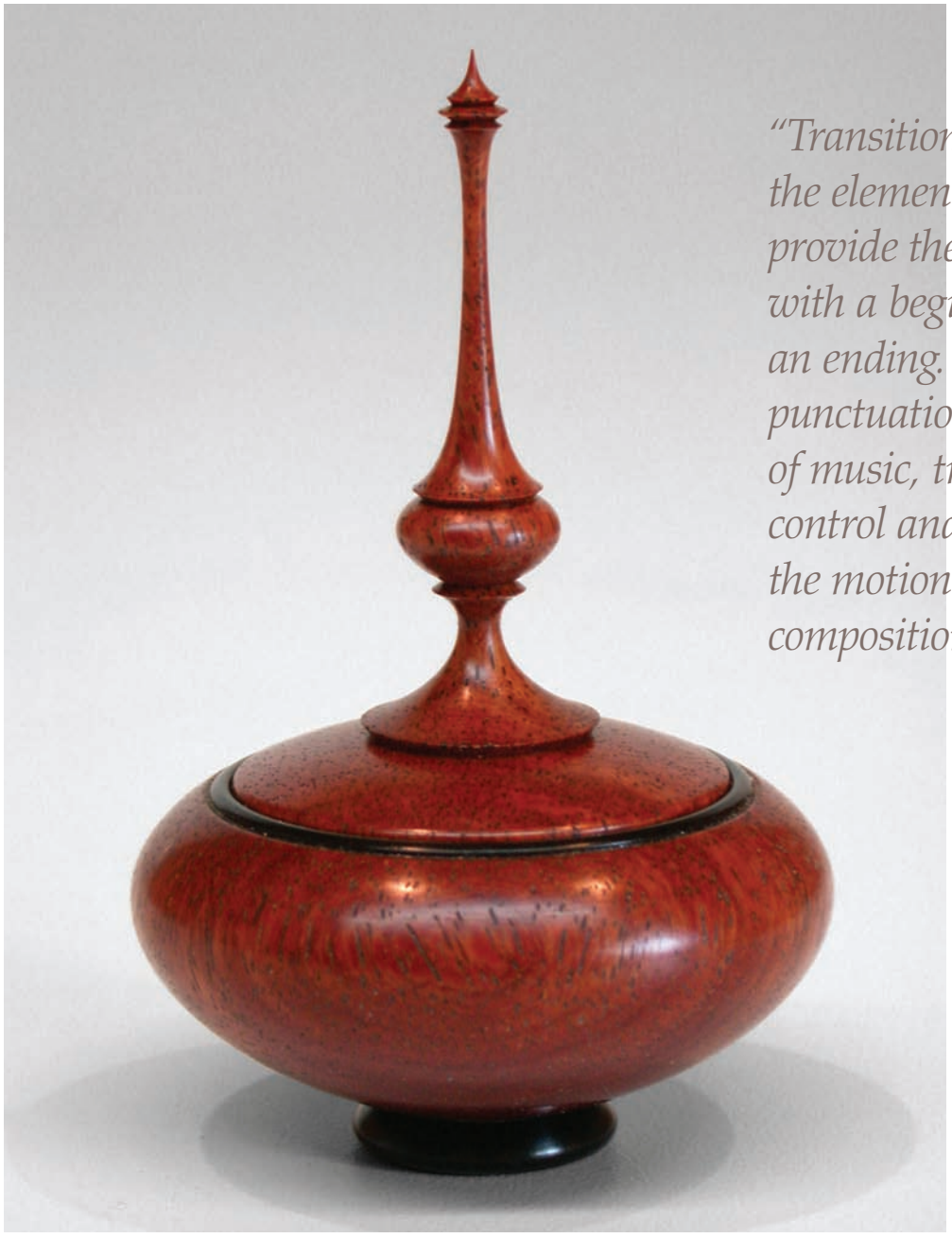
An analytical approach to



*"Transitions separate the elements and provide the composition with a beginning and an ending. Like the punctuation in a piece of music, transitions control and direct the motion of the composition."*

# Finial Design

By Cindy Drozda

Cindy Drozda's pieces soar with her exceptional finials. Cindy shares the steps she applies to produce her heavenly designs.

