

Rings Upon Rings, Stories Upon Stories

Two intertwined themes today: one is technical about turning rings, with three ring projects of increasing difficulty. The other, is about using stories to develop your own style and voice in turning.



How to develop your own voice in your turning?

- Learn the whole repertoire of skills and ideas that you can use to express yourself.
- Read, watch videos in your club's library and not too many YouTubes.
- Listen to your audience and customers. I think benefit auctions are a great way to get started.
- Develop your "elevator speech."
- Tell stories about yourself as a maker/turner, about the material and about your designs and what they mean to you.

So, rings. A Fine Woodworking article from the late 70's on a turned captive-ring rattle changed my life. I turned hundreds and now thousands. I love rings. I used to make puzzles, and I like that the captive rings are a puzzle, and they fascinate people.

Then, at a Norwegian-American wedding reception, with those captive rings in my brain, I saw a wedding cake, called a Kransekake, as if for the first time, and said, "I can turn my rings on a cone and make that."

To find your woodturning voice, you need to know what you care about, what you think is beautiful and important. I grew up in a Norwegian American ghetto in Northern Iowa and my family has always revered its Scandinavian roots. I have made many trips to Scandinavia and am much influenced by the art and craft of Northern Europe's "wood culture." I'm also a Lutheran pastor.

First, a Celtic turned rattle:

- Accessible to almost any woodturner and much easier to learn and practice cutting rings on a rattle than on my ringed tree.
- I use a modified skew to cut rings.
- One reason is that a ring's project exposes lots of end grain which requires your absolutely best and cleanest cuts, therefore the skew.
- And second, especially on my tapered ring tree, I can't afford to lose wood between my ring and the cone, or they will fall down. So, the scraping tools take way too much wood.



So, two unique tools I modify and use:

- first, a ring-cutting tool based on the skew chisel, a traditional 1/2" skew ground to be narrower, thinner, and with an oval cross section that can fit into the narrow space between rings.



- Second, beading and parting tools made from 3/8 and 1/4 square extra-long metal turning bits, in HSS or cobalt steel. I shift the cutting off toward one edge so that when I rotate the tool, it moves me the right distance along the rest to make cutting beads easier. I cut with the short edge up and also use the side edge upside-down as a scraper to clean up the curve.
- I use a 1/8 parting tool, not 3/16, and a live center with the center point removed, so I can turn the point right to the top of the blank.

Mount the 2" X 2" X 8 inch turning blank and rough out the blank to a cylinder. Use the parting tool to lay out the rattle. Two parting tool widths at the right edge, then about an inch for the end bead, same as two width of the parting tool laying on its side. Then, mark out three rings, one width of the parting tool at each end of the rings section, and three widths of the 1/8 parting tool between rings. Cut down to a depth about 5/8 diameter.

- Use the gouge to remove extra diameter of the two outer rings and then the bead and handle.
- Cut a clean shoulder with the skew on both sides of each ring with my unaltered 1/2 skew chisel.
- Line up the cut with the bevel, slightly offset from the sight-line of the handle.
- A stop grip is best, and then a little roll of your thumb on the rest is a precise micrometer adjustment to get the entrance and thickness just right.
- Make a thin cut on maple, maybe two, to make sure we have no torn grain. Stop and look.



Then round the top of the rings. I use my 3/8 beading and parting tool, which specializes in a bead or ring of its own width. First, I make a nice bead on the right end of the rattle, big enough to not be a choking hazard. On a ring, in contrast to a bead, it's not easy to swing a good curve, so I tend to make several discrete cuts, then blend them with the flipped over b and p tool as a shear scraper, and then sandpaper through my grits. Before I cut the rings loose, I also oil the wood with walnut oil, and sand with 400 grit sandpaper.

