

# getting started in Spindle Turning



I meet many woodworkers who have been making furniture for a while and have reached the point where they need more than just square or tapered legs. Often they ask me what tools and equipment they will need to begin making woodturnings for their furniture projects. In this article, I will describe what you need to get started.

cost is about \$40. – see Enco in Sources)

There are five chisels you need for spindle turning of furniture parts.

- 3/4" roughing gouge
- 1/2" spindle gouge
- 3/8" spindle gouge
- 1/2" rolled edge skew chisel
- Diamond pattern parting tool

to sharpen, but I recommend a belt and buff system. This provides convenience, accuracy (repeatability), speed, and a flat grind which is best for woodturning. To learn more about various sharpening systems, view the tape in the Guild library which we made November 2004 at the GSWT meeting.

First, find a lathe that suits your needs. If you want to make table legs, you will need a lathe with at least 30 or 36 inch length capacity. If you also want to make bed posts you will need a much longer lathe; about six or seven feet. If you are handy at fixing things, you should consider getting an old lathe, because you will get more mass for your money. Mass is good,

and you should get the heaviest lathe you can afford. You can put a variable speed motor on any old lathe for not much money. New or used, make sure the lathe has a heavy bed – this is the foundation of the machine and is very important. Before you buy a lathe, read my article in *Fine Woodworking*, issue #149, June 2001 – *Basic Buying Guide to Lathes*.

Get a good spur center with sharp teeth, and a 60 degree ball bearing tailstock center. I recommend a Skoda for the tailstock center. The



Don't buy a beginners set. You would probably end up with some chisels you can't use, such as scrapers which are almost never used on spindle turning.

Next, you need some way to keep your chisels sharp. Turning chisels need sharpening much more frequently than other types of woodworking tools because of the demanding nature of the work they do. There is a huge diversity of opinion on the best ways

Furniture work is often long and thin. Whenever the length exceeds ten times the diameter, vibration of the workpiece is a problem. You can dampen the vibrations by holding the work with your left hand while you hold the chisel in your right hand, and in fact this is a good thing for you to learn to do. But for serious furniture turning, you will need a steady rest. There

are several kinds on the market. For a brief discussion of steady rests, see the article in this issue reviewing the January meeting of GSWT.



A drill chuck mounted on a taper shank is a very useful accessory for your lathe. You may use it for rechucking cabinet knobs as well as for drilling. A screw center can be used to make knobs, rosettes, and

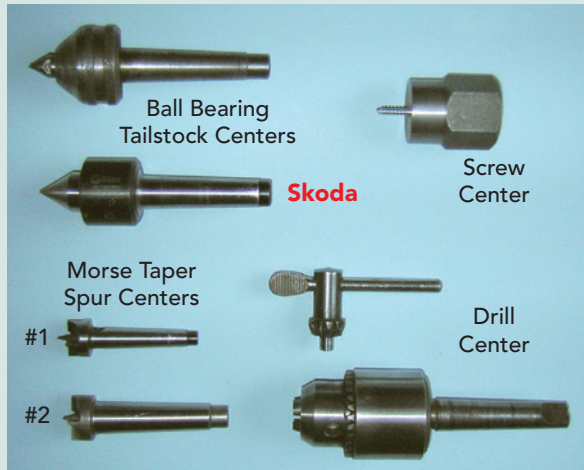
other small decorative turnings. Some screw centers fit into the taper, some screw onto the spindle nose like the one in the photo.

You may already have some tools – a marking gage (sometimes called a mortise gage) for finding the center on the end of a square, an awl to punch a little hole in the center, and a try square for marking out the work before turning. An assortment of calipers and dividers are also useful.

Now that you're equipped with all the hardware you need, there is one more thing – a copy of Wallace

Nutting's 1928 classic book, *Furniture Treasury* (Volumes 1 & 2 combined, Macmillan, ISBN 0-02-590980-0). This book has thousands of photographs which will give you a look at the rich history of how the art of woodturning has been applied to furniture.

Good luck in your endeavor to add turnings to your furniture. I hope that this will be the beginning of an enchanting adventure. While the lathe is one of the oldest and most basic of the machines in the woodshop, I think it is the most fascinating. ■



Set of five required chisels



Marking gauge at right is easier to use



Assortment of calipers and dividers

## Looking for more information?

Books are good, videos are better, but lessons are best. The book which influenced me the most is Frank Pain, *The Practical Woodturner*. It has been updated by Sterling Press.

There are many good videos, although few that cover spindle turning. Mike Darlow is good. But the Guild has a great number of tapes on turning (dozens), and some are on spindle turning. Members can borrow them free.

Classes on turning are available at the Homestead Woodworking School in Newmarket, NH, the Worcester Center for Crafts in Worcester, MA, or the School for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, ME. Starting in the summer ('05) there will be woodturning classes at Tom McLaughlin's new shop in Canterbury, NH.

Classes typically have 8 to 12 students, and you can expect to pay about \$15 to \$20 per hour for classes. Private lessons are best for some people, because you can set the agenda and work on whatever you want. But private lessons cost at least twice as much per hour as classes. The reason I recommend getting professional instruction right away is so that you start out right, and avoid bad habits (such as scraping) which are difficult and frustrating to unlearn later.

## Sources

**Packard Woodworks**  
Tools & Equipment  
packardwoodworks.com  
800-683-8876

**Craft Supplies**  
Tools & Equipment  
woodturnerscatalog.com  
800-551-8876

**Enco**  
Lathe Centers & Chucks  
use-enco.com  
800-873-3626

## Classes

**Homestead Woodworking School**  
woodschoollnh.com  
888-659-2345

**McLaughlin Woods**  
mclaughlinwoods.com  
603-783-9700

**Worcester Center for Crafts**  
worcestercraftcenter.org  
508-753-8183

**Center for Furniture Craftsmanship**  
woodschooll.org  
207-594-5611