

# Looking & Seeing 2

More examples of using reference in  
woodturning design and making

© Philip Streeting  
January 2009



This work is licenced under a Creative Commons Licence  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

In Part One we observed how ideas can be generated from simple objects and that close observation can reveal hidden shapes to use for woodturning. How can we expand these observation skills?

More complex objects or images although possibly confusing at first, offer more opportunities for extracting shapes as stimulating starting points. We can look for pattern, texture and colour as well as shape. We might be using several types of inspiration to use on a piece of work. It is here that a thematic approach to what we are making becomes useful. Narrowing options and avoiding too many sources of influence at any one time, can become helpful to both the maker and the viewer of the completed work. Incorporating themes and using these within our work helps to make sense of what we are doing and encourages the production of a disciplined, coherent body of work - in other words a style. To often UK turners seem to produce random disconnected pieces of work, this suggests random disconnected thinking with little or no source of reference. A quick look at individual makers in other craft disciplines will show clear indications from practitioners what they are investigating and expressing in their work. Even those working within the same visual or intellectual areas are producing their own unique take on the subject matter in hand, a personal and recognisable perspective.

The outcome of this approach is that the maker can talk with some authority about their work and where it comes from. Many will admit to being influenced by others but will also acknowledge the source, seldom is a work a copy of individual objects. Influence is more usually about ideas or techniques. Makers can describe where form, colour and pattern etc has been gathered from and how and why it has been applied to their work. Written statements clarify their thinking to galleries and buyers. Gallery owners who sell their work can talk knowledgeably to potential purchasers about the work. It is an informative process throughout from initial thoughts and ideas to the sales transaction.

So how do we work within a theme and are we able to gain sustenance from a single subject matter over a series of works, will there be enough ideas? Overleaf we will take a look at both more complex looking and seeing and then see how this translates into a more coherent way of working. How might we describe the theme or approach to our work if we adopt this practice and accepted way of working?

On the following pages you will find some example themes, example source material and some research points that could extend the way we could think about possibilities.

## Nature

Let's start by looking at the material we use, wood itself. Where does it come from? Trees of course will be the answer. How many of us take this for granted and don't look any further? Let's see whether wood and trees, native or exotic, can also be the inspiration for our work as well as being the material we use.

I have taken a photograph of some trees I can see from where I am sitting. If you look at the enlarged view you will observe the trunk and branches silhouetted against a mainly plain sky background. Look at the arrangement of branches, where they stem from the trunk, individual smaller branches as well.





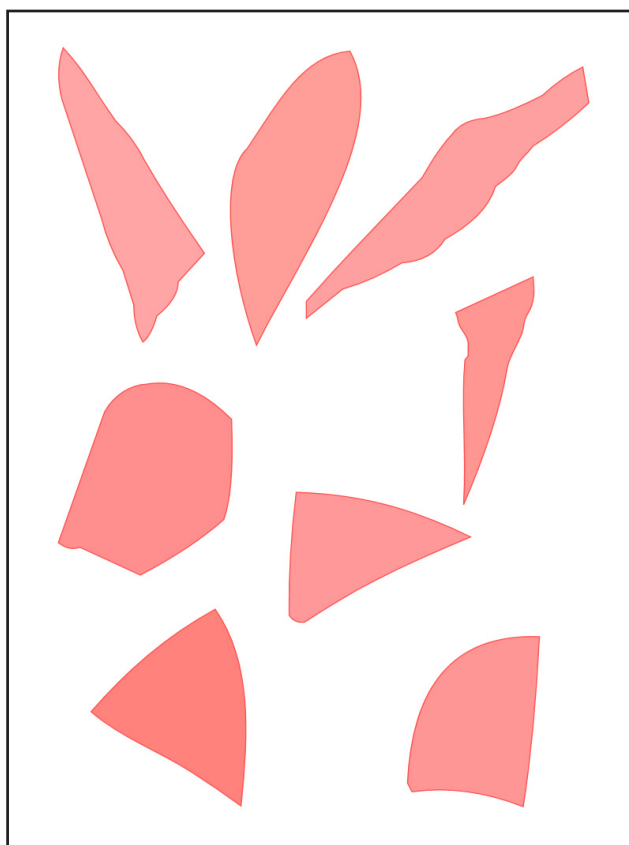
Now look more closely at the spaces created between branches - to help I have highlighted some in red. These are called negative spaces - the space around the shape we are observing. They define the outline of the form. They can also be useful sources of reference in their own right - shapes that can be used for inspiration or development. I have extracted some and made basic 3D models or forms to illustrate this. I am using symmetrical forms here so note that sometimes forms could be best expressed using part or complete off centre turning techniques or deliberate distortion, warping or alteration by other means by say microwaving green turned forms or possibly cutting and steaming techniques. You may have to devise your own techniques to describe what you see in something.



As in most things in nature patterns of growth repeat themselves so here we can see similar shapes re-occurring in the tree from large branches to smaller twigs. These could form the basis for a series of vases or bowl forms. It might be that an exploration of subtle variations in shape could be a way forward or a single shape with textural/colour/size variations may come to mind.

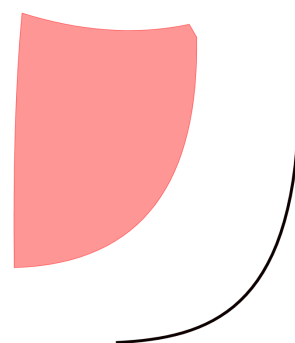
By extending our reference points and looking at growth patterns in other trees a whole library of potential forms can be discovered. Climate zones cause different growth habits, temperate/cold/tropical offer species differences. Subject to where we live a different set of referral points may become available. Some of us are lucky enough to live near or have access to arboretums, garden collections or botanical gardens with greenhouses - the species found in these locations can extend the possibilities further.