Then, separate the rings. Instead of round cross-section rings, a tear-drop look is good and much faster and cleaner. So, I use this narrower skew, and with each cut, swing further out, careful to be quick about the cut so it doesn't burn. **You will find you not only swing out the handle, but you also need to rotate the tool slightly to keep the sharp edge out of harm's way.** Be very aware of the inside line of the spindle, on both sides of the ring, to make your two cuts meet in the middle. Warning- the skew can easily burn the wood, especially with a lighter colored and harder wood like maple. Make quick cuts and get out. I keep my lathe speed under 1725 rpm.

I like the look of a taller ring in the middle, full diameter of your blank, but it also gives me easier access to separate that middle ring. That's a key factor with rings and how closely spaced the rings can be. Then I clean up what might be a ragged or sharp inside edge by pushing the ring sideways and sanding on the wood itself. No sandpaper on the inside of the ring. I'm doing production work of these rattles, 10-15 minutes each, and I think the clean-cut skew finish, though not a round cross section, looks great.

Finish up under the rings by planing flat with the skew, marking out and then turning 4 small beads to dress up that surface. Back to the roughing gouge to reshape the rest of the rattle, with a slim handle for little people. Good design suggests it looks better to keep the thinnest part at 1/3 or 2/5 of the length, not in the center of the section. I use the parting tool to define the end, then use the skew to clean up the end with a



slightly angled shoulder cut and a planing cut for the handle, cutting downhill from the ends. Still with the skew, add some detail on the handle, deepen the definition between the beads and further define the ball on the end and leave the rattle just barely attached at the ends. Then sand, oil, then 400 grit, and finally, cut loose, sand the ends and oil everything. Give it a good shake.

And finally, a story. These were my first captive rings, but I love the story, three rings on the base of a Celtic goblet like Celtic art's intertwining circles—a 2700-year-old turner's trick found buried in a peat bog in Belgium. I have turned thousands of these rattles for little babies, who I'm told have found great joy in shaking things up. What greater kudos for your turning than to have them treasured into a next generation. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

So, to cut rings with a skew, ride the bevel down the side and even underneath. Swing the tool and also rotate a bit. Quick so it doesn't burn. Go home and practice.

For my own style and way of working, I've chosen to modify the beading and parting tool for rounding the shape and as a scraper upside down too, then use the modified ½" skew to cut the rings loose. Sand the inside of the ring on the raw wood.

These learnings will be useful on my next project, but it's easier to learn on the rattle. Start and get good with rings on the rattle first. One last thing, I think it's great to make a lot of a few items. I like this rattle and tree partly because they are almost a sampler of all the different turning techniques. Find a signature piece or two. You get good when you repeat it again and again, and it enters your muscle memory. Make parents and babies very happy.



Now project number 2. “Kransekake” is the Norwegian name for “crown cake, or more specifically “bridal wreath cake,” a unique ringed Scandinavian wedding cake that was my inspiration to design this decorative tree. I have made thousands of them since about 1982. This decorative tile by Suzanne Toftey shows the Kransekake “tree of rings” cake in its setting in Scandinavian festivals, especially weddings.

The cake and design have rich and ancient symbolism for marriage and loving relationships. The ring (think wedding ring) means forever, many rings more forever, and in Northern Europe the evergreen shape means eternal life, even more forever. So, the shape wishes the recipients a relationship that lasts forever. A narrative, a good story, makes items easier to sell. Back to finding your own voice, if your products have a story, and better yet, a story that fits with your story, people love that.

You see the transition from the rattle to the ring trees. More delicate rings, on a cone. On these more delicate rings, I again use a modified skew chisel, not a scraper. First because the skew works well on end grain. But also on the ringed tree, I need a zero loss of wood between the ring and the cone. That also excludes a scraper, which needs much more space.

