

Santa Cruz Woodturners

Sheltering in Box

Our Experts Share Insiders' Thoughts

March, 2020

March has certainly put our society into a figurative box, but turners know how to spin that into an artistic enterprise. We enjoyed a fine box demo at Sue's shop not long ago.

Several of our members "do" boxes especially well. SCW members Morgan Taylor and John Wells shared their thoughts about a number of aspects of this specialized craft in this "virtual panel discussion." We definitely respected social distance, of course.

We hope you can use their dialogue as a remote tutorial opportunity while we're all Sheltering in Shop.

Thanks,

Wells Shoemaker

*(Presidents can get Coronated, it seems,
but that doesn't make them Kings)*

A Virtual Interview with Morgan Taylor and John Wells

1. *Approximately how many boxes do you make in a year? Do you particularly enjoy this, or is it just another project?*

MT: The present annualized rate is about 100 per year, and I love it!

JW: 6 - 10 I suppose. I do enjoy them more than the average "everyday job." I like being precise and focusing on details. I like making threaded lids a lot. It's challenging. I also teach 2nd year woodshop kids to make them



*Flying Box, Maple Burl, 15" x 6", threaded lid
John Wells*

2. *How many years have you been making them?*

MT: 2-3 years, though not at the present rate.

JW: 30 or so.

3. *Do you use hardwoods, softwoods, or both? Do you have a favorite?*

MT: Favorites are myrtlewood (AKA Bay laurel), maple, honey locust, walnut, black acacia, and lignum vitae for the body, and ebony, cocobolo and walnut for finials.

JW: I've used both, but mostly hardwoods. Walnut, padauk, maple, maple burl.



Novel Lignum Vitae box, 3 segments. Morgan Taylor

4. *Most boxes are made with openings cut into end grain. Have you also done face grain boxes? How did those work out?*

MT: If I do, I call them “bowls.”

JW: I do a lot of face grain lidded bowls which are pretty much boxes. When I do threaded lids then the boxes are face grain usually. That orientation of the grain holds the threads way better. The alternative is to make threaded inserts for an end grain box. I just bought some finer threading tools, 22 tpi as opposed to 16 tpi. I'm interested to see how they work in different grain orientations and if they are easier to use. I'd also like to try denser species some time like boxwood, lignum vitae, ironwood, etc.

5. *When we learned, it was fashionable to match the grains and make tolerances close enough so the lid would “pop” when you opened it. Those of us who make jewelry boxes have gotten feedback to make the lid open easily with one hand. What’s your take?*

MT: If it is a jewelry box with a *delicate* finial on it, it should open with one hand with little pressure on the finial. I put a steel spike inside the finial if it is too narrow and delicate to withstand normal use.

JW: Loose lids sell better. Making suction fits is so much more satisfying.

6. *For boxes with tight fitting lids, as we painstakingly pare down the interlocking surfaces, there’s often a roughened surface. We turners frown on rough surfaces unless it’s bark on a natural edge bowl. If we sand a tight fitting surface, it gets looser, and sometimes the straight wall contours get subtly rounded. How do you manage that?*

MT: Lately, I’ve been experimenting with wrapping sandpaper around a dowel if I’m working on the inside of the box, or back up a bit of paper with a block if I’m working on the outer lip of the spigot.

JW: Depending on what I’m making I like to use Raffan’s technique. First you should be able to cut the flange cleanly with a sharp gouge. Raffan taught me to cut a tight, straight flange and then taper it from the middle to both the top and bottom. Then only a very light touch is needed to adjust the fit at the middle point with sandpaper. The tapering cuts almost guarantee that you’re cutting downhill and should make clean cuts easier if that’s an issue.

Richard Raffan’s *Turned Wood Boxes* is a wonderful resource. He’s a great teacher.

7. *Splendid boxes are often made with highly figured wood, and that marvel may say everything that needs to be said. Many turners also embellish their boxes with inlaid wooden medallions, stone, metal, shell, and other mixed media. Still others have ergonomic knobs or finials. What do you like for special touches?*

MT: I like finials. Also, abalone/mother of pearl/imitation ivory on the top of the finial, if it’s a flat rather than a pointed one. Other special touches include lining the inside top and bottom with self-adhesive felt circles.

JW: Antler and stone cabochons, carving, and texturing.



Decorative finial inlays from above: Morgan Taylor

8. Boxes need to start with bone dry wood, but some woods maybe aren't suitable for a box. Western Red Cedar, if unfinished, fumes off a substance that makes a gummy film on silver jewelry. (I got in trouble for that one.) Some woods with high coefficients of expansion (most conifers, sycamore, madrone) may warp enough with changes in humidity to become a nuisance. Can you share your experience?

MT: Well, I didn't know that sycamore was a problem for some people, but my projects are fairly small. I like cedar though, and when I give someone a cedar box I tell them it's a miniature "cedar chest."

JW: I haven't run into a problem with anything I've used.



Old growth redwood box from a salvaged 4x4. Oil and paste wax. WS

9. Last question: Do you have a favorite finish? Does that answer vary if, for example, you're using the container to hold spices or organic matter?

MT: I really like Mahoney's walnut oil utility finish, followed by a coat of his walnut oil & beeswax. Not only does it look good, but gift recipients have told me that it FEELS especially good!

JW: If it's going to hold food or other consumables, I don't put any finish inside. Outside I finish with lacquer or Myland's Friction Polish. If it's going in the kitchen, I use oil and wax just like bowls and spoons.

So there you have it! Give it a whirl in your shop and show us what you've done when we get back together in person! (Looks like we'll have a couple months to polish our techniques.)

Enjoy this rainy day!

Wells



"Venus Transit" is either a celestial box or an odd lidded bowl. Once you get a few million miles from Earth, definitions begin to warp a little bit. Doing this project again, channeling John's demo from 2019, I'd have made it eccentric and Venus a bit smaller.



Totality Platter, er, Box Celebrating the year 2018 (14" diameter)