turner, or even *just* a penturner. Turning wood on a

lathe gives me a satisfaction for making things by hand that I don't get anywhere else. I still enjoy the challenge of turning a thin-walled bowl, and I also enjoy producing a fine writing instrument out of beautiful wood. For me, pens are a valid branch of woodturning all their own.

A couple of things that have fueled the resurgence in penturning are the increased quality and selection of pen kits and the increased availability of equipment intended for penturning (see sidebar *below*) that allow you to make a pen that

## Why pen turning?

By Scott Greaves

Emory McLaughlin, Jacksonville, FL.  
Afzilia xylay fountain pen.



## Today's pen market

What's hot today in the penturning arena?

Here are comments from four industry leaders

### Bill Baumbeck

owner of Arizona Silhouette  
arizonasilhouette.com

*"In my opinion, penturning has really taken a turn on an upswing. And it's evolving. The biggest thing in my estimation is that there are more people turning pens and they want better quality kits. And they want more eye candy. With a pen, you gotta have something there to catch someone's eye—figure or color or stabilized color.*

*"What's popular right now is curly poplar with a color stabilization. It really highlights the chatoyance—character markings like fiddleback or curly maple. Stabilization really changes the personality of the wood. We offer it in nine different colors.*

*"For imports, afzilia xylay from Laos is popular; It has a crocodile pattern. Also selling well is spalted tamarind from Laos. It looks a lot like spalted hackberry. Tiger pradauk and any of the Australian woods seems to get interest."*

### Ed Levy

partner of Penn State Industries  
pennstateind.com

*"Dedicated penturners go for the more elegant styles—Monte Blanc and Parker styles are very popular. Satin-type finishes and titanium nitrate finish are growing.*

*"What's most attractive about pens are the beautifully burlled woods—they look fantastic. Those into hunting love deer antler and buffalo horn for pens. Also selling well are pearlized plastics.*

*"The favorite of the high-end pen for us is the Cigar pen and pencil set that has lots of gold and black enamel. It's a 'Man's Man' pen. In fact, it doesn't even fit into some of our pen boxes. It uses a Parker style refill.*

*"Our most popular newer style is our Slimline Pro style. It's a wider variety of Slimline with a Parker style refill or a gel refill. The pen and pencil both have a click mechanism."*

### Jim Heusinger

The Berea Hard Woods Co., Inc.  
bereahardwoods.com

*"The writing instrument kit market is following the general demand in today's writing instrument market. There is growing interest in better pens as well as a surprising interest in fountain pens.*

*We're seeing a growing demand for very high end and sophisticated kits such as solid sterling silver kits, 18K Swiss rose gold plating, real platinum plating, and black titanium.*

*"There still seem to be turners who consider making these kits to be a non-creative, mind-numbing activity. There is, however, the potential for great creativity in making writing instruments. The design and engineering of writing instruments continues to be a significant challenge. Historically many famous designers have been involved in this field. The MOMA in New York has writing instruments in its permanent collection."*



rivals the \$500 designer pens.

But many ask, “Why penturning?” I could entice you with the challenge of working fine details into small turnings, or using wood that is so rare that you can’t afford to turn a bowl from it.

But the real reason is that pens are fun. Most of us got into this activity because we enjoy the simple activity of turning wood on a lathe. Penturning still embodies that fun. And the results are nothing less than spectacular.

### Rex Burningham

Crafts Supplies USA.  
woodturnerscatalog.com

*“The high-end pens are strong. Platinum series pens are popular — just like what you see in jewelry.*

*“Some of the lower end pen market has flattened out. I don’t see as many penturners at crafts shows with a whole table of lower-end pens. But the pens for the collectors seem to be doing well. And some turners are doing more volume with corporate sales.*

*“What I’m seeing is more laser work and other unique and creative things. I’ve seen a castle pen and a nut-and-bolt pen. These aren’t clunky — very creative.*

*“For materials, dyed box elder remains popular for us. Penturners like stabilized woods because they don’t dull and fade.*

*“The bigger diameter pen kits are getting popular. There’s a little more wood on it, which opens up more shapes for turners. Our Gentleman’s Junior is a smaller roller ball fountain pen that is new and doing well. Also new is the Patriot pen with a single wood tube. It’s a 9/16” diameter twist pen with metal fittings on the end and top. It shows off the wood really well.”*



# Revisit the Slimline pen

By Scott Greaves

If you have done any penturning, then you probably already know about the venerable Slimline pen. Everyone makes a Slimline kit, which is a basic twist kit based on a popular Cross pen. Slim, light, sturdy and dependable—it’s what most penturners learn first.

The problem with the Slimline kit is that after you’ve made a couple of dozen of them, you have pretty much run out of interesting things to do with them. You’ve made straight pens, and pens curved like an hourglass. At this point many penturners leave the Slimline pen behind in search of fancier pens that challenge their growing abilities. But the Slimline deserves a closer look because it’s probably the most versatile of all the pen kits available to turners.

One of the first things you can do to expand the capabilities of the Slimline pen is to think beyond the confines of the center-

band. The metal centerband supplied with a Slimline kit is nothing more than decoration — it has no useful purpose. If you take an assembled Slimline pen and remove the centerband, the pen will still function as before. Once you know that the centerband is optional, it opens up a whole new set of possibilities.