I admit it, I do love finials. I love the way a finial completes the personality of a lidded vessel, then invites you to reach out and lift up the lid. In my eyes, a well-done finial is a pleasing and lively composition that adds another dimension to a piece.

As an artist, I love having the opportunity to express motion and energy through a finial, and I enjoy its technical challenge. By adding a finial to my vessel, I also get to indulge in my love of working in a small scale, even when I'm making a larger piece.

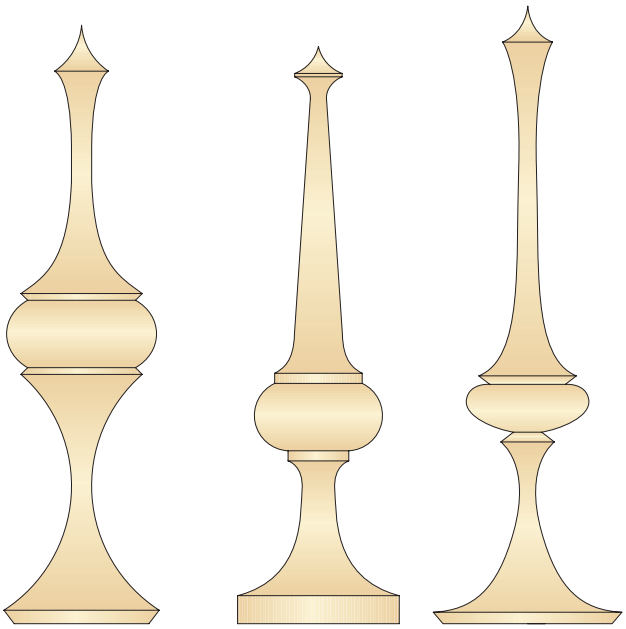
Precise spindle work requires intense energy. There is little room for error, and the tiniest cut makes a huge difference in the finished piece. Planning the piece is critical; finial turning is not one of those projects where I want to "let the wood decide" what the finished piece will look like.

The goal of this article is to explore the process of analyzing forms and compositions. Using my philosophy on finial design as an example, I present a vocabulary for describing the positive and negative design aspects of a turning. To illustrate this philosophy, I have made an 11"-tall large-scale model of one of my favorite finials. Two more models in the same scale are examples of variations on this design that I consider to have missed the mark. Finial #3 is my vision of success; #1 and #2 are the variations.

Just to set things straight, I am not suggesting that my finial is the "best" finial design or that I know more about "the perfect finial" than anyone else. There is no such thing as "the perfect" shape, finial, or composition.

## Line describes form

Woodturners often say that the form (shape) of a piece is the most important design feature. When I look at vessel and bowl forms, I see form as lines. The curve of a bowl, for example, is a single curved line. To me, this line expresses motion. The motion changes momentum and speed with the radius of the curve and the length of the line.



Finial 1 Finial 2 Finial 3

What I refer to as the elements of a design are the composition sections where the motion of the line is interrupted, is stopped, or changes direction.

An element is a form that stands alone. If we look at my finials, I consider the individual elements to be those separated by fillets or V-grooves.

Combining elements in the proper proportions establishes the energy of the composition. I see my finial taking the motion of the top line of the vessel and continuing it upward so that it reaches for the sky. I want the finial to complete my vessel with a feeling of lightness and liveliness, as if it were dancing to music. To accomplish this, the elements are dramatically separated.

Of course, this is not the only way to use finials—different designs might display different energy. My work expresses its unique combination of energy to evoke emotions. Another person's work might be saying something completely different and would use different elements in a different way, just as not all pieces of music sound alike.