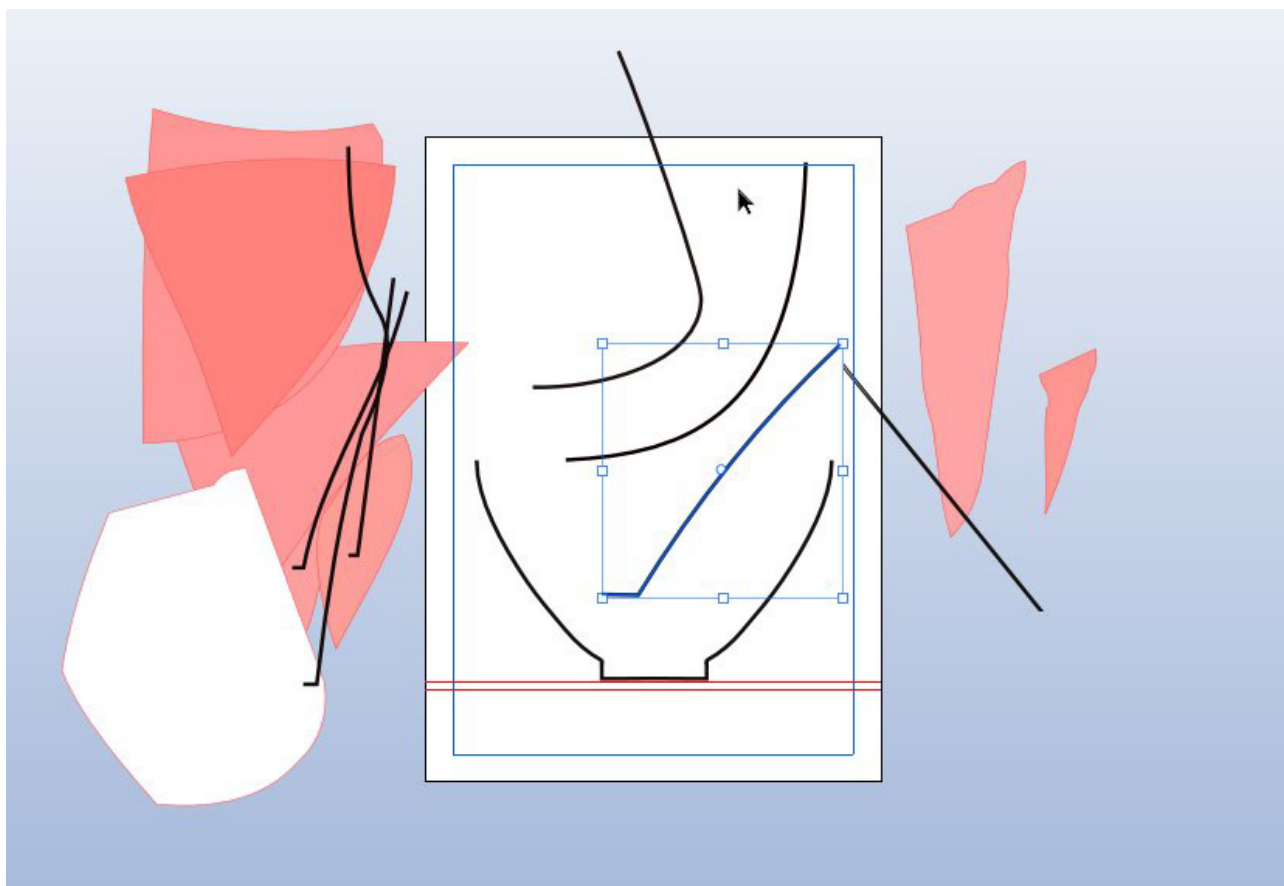


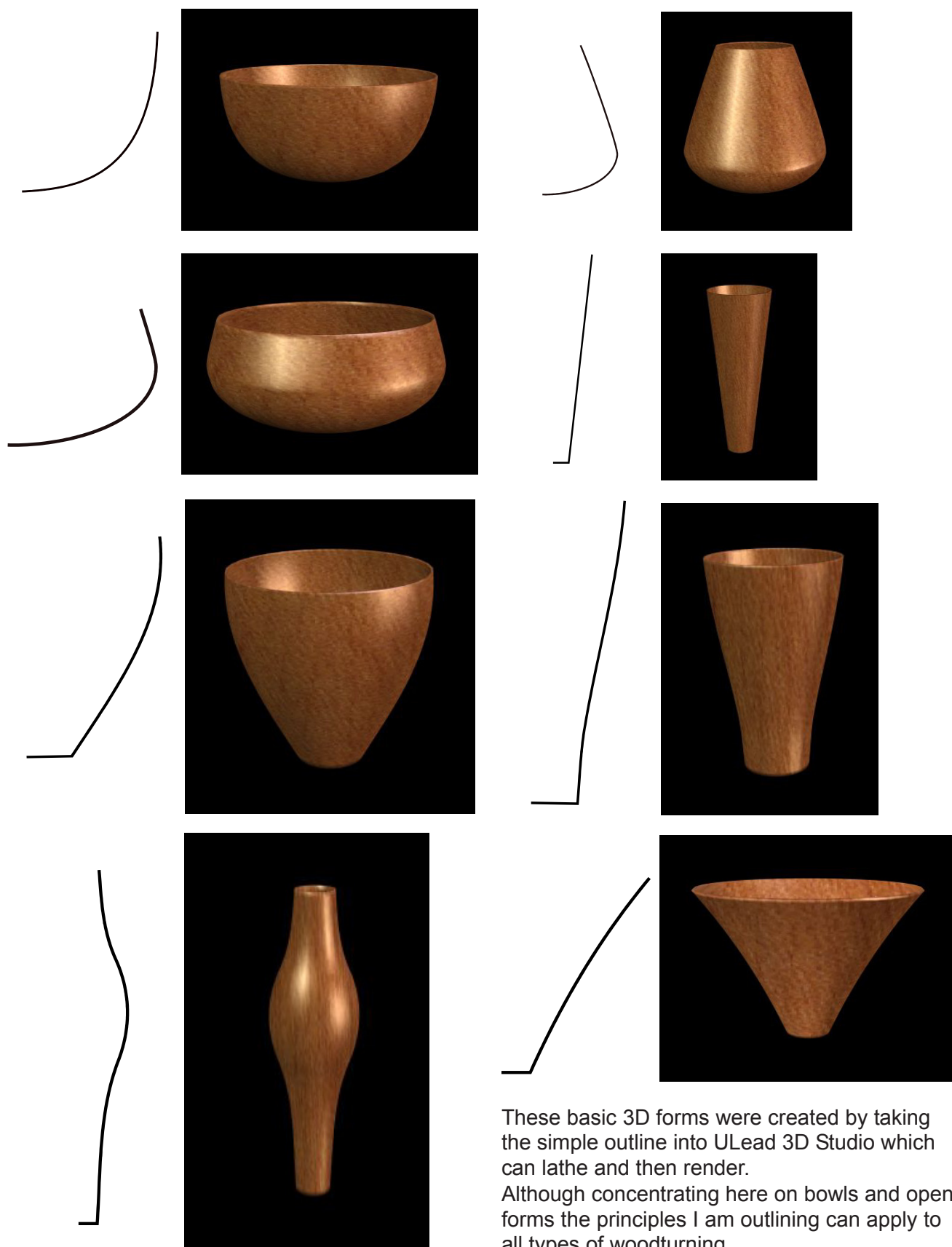
This diagram shows the negative space shapes extracted from the photograph on the previous page.

