

Katherine Kowalski

“Fine, *Refined* Turnery”

P.O. Box 20543, Cheyenne, WY 82009, Ph: (307) 220-0130

Katherine@daystarhandworks.com, <http://www.katherinekowalski.com>

Platters

Please see my web site www.KatherineKowalski.com for additional handouts, a supplier list, and more information.

Wood Selection

The most striking thing about a wooden platter is not necessarily the shape, or the finish... it is the grain. Platters have a “natural” ability to prominently display landscapes of grain, highlighting large areas of natural patterning and grain lines. Figured wood is especially striking: curls, quilting, birds-eye, burl, crotch patterns, ambrosia, spalting, sap- and heart-wood contrasts, and the chatoyant effects that sometimes go with these.

What is *very* important when choosing a piece of wood, (as for any other turning), is stability. Pieces with cracks, ring shake, excessive checking, etc. are **not suitable**. Heavily spalted wood that is punky and soft is also to be avoided. Bark inclusions, bug cavities, and solid-wood spalting can also be risky to turn – assess each piece individually. The last thing you want is your platter to break apart on the lathe and end up through a window – or hit you in the head, or worse.

Utility or Decorative?

Almost any type of hard- or softwood can be used to make platters: choosing a wood may depend on your intended use for the piece – is it to be hung on the wall as a decorative piece, highlighting the grain of a particular species? Perhaps it will be used for serving slices of cake at a party... Or maybe you’d like to choose a plainer wood with the intention of decorating it later?

For **utility** pieces, use a food-safe finish, or none at all. (My favorite is “Mahoney’s Finishes: Utility Finish” a filtered, heat-treated walnut oil). Design your platter so that there aren’t any hard-to-clean areas, such as excessive beading. A utility piece should be **free** of cracks! Bacteria can collect in these areas making the dish potentially toxic! Design the form so that it is pleasant and comfortable to hold.

Wall thickness should be appropriate for the function. (A thin-walled bowl/platter is neither functional nor attractive to buyers – some heft is desired. It must *feel* like it will do the job for which it is meant). Shape is of great importance – a shallow platter with in-curved edges might serve well as a salad bowl. Otherwise, a wide-rimmed platter has more presentation appeal; excellent for serving hors d’oeuvres.

Decorative Options

Using **pyrography**, (wood burning), is an excellent way to build your decoration skills. When starting out, it’s advisable to make smaller platters, about 6-8 inches in diameter – that’s a lot of surface to cover with a design! There are many techniques to master: outlining, stippling, shading, etc. Use wood with a grain pattern, or not... sometimes the grain can be an inspiration to design. Pyrography can be a good way to “dress up” (or *cover* up) areas of plain grain which are mixed with figured. Use these features to your creativity!

Painting with a brush, or using an airbrush are also methods of decoration that can be fruitfully employed. Ranging from simple patterns of folk art to detailed, masterfully painted works, a platter can provide a unique canvas – a curved surface to “play” with. Wood has been a “canvas” for thousands of years, allowing generations of artisans to leave their mark, so to speak. Use your turning skills to design this surface for the purpose of decoration. Various paints can be used – simple acrylics, milk paint, Japan colors, airbrush paint, etc. Choose to make a curved bottom, or a flat one... a rim that has a definitive edge, or a smooth internal transition to complement your design.

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Dyeing is similar to painting, except that the wood grain shows through. This can be a blessing or a curse, depending on what your project is. Often, dyeing can enhance the chatoyant effects of wood, making a piece more striking with color, (think curly maple platter dyed a deep blue). Using “colored” wood, especially basic browns, (walnut, mahogany, etc.) makes the colors muddy. These woods are best avoided for a dye project. Light-colored woods serve best. Burl has an added attraction – the eyes “hold” the color better, so the surface acts somewhat like watercolor paper. Colors can be layered and placed in small increments more easily. (A straight-grained surface tends to let the colors run all over the place). Be conscious of your color choices! Red + green dye may appear to be “Christmassy”, but allow those colors run together on the surface, and you’ll get a very definite shade of brown... Be sure to use light-fast products if you want the color to last: I recommend TransTint metal-complex dyes.

Carving, whether by hand, powered/rotary tool, by sandblasting, or even torching, offers many possibilities.

Mixed media is a growing area of artistic expression – never be afraid to combine wood with metal, fiber, stone, paper, or other materials. Other crafts may inspire creative new works!

The Underside

Finish the underside of the platter with the same care and attention you would with the top surface. Always sign and date your work. It’s a tribute to the hours you’ve spent becoming a skilled turner.

For many of my pieces, I have a signature signature – I cut a bead or recess to define the center, and pyrographize my artist’s mark there. While the piece is still on the lathe, I use a pencil to make concentric rings on the base that define the height of the lettering, as well as the curvature of the writing. (This makes for a very clean appearance once the lines are erased/sanded off.) Using a wood-burning ball-point pen, I write my name, the title of the piece, and the date. Add the wood species if desired.

Finishes

The finish is the final touch – make sure the finish matches the function and look that you desire. Decorative finishes can be a highly-glossy 10 coats of lacquer, or a satin or glossy oil finish, like Watco Danish Oil, Waterlox, or even acrylic. Insure the finish doesn’t interfere with the paint or dye applied.

The Nitty Gritty

An internal **chucking** recess is my choice for platters. Make the internal depth twice as deep as for the height of the foot. (If it is the same as the foot, this thin area has a **high** probability of breaking off.)

The inside of the platter is relatively flat, and the tool will be cutting into the end grain. For best results, use a “bottom bowl gouge” – a bowl gouge with a bevel between 60°-85°, sharpened flat across the top. The bevel helps lay down the wood fibers and makes it much easier to achieve a good cut.

Some timbers respond well to negative-rake scraping, and this technique is especially effective for evening out a curve. (A skew held on its side is a good choice for convex curves, while an arc tool is excellent for concave ones.)

Sanding

Power sanding is highly recommended. Do not skip grits – go through 320 for a utility piece, higher if it is to be decorative.