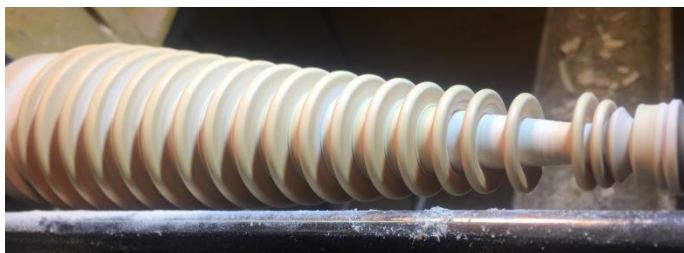
Here's the process- take a block of 2 1/4 X 2 1/4 X 8" maple and shape it into the cone, small end toward the tailstock. I never measure, but here are my dimensions. 2 1/4" diameter, 8" long, with a taper starting 2" from the bottom to 3/8" inch at the top. More precisely: 5.5 inches of rings, with 15-16 rings, Thickness of rings- .15 inch in the thicker, larger rings, tapering to .065 for the smaller, thinner ones. Each ring about .10 larger than the next. Spacing of rings .35" total for the first row at the bottom, .25" at the top row. Final thickness of the inside of the cone, under the rings, 1/4" for the top of cone, 5/16" for the narrow stem/trunk. The top and bottom rings will be attached, not loose.



I use a roughing gouge for the basic shape and then a skew chisel for a clean planed finish. I use my 2" roughing gouge as a guide to the bottom section, which is also the thickness of the blank. At the top, the diameter is just larger than my Oneway center. I've removed the center pin of my center so the point goes to the very end of the block.

- Next, cut grooves to shape my rings. I do that by eye, starting from the bottom/left, at the beginning of the angled section.
- I use a 1/8" parting tool, not the more common 3/16, and everything tapers. Grooves that are 2 thicknesses of 1/8 parting tool at the thickest section, to 1 thickness at the top, and tapering between. Thicker rings in the big diameters, tapering to quite thin at the top.
- In my rough-out stage, the width of the groove, from 2 widths at the thick part to 1 width at the top, is also the thickness of the wood between the grooves.
- Then narrow the rings a bit by cutting a shoulder on every edge and clean up the rough cut from the parting tool.
- **As you use the parting tool, keep the inside line, the bottom of the grooves, straight and even.** When I started making this tree, I made 6 rings, big thick ones like the rattle, and no thin stem at the base.
- As I developed this design, I found they didn't need to be round in cross section to be strong enough; they could be 2-3 times wider than thick. That gives an elegant look from many more rings, still keeps them quite strong, and makes them much easier to undercut.
- Round, sand and oil the still attached rings before cutting them loose.
- Use the 1/4 beading and parting tool to round the rings, sand to 220, then oil with Watco Teak Oil and sand with 400 wet-or-dry sandpaper.

This is a great demonstration piece at art fairs because there is disbelief that the rings all come from the same piece, then suspense as I cut them, and then, they want to see it done. Many recognize the resemblance to the tree and love to know more about the story. Many people have never seen



woodturning. Most people watch till it's done, 35 to 40 minutes, which is amazing. I've recruited hundreds of turners for my workshops and our clubs.

This photo shows the grooves made between the rings and the first 3 rings at the top

released. I use my modified skew chisel to undercut the rings from each side. It is very delicate work and if I cut too deep, the rings will not stay high and evenly spaced on the cone. The first cut is the most difficult because there is not much space alongside. If I cut the hole too big, or cut too deep into the cone, that ring will hang low and I can't do anything about it.

- So, go slow at first, and you may have to go back and make some more rattles to practice.
- Develop a consistent way to cut these rings, usually 3 cuts from the top, with space to swing further over to undercut the ring and rotating slightly to keep the edge out of the ring. Then 3 cuts from below, in the more confined space under the ring.
- The two cuts must exactly meet each other, so keep that inner cone line consistent.
- Once I have the first couple rings cut, the rings naturally slide out of the way and give good access from the right. Before most cuts, I clean up the surface with my skew chisel, so I can keep the line of the cone very consistent and then cut just to that line.
- I often adjust that line midway in the project as I see that I have enough taper to keep the rings high and uniform on the ring tree. I especially want my lower rings to be strong, because they are more vulnerable, being larger and more likely to be "askew."
- In both my rattles and ringed trees, in order to keep the point of the tailstock from leaving its mark on the ends, I took out the point of the live center and can use the wood right to the tip.