I am using computer methods for illustration purposes. Pencil and paper will do the same job.



Above and below you will see the shapes taken into a Draw program. These shapes can be rotated then suitable curves can be drawn round the shapes to create woodturning forms. Over-leaf you will find some completed curves and basic 3D models made from them.





These basic 3D forms were created by taking the simple outline into ULead 3D Studio which can lathe and then render. Although concentrating here on bowls and open forms the principles I am outlining can apply to all types of woodturning.

As well as healthy growth there are burrs and distorted growths on trees, part decomposition, storm or lightning damage, splits, growth rings, all these offer opportunities to see shapes or curves that we can exploit in our turning. Consider planed timber too, grain, knots, burr patterns, faults etc can also offer fruitful visual stimulus. Look at leaves closely too because these have intricate patterns and curves both externally and within the veined construction. Flowers, fruits, nuts and berries offer opportunities as well.

Next you will see a few of my reference pictures of wood, trees etc. showing the diversity of material available within this as a subject matter. Then I will briefly illustrate how some basic ideas can be generated from photographs or actual objects using simple thumbnail sketching to record visual elements within the picture or object that may catch attention.



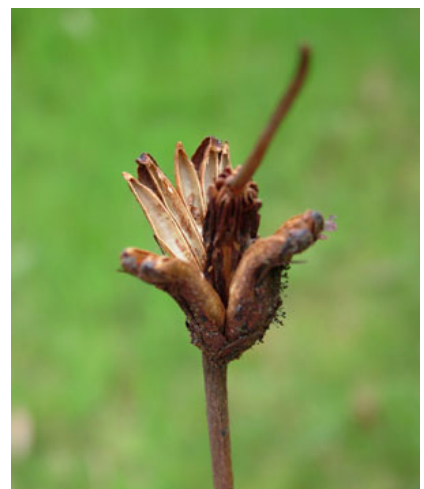






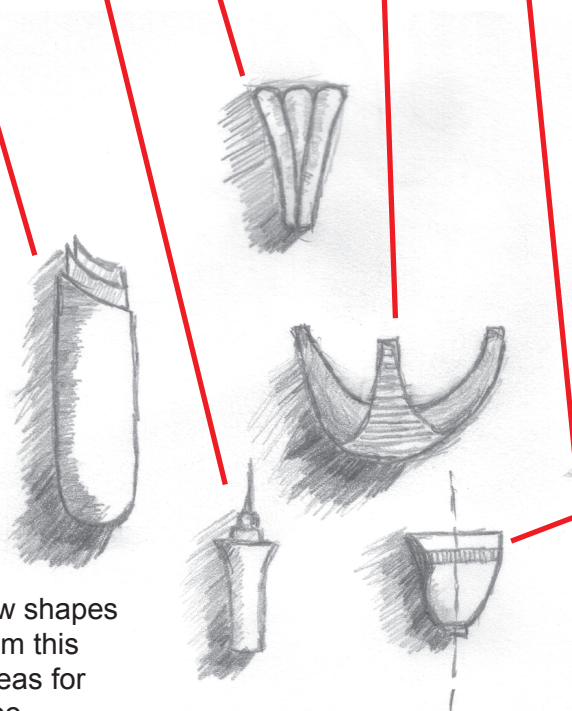






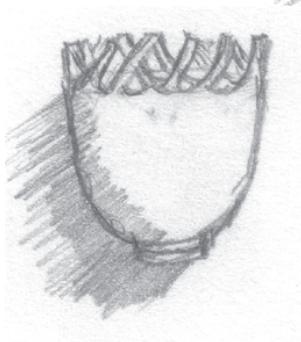
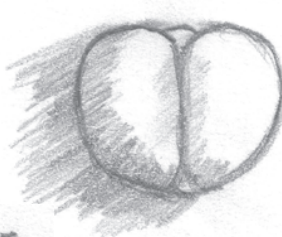
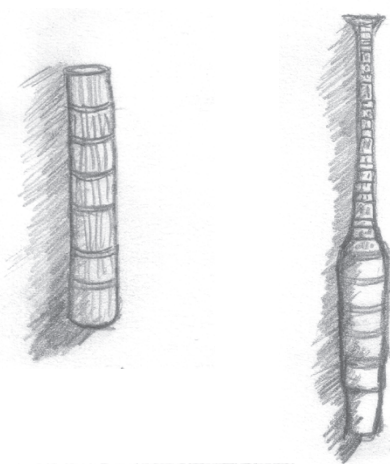


On the following pages I have included some reference pictures with some simple sketches taken from them as examples of recording shapes that might be useful for turning.



Here you will see just a few shapes that could be extracted from this image. There are many ideas for textural/carved surfaces too.

