

Design Inspiration

Although their approaches are different, Andi Wolfe and Keith Tompkins have made a habit of recording design ideas. Their efforts have paid off in spades.



Inspiration for botanical motifs such as this calla lily design comes from photography of the calla lily in South Africa as well as photographic studies of other plants with similar leaf morphologies.

Have camera, will record

By Andi Wolfe

I'm often asked how I come up with design ideas for the surface enhancements I give my woodturnings. I've been a keen observer of nature for most of my life, but I have honed those skills as part of my career as a plant systematist. To understand the diversity of plant species, genera, and families, I have studied morphology (the form and structure of an organism or any of its parts) and anatomy at levels ranging from the macroscopic to microscopic.

Photography has always been an important tool that allows me to study plants in their entirety or with regard to microscopic characters, which has helped me to develop an eye for seeing nature through the lens of a camera or the eyepiece of a microscope. Some of my most enjoyable projects have involved my attempt to re-create the microscopic textures and architecture of pollen and seed as though using a scanning electron microscope.

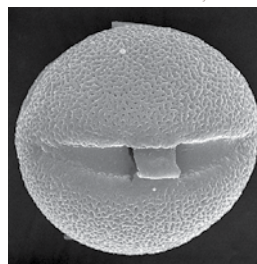
Doodling with a camera

I use digital photography as a supplement to my sketchbook for recording design ideas. I find myself doodling with a camera more often than I sit down with pen and paper. I usually have a digital camera with me when I'm likely to be outdoors or in an interesting environment.

I'm not all that interested in taking tourist snapshots, but I will often try to capture images that might give me some ideas for design motifs. Most of these images will not end up being useful in the short term, but I browse through them periodically and I'm sure some of them will spark an idea for navigating a new direction in my work when the time is right.

I'm particularly attracted to interesting color combinations and

Photo: Dr. John Skvarla/University of Oklahoma



The first plant I studied using scanning electron microscopy was *Penstemon oklahomensis*, above left. The pollen grain of this plant has a lovely texture, and I tried to capture it in the surface of my small bowl.

Photo: Jerry Anthony Photography

Photo: Dr. John Skvarla/University of Oklahoma

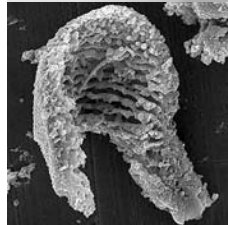
textures, and the way light plays off foliage and flowers. I photograph everything that catches my eye, including plants, animals, fractured stones, fossils, shadows under trees, light reflecting off water, buildings and architectural details, carpet and fabric patterns, and the miscellaneous chaos that I find around a college campus as I take a noontime walk. All of these images are carefully examined, and the ones I find interesting are filed away into computer folders by date and general description such as "campus walk," "wetlands walk," and "greenhouse tour." If there is a detail study of a texture or a particular plant part I want to use for design inspiration, the file is clearly labeled with a descriptor plus the word "study."

Best saved for the iPod

I place my favorite digital images in a separate folder that I load onto my iPod, and these are the ones that I draw on for inspiration for pending turning projects.

Digital imaging is pretty straightforward these days with the sophisticated cameras that allow for macro photography. Everything is automated in today's digital cameras, so

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This scanning electron micrograph shows the architecture of a fractured pollen grain. I'm fascinated by the ultrastructure of pollen and seeds, and some of the motifs present in the micrograph make their way into my *Imagine the Hidden World* series.

you don't have to know a lot about photography to get decent pictures. I use a digital SLR camera that is pretty similar to my 35mm film camera. I like adjusting all the dials and having control over the shutter speed and aperture settings.

Digital image processing is the icing on the cake. When I used 35mm transparency film, developing costs and the initial expense for purchasing film made me somewhat conservative with regard to the number of photos

I took. The primary cost of digital photography (after the equipment and software are in place) is time. I find that I take many more digital photos than I would have done with film, and this gives me many more images to use for design inspiration.

I probably have shot more than 10,000 images by now, so I store them on two external hard drives (one is a backup drive).

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Autumn foliage has always been an inspiration to me. I really enjoy the play of colors as the leaves are changing from green to brilliant hues of red, orange, and yellow.

Inspired ideas are
always unannounced.

‘Quick! Hand me a pen and paper’

By Keith Tompkins

Keith is convinced that anyone—yes, even thee of little art talent—can sketch. In an upcoming article, Keith will offer pointers on how to record your ideas. But first, Keith explains why keeping a journal is important.

The texture of a folded dinner napkin. An impromptu trip to a department store. Sunlight streaming through the leaves in a forest. The solitude of a garden. The haunting words of a favorite song. Each of these appears to be a random, insignificant occurrence or observation, yet each event provided the inspiration for one of my turned pieces.