- Once I release my last ring, leaving the last for a "gate," I use my unaltered 1/2" skew chisel to clean up the surface. I've learned to do that in two steps, first taking most of the extra but leaving the deepest cuts. I like my spacing to be even, so if I line up the rings and if some are too close together, I have a little trick. I can push the lower too-close ring down the inner surface of the cone till it smokes, burns off a bit of material and drops lower on the cone. When I have finished that close examination and adjustment, I make another trip to clean off all marks to a pristine surface.

- Next, use the parting tool to make three deeper cuts, to the left of the still-attached bottom ring and above and below the base. The outside of those cuts go as deep as the 1" driving center and the middle one is halfway from that diameter to the outside diameter of the base.

- Use the 3/8 spindle gouge to take six quick cuts across the base to make it smaller than the rings, then rough out the slender "trunk" of the tree. I cut 3 shoulders with the skew, then use the 3/8 b and p tool for the beads and fillets, and the small 3/8 gouge to clean up and further thin the cove.
- Instead of a single continuous curve from base to rings, I add fillets to the cove, short flat reveals, that make a more interesting, and shadow-producing shape. I like the trunk thin, maybe 1/4", and with the thinnest section off-center to the top. I want it to be as light as its strength allows and to look like an elegant ballerina, weightless.
- To avoid chatter, work the middle of the turning while well supported by the ends, but now finish the ends. Cut a three false-ring finial at the top to continue the look of rings to the point.
- Now sand and oil, wet-or-dry 400 grit, oil again and cut it loose. Carve off the nubs.
- I oil the tree, by anointing it with a measured capful of Danish oil, pouring it so it runs down and I work it into every ring, especially those sections not ever oiled.



- About the story. A researcher named Daniel Pink, among others, says people don't want generic items. They want to surround themselves with products with a story. They want to know the story of the maker of the product, the story of the design, or the wood, the process, everything. Most of all, they want your story. So, any way you can tell your story, and match it to your product, helps engage people with this item. It helps you sell it, and helps you more carefully define yourself and your unique style. People will help you.



We turn wood, so even the material has a story. The sugar maple I buy sometimes has color and stain in it. Some has a figure called birdpeck, which are vertical dark lines in the wood from the sap wells made by a Yellow-bellied sapsucker. I've often seen it as a defect. A couple years ago, as I was selling my ring trees, all the same price for a given size, I realized the birdpeck ones all went first and the pristine white ones were left. I think that's a new esthetic. And especially when people know the story of those marks, that I have a wild collaborator, they love them. So now, I mark those figured trees for 10-40 dollars more, and they still sell first. People want the story.

So, another chapter in my rings story. I've turned this ring tree, which I sometimes call a Lover's Ring Tree, or a Kransekake, for 40 years. I've made it part of my brand, and people identify me with it. The last time the Symposium was in Minnesota, I bought a new Vicmarc Escoulen chuck, with multiple centers. After doing some experimenting with off-center turning, I had an idea, that I could bend my ring tree, to make a playful and unique development of my tree. It worked, with 7 different centers. People laugh when they see it. It worked. They call it "Seuss-ical." One of my very good customers, who had bought many of the straight trees as her signature wedding gifts, saw that crooked tree for the first time, and gave a huge sigh. "You get me." Our marriage was never as straight as the Kransekake ring tree. My tree has become part of her story.

Now, as I have time, I will describe and show you the process for turning the crooked Kransekake. For more information on that process, check out my website, philholtan.com, where I have a section on Directions for Woodturning Project that includes directions for turning the Crooked Kransekake.

I wish you well with discovering your unique turning style.



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PHIL HOLTAN
MAN OF THE WOOD