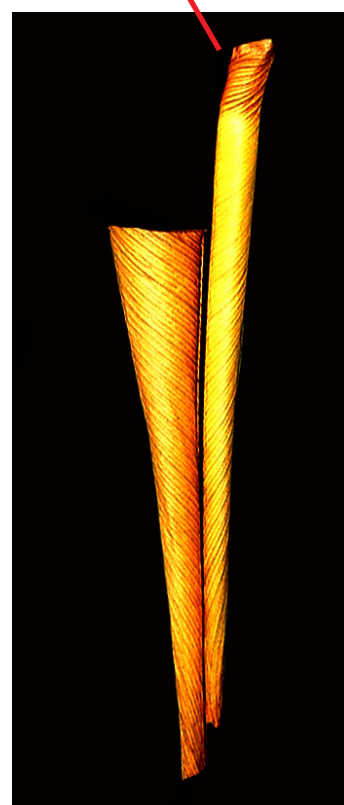
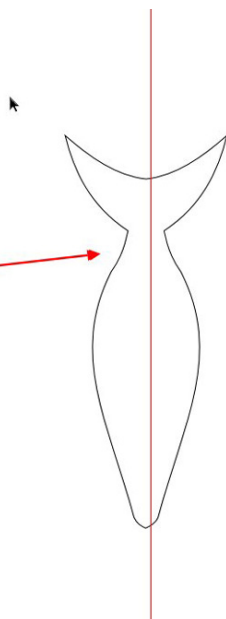
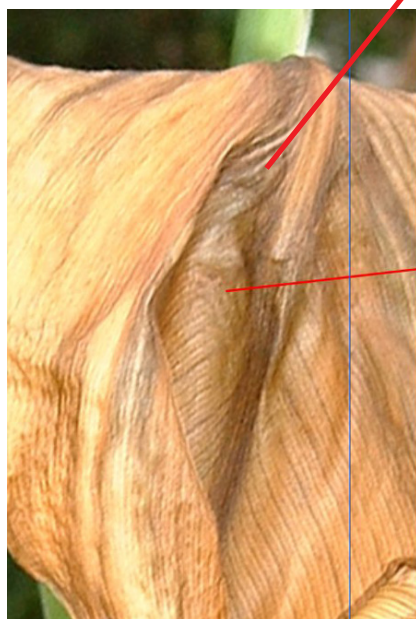






As well as using pencil and paper sketches it is also interesting to use software programs to isolate shapes. In the diagram below you will see a cropped section from the picture on the right. This has been imported into a Draw program where it is possible to draw round a selected area. The screenshot shows a half profile that has then been fipped and joined.

The second picture below right is a selection taken in Photoshop, cut and pasted onto a black background with some tweaking of the colour hue.





Once we have some basic forms we can consider and explore what else trees and wood can provide.

### **Colour Studies**

We all know the beautiful range of colours that occur in trees during the autumn. If you haven't already taken pictures then next autumn do so. It will provide a rich range of subtle and contrasting natural colours that can be incorporated into your work. If you are inexperienced in using colour, as a starting point, nature's palette is invariably better than those we try to make up for ourselves. Other colour references from trees and wood include bark, flowers in spring, fruits and berries in autumn. I shall be returning to colour in more detail in another tutorial.

### **Texture and Surface Carving**

Nature is a rich resource for textures and trees or wood can provide textures that look natural on woodturning. When looking to interpret textures try to see the imperfections or irregularities in repeats. If you this bear in mind, textural applications on woodturning become more visually interesting and less mechanical or machine made in appearance.

Sources for texture include bark, leaves, dried leaves, weather worn or eroded surfaces, driftwood, decomposing fruits and nuts.

As well as photographing and drawing, bark or other textures can be recorded using brass rubbing techniques (wax crayon + thin strong paper) results can be traced and transferred to the turned surface. If the image is too large or small, resize it using a photocopier or computer scanner. Remember the shape or structure created from observed texture might be just the start. The basic texture once applied to a surface can itself be textured using a variety of techniques such as sand blasting, wire brushing, selective burning etc.

Although turning is essentially a lathe process and as such mostly produces symmetrical items, asymmetrical or non-circular applications of texture or line can add contrasting elements to the work. This can be done on and off lathe with various tools. Look for instance at bruising techniques causing depressions in the wood surface. Sanded back to flat and then steamed to raise the bruised grain. Burrs and other cutters can be used in rotary carvers for interesting linear or random textures.

Overleaf I will provide some examples of texture references and interpretation.

Here is an interesting picture taken from a felled and weathered Olive tree. Cut with a chainsaw from various directions the resulting cuts provide a multiple resource for textures and linear surface decorations. As in previous sections look for shapes too.



Taking two sections from the above picture may help to show textures more clearly





### *The stimulus*

A piece of weathered plywood found on a beach - naturally sand abraded



There are many ways to texture and carve wood, research will provide many examples of method and tool recommendation. If you wish to find a personalised route then be prepared to experiment and use several techniques together to achieve an outcome. An example of an experimental approach to carving/texturing a surface is illustrated below. I am showing:

the stimulus

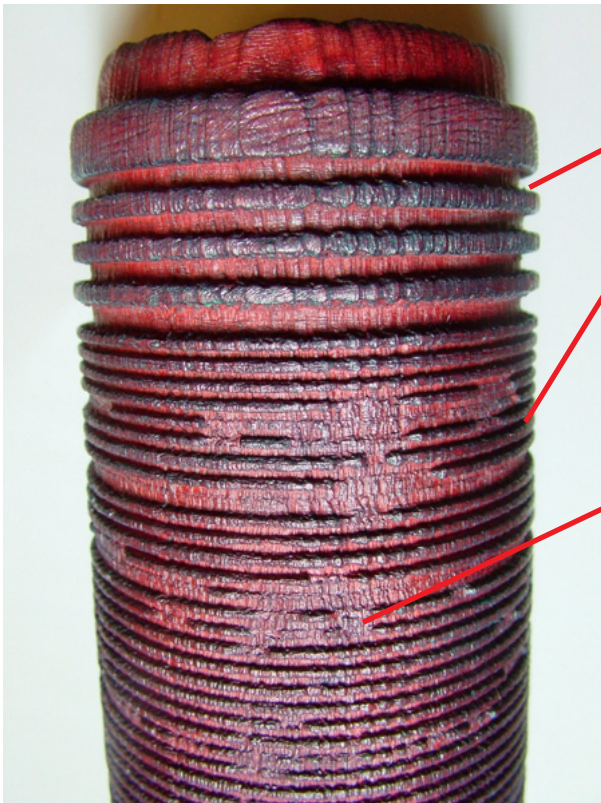
the pot which was just a basic form to carry the experiments  
a description of the central processes used

The main thoughts used during the making were 'I wonder' and 'what if'.