My hope is that members reading this article will understand how to verbalize what they are expressing in their own work.

I believe that knowing the "why" of design success is important. It is not enough to say "I like it." In fact, to say simply "I like it" might only express a personal preference. I want the ability to say "this is or is not a successful piece of artwork, and here's why." Being conscious of what is happening in my own and other artists' work enables me to strive for success without relying only on trial and error.

One exercise that I use is to make several examples of a design and look at them together. Taking time to just look and analyze often allows me to see what I would not have otherwise seen during the creative process. A real challenge for me is to look at work that I don't personally care for and see it

as a successful piece of artwork.

## Traditional becomes contemporary

A spindle turner takes pride in creating perfectly symmetrical beads and coves and smooth, straight tapers. Each cove or bead element represents a portion of a circle with the radius remaining constant throughout. Finial #2 shows what my favorite finial design would look like if, keeping the same proportions as Finial #3, the elements were shaped like traditional spindle elements.

Finial #3 is my current favorite finial design. I have taken the traditional bead and made it asymmetrical, with the widest diameter above the centerline. The coves are not constant radius coves. They are continually changing in radius as the motion initially accelerates, slows down to almost a stop, and then accelerates again to the top of the next fillet. The fillets are undercut to give them the drama and crispness of dance steps.

By tweaking their proportions, the traditional spindle elements of beads, coves, tapers, and fillets are made into contemporary design elements.

## Proportion expresses motion

In a symmetrically turned object, you can simplify the study of proportion into two dimensions. Each element of the design has a height and a diameter. An abstract design adds a third dimension, altering your perception of the object's proportions.

I find it easier to understand proportions when looking at two dimensions, rather than three. With only height and diameter to plan for, I am able to draw my finial designs on graph paper before turning.

In Finial #1, I put my contemporary elements together in static proportions. I repeated the diameters, making the beads too bold while causing the coves to lose their dramatic dancing effect. The upper and lower cove elements were made too close to the same height, which stalled the upward motion of the finial. The overall effect is clunky when compared to Finial #3.

The Golden Mean, a ratio of 1:1.618 (often approximated as 1/3 : 2/3), has occurred in nature and in human-made objects and structures as far back as recorded history goes. When people are asked to pick the object they prefer, the one with proportions that comes close to the Golden Mean wins every time. Even when it is not perfectly measured out, we find that getting close to the Golden Mean is pleasing to the critical human eye.

In my experience, trying to have every element in a complex composition interact using Golden Mean proportions would have me tearing my hair out! Efforts to design a finial using a calculator can result in a static design. It is usually more visually exciting to incorporate Golden Mean proportions in only one or two relationships between elements. My view of the Golden Mean is that it is a place to start, not a strict set of rules to follow. When designing a finial, I like the results that I get when I try not to duplicate any of the dimensions within the piece. That's as close as I get to a "rule to follow."

## Transitions are the punctuation

When motion is interrupted or redirected, I call that "transition." Points like the joint between the lid and the vessel—where the piece contacts the surface it sits on—or the smooth change of direction in an ogee curve, are transitions in the piece. Transitions separate the elements and provide the composition with a beginning and an ending. Like the punctuation in a piece of music, transitions control and direct the motion of the composition.

## A symphony in wood

An orchestral symphony is a blending of individual instruments, all playing their separate parts, into a composition that is much greater than the sum of those parts. This is the same way that I look at a painting or drawing composed of lines and color. A turned piece, in a similar manner, is a composition of shapes and textures with each element playing its part.

Every composer works in a different way, and a wide range of music appeals to a wide range of personal tastes. When we woodturners express our passions for life through our work, the result is artwork that enriches our culture.

When we all openly share our personal knowledge and feelings with the rest of the woodturning community, we grow further and at a much greater rate than we ever could on our own.

And now it's your turn….

Cindy Drozda (cindyrozda.com) lives in Boulder, Colorado. Cindy will be one of the demonstrators at the Louisville symposium.