Turn North

The Monthly Newsletter of the Northland Woodturners

www.northlandwoodturners-kc.com June 2026

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Chapter Meetings:

First Thursday of every month, 7-9 pm.
Our ADDRESS: **7305 NW Prairie View Road** in Platte Woods. We are across the street from the Platte Woods Methodist Church who has allowed us to park there when our regular parking is taken up (only about 7 cars/trucks can park in back.

Coming Attractions

Newsletters on the Chapter Website: *http://northlandwoodturners-kc.com*
Event Information:
NEEDED: Fund raising Ideas.

Remember—2026 dues are $10 for the year.
Due beginning January 1 2026

Next Meeting:
June 4, 2026

"***June is Bustin out all over!!***" To quote a line from a popular musical, this newsletter will have some unique features that maybe haven't been explored in depth; so "*HANG ON!*"



Turning History: The Origins and Evolution of Woodturning

Whether you're new to the world of woodturning or a seasoned woodworker, you may have wondered at some point how woodturning originated and the evolution of woodturning. Why did people begin turning wood? How were lathes originally powered? How did we get to the tools and machinery we have today?

These questions and more are answered in the article below!

Woodturning in Ancient Times

Woodturning began in ancient times; there is some evidence that the ancient Egyptians used a kind of bow or strap lathe to turn wooden objects as far back as 1300 BC. While this evidence is sparse, most historians agree that there is enough evidence from a few preserved wood-turned pieces and depictions in ancient drawings, as well as references in other ancient literature, to agree that woodturning has been practiced since at least the sixth or seventh century BC. According to the Woodturner's Workshop, the Etruscan people (who lived in modern-day Italy) had mastery of the lathe and various woodturning techniques by 700 BC. Researchers recovered a fragment of a bowl from an Etruscan site that had "clear evidence of rounding and polishing on its outer surface and of hollow turning…" (Woodbury). Excavations in modern-day Turkey and Germany show similar artifacts, which indicates that this technology was widespread in the known world by several centuries BC.

By several centuries AD, this technology was the primary method used for creating wooden vessels like bowls, plates, and cups in Europe, and there were woodturning guilds as early as 1300 AD. After the industrial revolution, woodturning by hand was not as widely practiced, but there has been a resurgence in the United States during the last fifty years of hobbyists who are revisiting techniques of old.
So, what were our ancestors using to turn their wood blanks into rather impressive bowls and goblets?
They had lathes, but they were much more primitive than the ones we use today.

Kinds of Lathes

Strap Lathe

One of the earliest kinds of lathe is called a strap lathe. A strap lathe consisted of a wooden dowel that was used as a workpiece, which was mounted between two iron pegs. A strap was wound around the end of the dowel, and then a person would pull the strap back and forth. This kind of movement meant that the dowel would turn a few revolutions in one direction before turning back in the other direction as the person pulled with their opposite hand, which is called reciprocal revolution.

As you might expect, a woodturner could not both pull the strap to cause the dowel to turn and hold the wood blank to be turned at the same time. Instead, a woodturner would employ an assistant to pull the strap while he or she manipulated the wood blank. Both the woodturner and the assistant would need to be seated on the ground to make efficient use of this kind of tool. There is an ancient Egyptian carving that shows this exact scenario, which shows how old this technology is.

Strap lathes are not widely used today, but there are some places in traditional societies throughout the world where woodturners still make use of this technology to help them create beautiful and useful tools and woodware.