*The experiment - to simulate a worn antiqued texture*







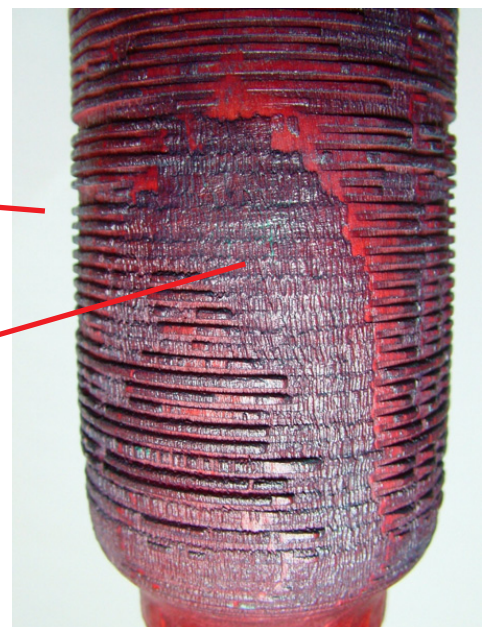
After turning a basic hollow vase form two sizes of parting tool were used to form the basic flat bottomed grooves. The top surfaces had fine grooves cut with the point of a skew chisel. With the the larger parting tool a series of random stabs were taken at the surface to remove chips from the bands. A stiff circular wire brush was hand held and used to abrade the surfaces on lathe while the wood was rotating.

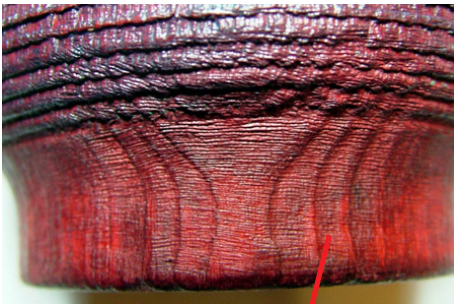
Off lathe the next stage was selective burning with a cook's gas torch. Wire brushing with a flat wire brush to remove carbon.

Back on lathe to hand wire brush again breaking down the surfaces further.

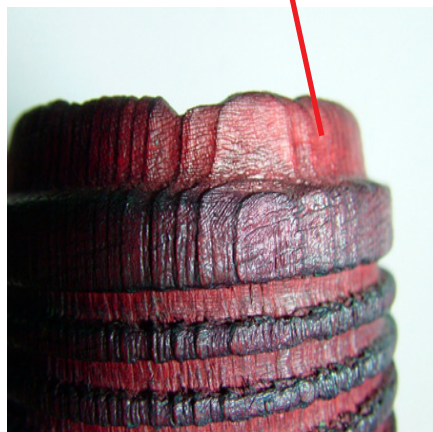
Next stage with the wood stationary on lathe a smaller circular wire brush in a drill was used to power brush vertically along the wood with varying pressure to further randomise the broken rings and add vertical lines to the bands.

In places the brushing removes the rings and creates an alternative texture pattern.





On the rim and the base the vertical and horizontal brushing exploits the natural grain patterns of the wood



A reminder of the pictures used and textures I was simulating.



Let's have a look at some other natural textures - maybe you could think of ways of interpreting them with tools you have available.







I have included here textures that have stimulated my interest - you will have to discover those that excite you. I have shown that sometimes you have to improvise your own methods for describing what you see. There are conventional ways to texture and carve but sometimes discovering you own method can make your work and expression unique.





### Pattern and Pictorial Elements

Repeat patterns or pictorial representation can be constructed from many of the elements already mentioned and illustrated. One way to view potential shapes for pattern is to look at shadows cast by direct light. This simplifies an otherwise complex image into a silhouette. This can be traced and copied to the turned surface using carbon paper or similar. This image can then be coloured, carved or pierced adding suitable simple details for enhancement. Small items such as leaves including decomposed or skeletal objects can be used as direct masks for airbrush techniques. Traced patterns can be made into masks by carefully cutting out portions using a sharp pointed scalpel. There are many other techniques from the art and graphics worlds that can be adapted for decorative embellishment of turning. This could include image transfer both for the image itself as decoration or as a template for surface carving.

Good historical examples of how to interpret and simplify plant shape, colour, texture and pattern in other art forms can be found in mediaeval and earlier manuscripts, Celtic and Ethnic crafts, Arabic, Chinese or Japanese prints, paintings, Japanese heraldry and Art Nouveau amongst many. Look also in wallpaper sample books. Museums are a good source for direct observation. Many historical buildings including churches are a rich resource for examples of traditional carving. Books and Internet searches including online access to museum databases are good start points too.

Some example pictures follow.



Direct scan from part decomposed flower



More scans, a photocopier  
can do this too

Pressed flowers

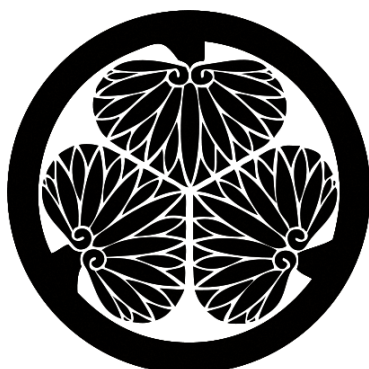
Leaves in colour and b/w



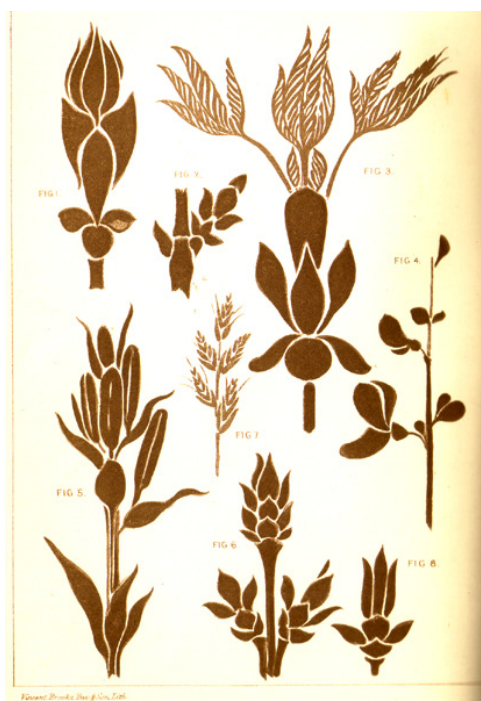
Scanning in b/w or photographing cast shadows can help to  
simplify the subject we are viewing and help us in converting the  
image to a basic pictorial or pattern element we can use for  
decorative purposes



