

# Sign Your Work

by Kelly Dunn

Have you ever picked up a bowl and turned it over only to find nothing on the bottom? You may have been hoping to find an artist's signature, wood type, and the year it was made. Or maybe you've looked for a signature and found only illegible scribble? What about a code that makes no sense to the holder?

Why should we bother with legible signatures, wood, and date? Many of us will not get our work into a permanent museum collection, a corporate setting, or even a private collection. If we are fortunate and someone takes note of our work, all information on the bottom of the bowl becomes vital; but including this information creates a valuable record, even if it's only for ourselves.

In 1990, a gallery owner requested that I not date my work. He held that an older date led clients to believe that something was less than perfect with the piece. I followed his request for part of that year.

I had a conversation with Bonnie Klein at a symposium dinner that same year. Bonnie picked up one of my pieces without a signature. Bonnie's view was that I was the artist. She suggested that the gallery owner did not care about the artist's reasoning for wanting a date on the work, merely the marketability of a bowl. Bonnie stated, "In 150 years, the date on the bottom may be more important than the signature."

I reverted to dating all my work after that conversation. Occasionally, I stumble across one of those pieces without a date. I can pinpoint the time frame to that brief period in 1990 when I did not sign work.

A locally known turner/gallery owner signs and fully dates his pieces—month, day, and year.



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His clients will ask if something is wrong with a piece with an old date. He jokingly tells them he made the piece just for them and suggests that it took them a while to get there.

The notable Jack Straka had a long career as a full-time woodturner in Hawaii. Early in his career, he would only sign to indicate the type of wood. Jack considered most of his work as functional and did not feel the need to add a signature. A gallery owner told him she was not just selling a functional bowl, but a Jack Straka bowl.

Jack would then sign each bowl bottom with "Straka" and the type of wood. There is no time line for his work because he did not date his work until after retirement. In a recent conversation with Jack about signatures, we discussed the lack of dates on his work. The added year was prompted by request of a gallery owner. The gallery owner impressed upon Jack the importance of dates for clients that collect his work.

Bob Stocksdale also had a long career as a woodturner and produced many bowls. Each

piece included a legible signature, the wood, and year made. Bob was known to occasionally include a bit of history on the bowl bottom. Seeing the extra information is delightful.

One option some artists use is a numerical code. The issue with coding work is that unless the code is available, the holder has no idea what it means. The artist may be able to track work utilizing that code and give a full accounting of a piece, but unless this information is shared, no one else understands.



When I taught a hands-on class a while back, I brought out my vibrating engraver and demonstrated control for signing work. This led to a class discussion where a member revealed that he finishes his bowls with nothing written at all. I asked if he was proud of his accomplishments. Of course, he was, but offered that he did not care about identifying his work.



Consider heirloom woodwork passed down within a family or finding a beautiful piece at an estate sale or on the secondary market. How does a signature or maker's mark make you feel? How do you feel when you see a date on something handcrafted long ago?

From our own collection, we have work that we can no longer identify. At the time of purchase, we knew the artist's name, or had a business card. Over the years, memories fade and business cards are misplaced. In several cases, the pen used to sign was not archival, so that too has faded. Initials may not evoke a full name after a time. We may recall where and when we purchased the artwork, but initials are not enough to identify the maker.



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I am a proponent of signing all work with a legible signature, the species of wood, and year. I recommend utilizing a vibrating engraver, a pyrography tool, or archival ink. By signing each and every piece, you offer a chronological journey through your development as an artist, and keep yourself connected to your own history.

*Award-winning wood lathe artist Kelly Dunn lives on the Big Island of Hawai'i. Kelly specializes in woods grown on the Big Island. He creates bowls, hollow vessels, and art forms full time for art galleries and private collectors.*