I’ve discovered that my favorite turned pieces all possess something in common: They were influenced in some way by my life experiences. As I became more and more aware of the importance of these experiences as they related to my turned work, I began keeping a journal filled with sketches and design ideas based on them. I never know when inspiration may hit, so I try to keep my journal nearby; I want to capture ideas while they are fresh in my mind.

Dinner designs

I had just sat down for dinner with my wife, Lisa, in a restaurant after a long weekend spent touring the



Photo: On-Location Studio

sights of Philadelphia. We had taken in the Philadelphia Furniture Show and then visited the nearby Wharton Esherick Museum.

My head was still spinning with ideas when I picked up my napkin, and just as I began to place it on my lap, I exclaimed “Honey, quick! Hand me a pen and paper!” Something about the folds in the napkin appealed to me, and I began to make a rough sketch. The drawing *above* is what I sketched into my journal upon my arrival home, and the photo is the final piece, “Tango,” inspired by it.

The precious sketchbook

My sketchbook has become one of my most valuable turning tools. It allows me to visualize a piece, then work out technical and design problems before I approach the lathe.

Sketches helped me refine the serpentine form, and the appearance of the rim and foot of “Tango” helped me work out construction details. Creating this piece involved

turning two identical conical forms, then cutting and assembling the two forms precisely. The assembly was then mounted between centers to form a tenon for the foot. An ebony ring was installed before the foot was glued into place.

As the title implies, this piece is suggestive of dancers, moving across the floor as one. Ironically, I cannot dance at all.

A rose of a design

Designing the forms for “Tango” led me to other design ideas, including “Winter Rose” at *right*. And of course, I couldn’t have done this without a fistful of sketches. All three parts—rosebud, stem, and base—were turned on the lathe. But first, I sketched it out in my journal.

The rose blossom was made from three turnings, all the same shape, but with different diameters. As the sketches hint, each turning was cut in half. The edges were flattened with fine sandpaper held against plate glass and assembled to form the diminishing spiral. The process is exceedingly demanding, as each segment must fit perfectly. To complete the spiral, both halves of the largest form are reassembled. The resulting glue-joint is invisible.

The base was turned on three axes with a skew. The idea just hit me like a flash one day. Luckily, I drew it out immediately on paper.

Turning the multi-axis stem on the lathe provided more challenges.

Inspiration at the mall

Inspiration can hit at the least likely of times. The next piece was the result of a quick trip to the mall with



Inspiration! I frantically searched for a scrap of paper; the sketch I drew is shown *below*. I have since turned several pieces featuring the linen-fold effect, based on the original sketches I drew in my journal.

Many of my pieces present technical problems that must be solved: The linen-fold pieces

required a sidewall heavy enough to carve, while retaining the illusion of delicate fabric. Again, the journal proved invaluable in finding a suitable solution, as shown *below*.

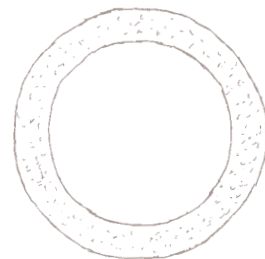
Be prepared

Your journal may be as simple as a 3½×5½" notebook that slides easily into your hip pocket or purse. The key is to have paper and pen at hand when inspiration hits you between the eyes.

And, it will.

Lisa. Tempted by the store window displays, she decided to try on a few articles of clothing. After waiting patiently as long as I could, I decided to take a walk through the mall to kill some time.

When I returned, I realized this was going to be a much longer wait than I had anticipated. The sales clerk, realizing my plight, offered me a chair to make things a little more bearable. While sitting impatiently for what seemed hours, I happened to glance up at a mannequin that had been right in front of me during the whole experience. The mannequin was draped in a provocative dress featuring a prominent linen-fold design that emanated at the collar and flowed to the hemline.



END VIEW

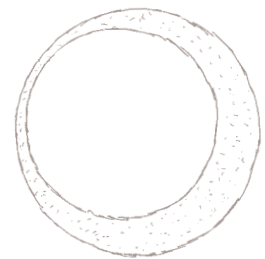
1. HOLLOW
END-GRAIN

2. FIT WOOD
PLUG

3. OFFSET 3/16"

4. TURN BETWEEN
CENTERS. TRUE
UP EXTERIOR

5. FINAL SHAPE
SUITABLE FOR
CARVING



Studio artist Keith Tompkins (daddy@webjogger.net) lives in Tivoli, NY. He is a member of Catskill Mountain Woodturners. Andi and Keith are working on a collaborative piece of intertwined leaves as a finial.