Here are some examples of stylised plant forms



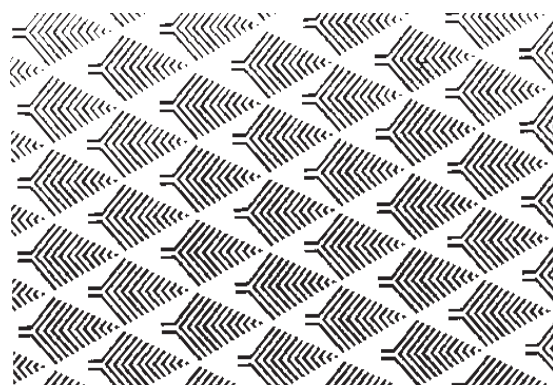
Japanese crests



Page from a Victorian book on design



Indonesian



Clip art sample



Aztec design

Finally in this section, try researching how modern artists and craftspeople, other than turners, use wood. As a starting point for different ways of visualising the potentials of wood, look for works by Dorothy Gill Barnes - is there any reason why a wooden bowl for instance can't be contained or part contained with woven wood? Liv Blavarp produces interesting wooden jewellery so could turned items be presented in an articulated form or construction? It could be that our creative insights are only limited by current experiences, our own ways of doing, training or lack of knowledge of other techniques, materials and approaches to our work. By looking beyond our immediate and usual sources of reference a whole new world of creative opportunities becomes available.

Some traditional carving



Above are two examples of carving from churches in Greece



Carved decoration from an old turned box found in a junk shop



In the last section we looked at trees and wood as a potential source of inspiration for turning ideas. Nature is an endless resource for subjects and ideas to investigate. Next we will look at two other less obvious sources from nature then look at how museums offer historical references for our work.

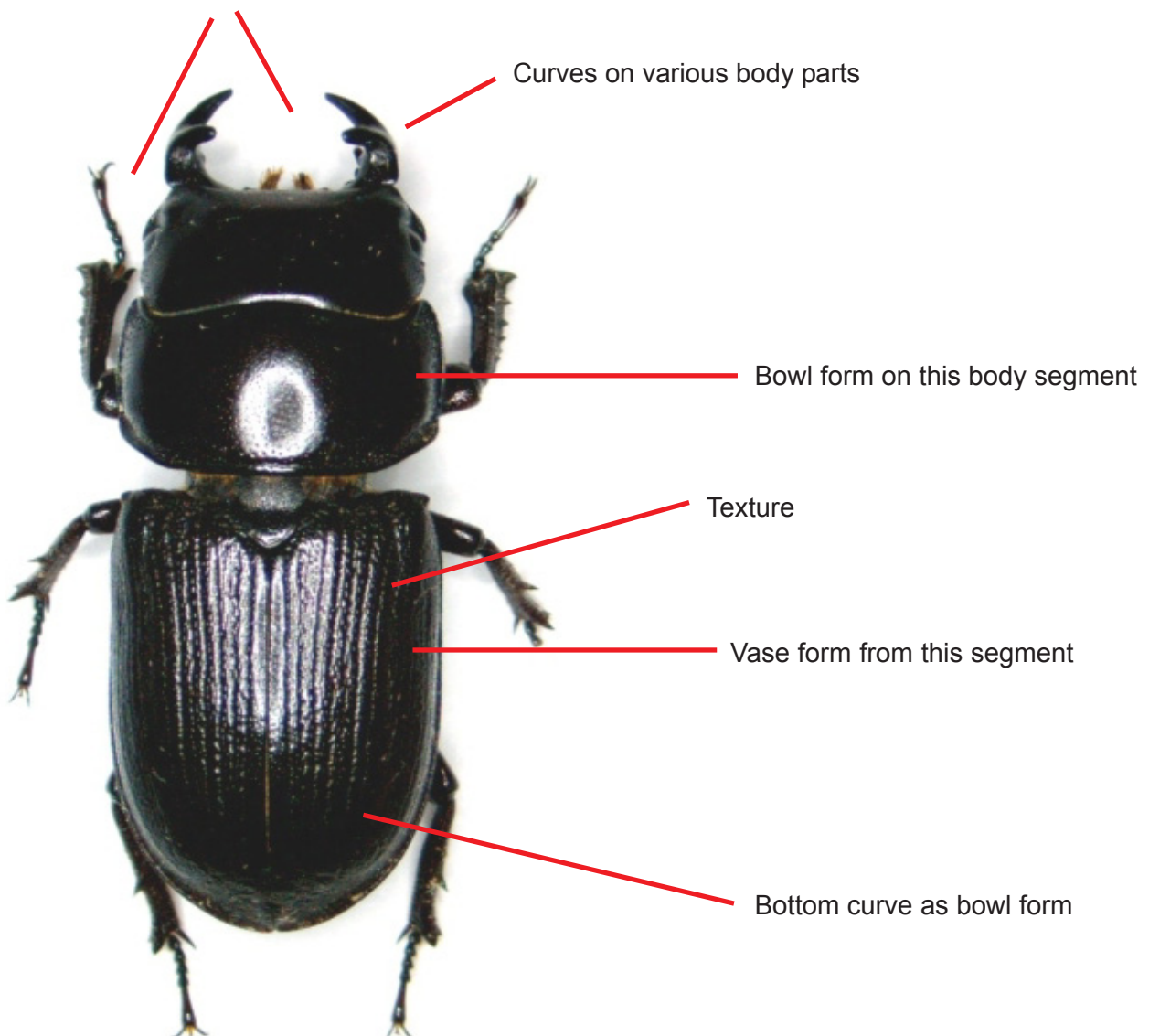
### **Beetles, Bugs and Insects**

Holidays are good times to take reference photographs. When we are outside our normal environment we tend to notice things we would otherwise overlook or dismiss. Out on a walk I spotted a dead beetle and a cicada which you will see below. This kind of casual encounter with a subject can trigger research and the discovery of new ideas.



Okay we don't have immediate access to lots of examples of beetles but a web and literature search can offer many photographs of exotic species that we can draw on for inspiration. Using similar headings to the previous section we can observe shape, form, texture and pattern in almost anything in nature so beetles and bugs of all sorts are no different to any other source. Lets take a quick look at a few examples and what we can extract from beetles, bugs and insects.