### The loose centerband

Penturners call this design a loose centerband because it is not attached to either the upper or lower barrel of the pen. This decorative centerband rides between the two pen barrels. The only real restriction involved in the loose

*Continued*

centerband is the size of the hole you need to drill in it.

The Slimline is called a 7mm kit because you drill a 7mm hole to accommodate the parts of the kit. With room for glue to hold it, this hole is big enough to accommodate the brass tubes that make up the foundation of the kit. The brass tube serves to support the material—wood, plastic, or whatever that the pen is turned from. The tube also provides a stable, consistent interior diameter that you can press-fit the pen parts.

The loose centerband will not have a brass tube glued into it, so a 7mm hole is too big. The hole needs to be small enough that it will provide a snug fit over the mechanism pressed into the top of the lower barrel of the pen. A 1/4" hole seems to be about the right size for this.

You can make a loose centerband from any material that can be turned. Shown on these pages are examples of Colorwood and Corian centerbands. The body is Steelwood, a dyed and stabilized poplar, which I believe outperforms ebony for pens.

Contrasting colors and materials are ideal for these pens. For example, the cutoffs from trimming pen blanks to length are great for this purpose, as are odd bits of plastic, antler, and Corian scraps you may have lying about.

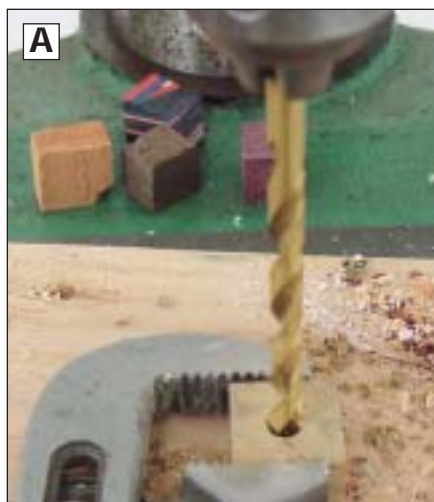
I recommend you stick with pieces that are between 1/8" and 3/4" thick. If the centerband is more than 3/4", the top barrel of the pen doesn't attach securely because it slides over the pen mechanism.

## Preparation

To prepare the loose centerband, flatten and square the two faces. Since I usually use scrap pieces I trim from pen blanks, I do this by first making a cut with the saw to remove just the very end of the blank. This leaves me a clean flat surface for the centerband. Then when I cut the blank to length for the pen, the leftover piece should be pretty close to flat and square on both faces. If there is any doubt, use a pen mill (available from most pen suppliers) to flatten the faces after drilling the hole.

Then using a waste board, drill the 1/4" hole through the piece as shown *below* in Photo A. Using the waste block on the back should eliminate any blowout as the drill bit exits; make sure that the waste board hasn't been drilled into at that spot.

I will often cut and drill a number of pieces for loose centerbands, then rough them out at the same time as shown in



**A** Clamp the centerband material, then drill a 1/4" hole into a waste board.

Photo B. This way I have eliminated a couple of steps, and can quickly select one I like and put it on the lathe with the pen blanks. You can put the centerband piece on the mandrel without roughing first, but I find that roughing a bunch of them at once provides me a truer picture of size and appearance when I make my final selection.

## Turning the loose centerband

I prefer to turn the loose centerband on the mandrel at the same time I turn the pen barrels as shown in Photo C. I simply replace the center bushing with the piece for the loose centerband. (The center bushing helps you turn the blanks down to the proper diameter for the metal centerband.) Since you won't use the supplied centerband, you don't need that bushing. At this point, you should realize you can make the center section of your pen any size you want. I have seen pens as much as 1" across at the center!

I begin turning the pen by roughing the blanks down to about 5/8" round and getting them close to the diameter of the loose centerband. This allows me to see how the colors and textures of the pen and centerband are going to go together. I prefer to turn a centerband that contrasts with the rest of the pen. You may want to set apart the centerband with decoration such as beads or coves. Whatever you want to do with your centerband, you need to decide the general shape of

your pen and what role the centerband will play in the shape of the pen.

I like fluid lines without much ornamentation, but I'm willing to be adventuresome if it suits my purpose. I like the look of the dark burl pen covered with beads, with a light colored centerband consisting of a graceful cove.

I also like the graceful lines of a contoured pen set off by a couple of beads done in a complimentary color of Corian. Whatever the choice, I turn the whole pen together on the mandrel so I can see how the shape is evolving.

If you want to have some fun with loose centerbands, choose a couple of different options, and turn them to fit your pen. This way you or the person who buys your pen can change its

personality to fit his or her whim.

I usually finish the pen by sanding through the grits to 600, and then I switch to Micro Mesh and continue through to 12000. I friction-polish with HUT Crystal Coat or Shellawax, unless the material is a plastic. For plastics, I polish the pen with a polishing compound such as Hut Ultra Polish or Novus.

### The challenge

Explore the possibilities of the humble Slimline pen. It can be the basis of any number of advanced pen designs. There are only a few constants required in this kit, such as the diameter of the brass tube and the length from the end of the mechanism to the tip of the pen. Beyond that, your imagination is the limitation of this kit.



You'll save time by rough-turning an assortment of centerbands at once.



To assure pleasing proportions, turn the centerband at the same time as the barrels.



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