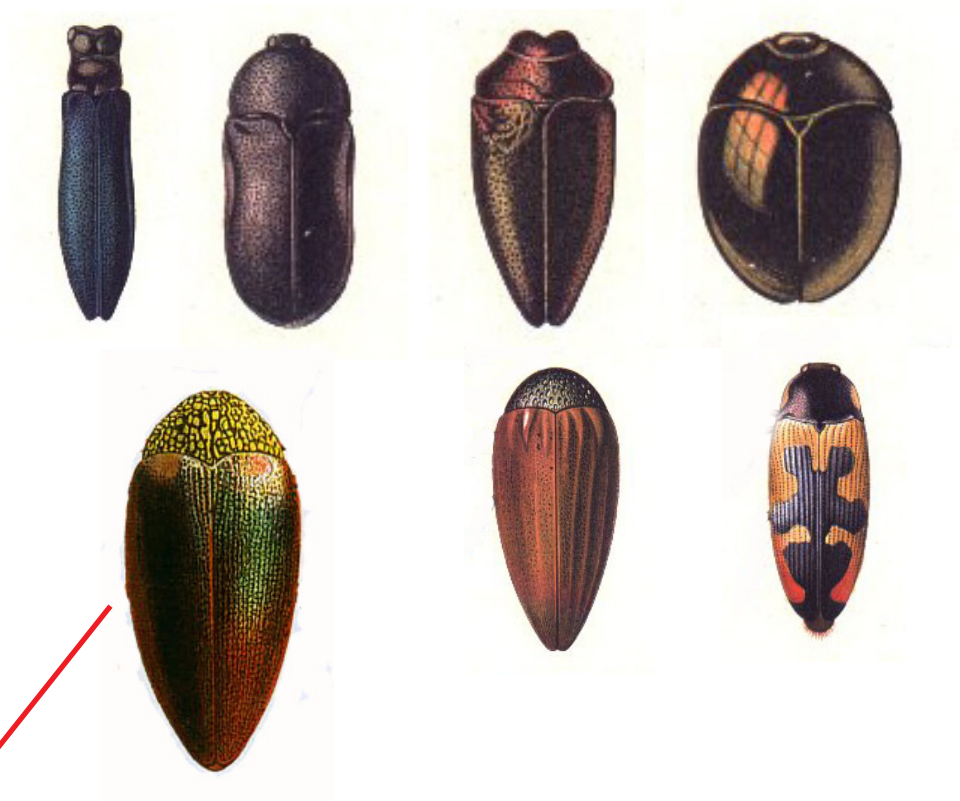
Look for negative spaces formed by horns and legs



Picture courtesy of Pennsylvania Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources - Forestry Archive. Bugwood.org



Old illustrated books on entomology will provide a rich resource for shapes - here are a few example illustrations from this source showing some body forms from one beetle species.



Once you start to research you will find colour, texture and pattern as well as shape ideas



Picture courtesy of [www.freephotobank.org](http://www.freephotobank.org)

I have chosen beetles to illustrate how research might lead you in a completely different direction. By looking up beetle in a Net search you may find yourself at Wikipedia and looking at a scarab and links to Egyptian images and artifacts. You may be stimulated to look in greater depth at museum pieces, art and artifacts from this period of history. Interesting illustrations, symbols, shapes and patterns maybe useful to work on and to transcribe some of the ideas you find into your own work.

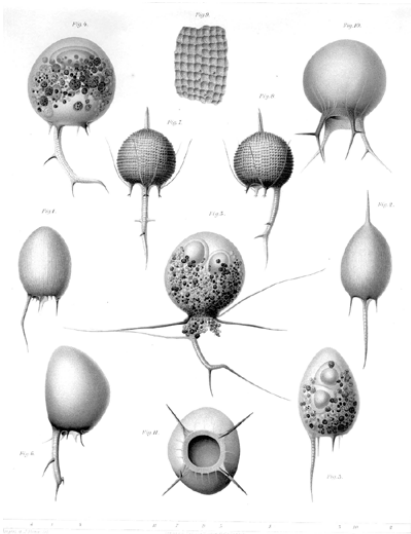


A decorative scarab from Wikipedia

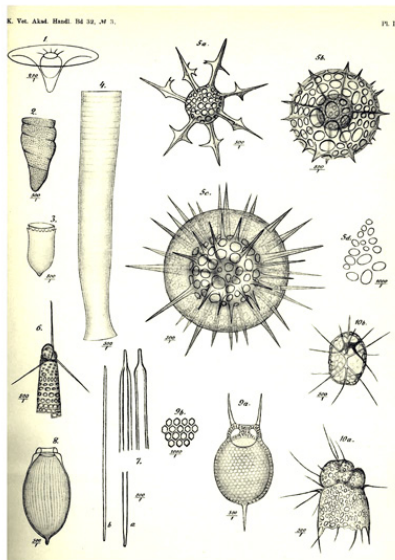


Picture courtesy of www.bigofo.com





Bogert 1906. Picture courtesy of Jane K. Dolven  
radiolaria.org



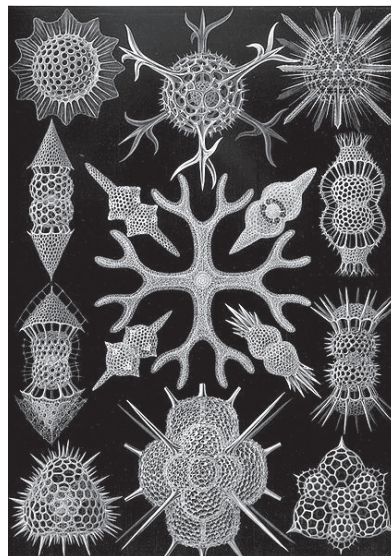
Cleve 1899 Picture courtesy of Jane K. Dolven  
radiolaria.org

## Macro and Micro

Many digital cameras have a macro facility which enables close ups of parts of objects to be taken. Relatively low cost digital microscopes are becoming available too if you wish to investigate micro possibilities further.

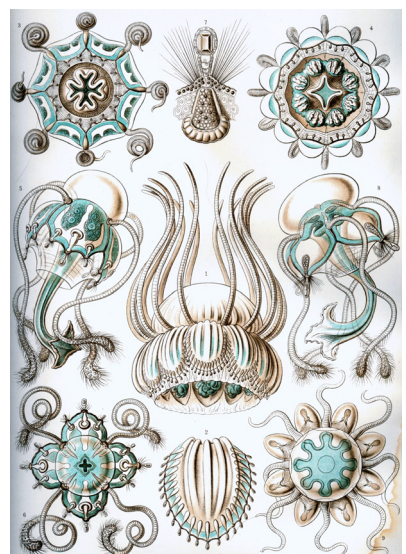
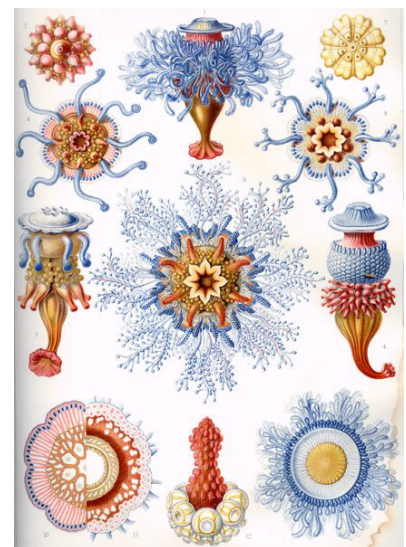
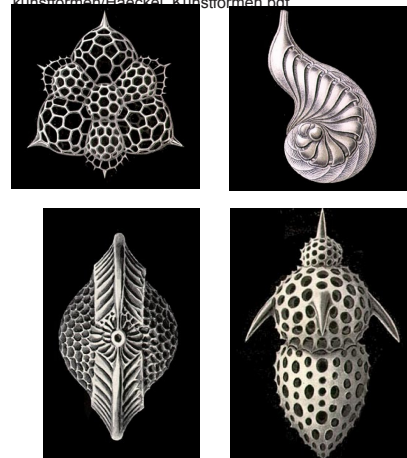
## The Micro and Macro world

Investigating what nature reveals in the visible world is great but the micro world can offer exciting opportunities too. Some turners have already exploited the works of Ernst Haeckel using his drawn observations of microscopic subjects. Much of the pierced work we see can be traced to this source of reference. As well as using his drawings as a starting point go back to the root of his studies and do some of your own. For example at [radiolaria.org](http://radiolaria.org) you will find many pictorial examples of small plankton organisms that can be useful starting points for both new shapes and pierced work. There are a couple of examples on the site showing how other crafts/artists have interpreted the subject. NanoWorld at the Queensland University has many photographs produced using an electron scanning microscope. You will find there are many shapes and textures not able to be seen by the naked eye waiting to be used.



## Ernst Haeckel illustrations

A free download of Haeckel original book can be found here:  
[http://caliban.mpiz-koeln.mpg.de/~stueber/haeckel/kunstformen/haeckel\\_Kunstformen.pdf](http://caliban.mpiz-koeln.mpg.de/~stueber/haeckel/kunstformen/haeckel_Kunstformen.pdf)



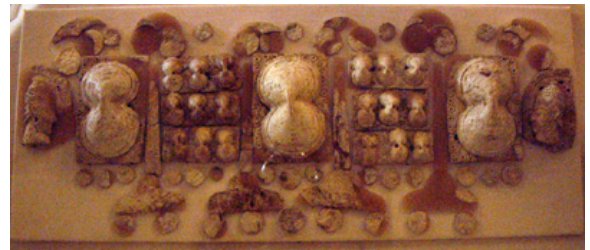
## Museums

There are many museum resources available both for physical and online visits. If you are not lucky enough to live near a major museum facility then go online. Many museums have online databases of exhibits with downloadable pictures for investigation. It is useful to decide a period of history or a subject matter for research before typing in search questions.

It is not just historical items or artifacts that are available to view, most subject matters are represented somewhere.

Below you will see a representative selection of pictures from my own collection which has been made from visits in London, Paris, China and Greece where many museums allow photography. Always ask before taking pictures.

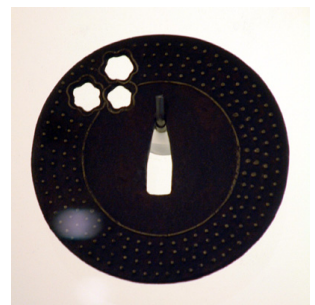
The pictures are not in a particular sequence or subject sorted they are things that caught my attention. Your selection may have been entirely different.



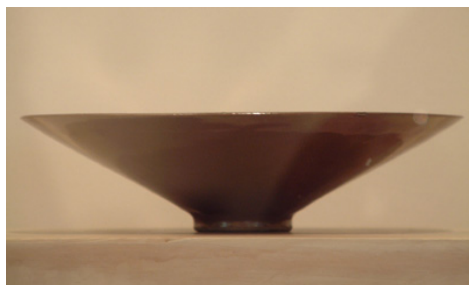




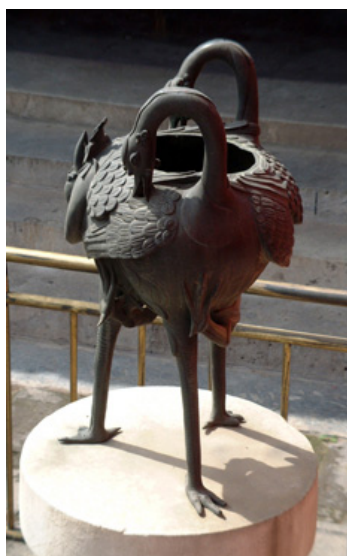














In this Part 2 of Looking and Seeing tutorial we can begin to see that almost any subject can be a source of inspiration for turning design. I have only touched briefly on one or two here to illustrate ideas are everywhere. It is up to the individual to choose how to be influenced by what they see and how things can be interpreted. 'How to' articles or books by turners can be useful but it is someone else's ideas we are using if we always follow this method to produce our work.

How much more satisfying it would be if all we produce what comes from within, expressing our own ideas and visions using our own techniques.

I hope that you may also consider incorporating other materials into you work. There is a place for glass, metal, plastics, stone and other materials to add contrast and enhance the beauty of wood. Some things we see cannot necessarily be expressed adequately within the restrictions of any one material and sometimes combining materials and methods can be liberating.

Developing creative skills is no different to developing technical or practical skills. You have to work at all of them to improve them. It takes time but if you are willing to try, positive results will be forthcoming. You will begin to gain confidence in the expression of your own ideas. The need to refer to other woodturners work will begin to diminish.

Looking and Seeing Part 3 will show examples of how I use the computer to investigate ideas. As well as new material, I will be using several of the shapes and photographs appearing in this tutorial in a different ways to throw up chance possibilities. Computer software can provide helpful methods for those who do not draw too well, to rapidly produce stimulating ideas.

If you have found this tutorial interesting or helpful or if you have any suggestions, please let me know. I welcome feedback that helps me in the production of further free publications that may help woodturners.

[streetblog@btinternet.com](mailto:streetblog@btinternet.com)