Image Source: The Woodturner's Workshop

Bow Lathe

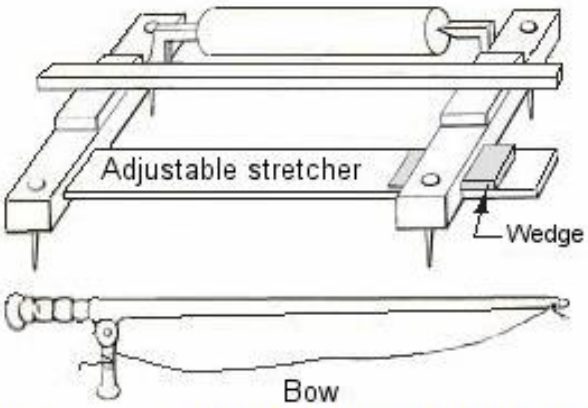


Image Source: The Woodturner's Workshop

The next kind of lathe that was used in ancient times was the bow lathe. A bow lathe works on a similar principle to a strap lathe. In this case, however, instead of a strap being wrapped around the wood blank, the string of the bow is wrapped around the dowel and used as the means of power. Using a bow lathe, a woodturner did not have to use two hands to hold each end of the strap anymore. This meant that a woodturner could turn wood without assistance, albeit with less power. The lathe was powered by the woodturner drawing the bow forward and backward to move the wood blank. Like the strap lathe, the bow lathe operated on the idea of reciprocal revolution, as the wood blank would spin one way as the bow was moved forward, and then spin back the other way as the bow was drawn back.

Because a woodturner now needed one hand to operate the bow, he or she only had one hand also to hold the tools. This limitation required woodturners to perfect their techniques with less stabilization. However, because the bow provided less power, the woodturner had more control over the cuts they made to the wood.

Pole Lathe

Another common type of lathe that was used before the power lathe came into being was a pole lathe (sometimes called a ***springpole*** lathe). The earliest evidence we have of a pole lathe being used was somewhere between the first and third centuries AD, and we have many diagrams and depictions of use beginning in the thirteenth century AD.

Like a strap lathe, a pole lathe creates a reciprocal revolution, where the wood blank is turned first in one direction and then back the other direction. Like the bow lathe, a pole lathe can be operated by one person.

In this method, a cord is tied to a pedal or treadle that is manipulated by the woodturner's foot. The cord is then tied around the wood blank that is being turned and mounted above the lathe on a pole. The lathe itself looks similar to the strap lathe, bow lathe, and even lathes today; the wood piece to be turned is mounted between two vertical pieces (which most woodturners today know as the headstock and tailstock) above a wooden lathe bed.

To operate the lathe, the woodturner pushes down on the treadle with his or her foot, which causes the cord to spin the wood blank. The excess cord is stored on the pole above, and when the woodturner lifts his or her foot, the excess slack of the cord is taken up by the pole. The use of the foot to power the treadle added more power to the revolutions than the bow lathe had, while maintaining the ability to power the lathe by oneself. It also allowed a woodturner to stand and work, which provided the woodturner with more freedom to move.

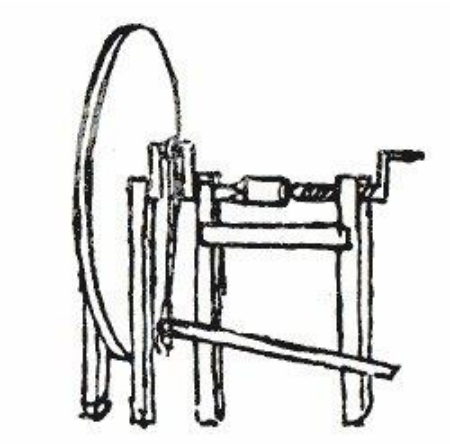
When using a pole lathe, cutting is only done on the downward stroke of the treadle using hook tools or chisels, which are sharper than the tools used on a power lathe today. However, many of the techniques a woodturner employs for angling his or her tools remain the same as when pole lathes were widely used.

Today, pole lathes are not exactly common, but there has been a resurgence of interest in pole lathes. One can attend fairs, festivals, and conferences where modern-day woodturners use pole lathes to create their unique wooden pieces. Most pole lathe turners prefer to work on green wood rather than dry wood because dry wood turns more slowly and is harder on tools than green wood.

Continuous Motion Lathes

The Great Wheel

The Great Wheel marked a change in the operation of a wood lathe, as it supplied continuous motion rather than reciprocal motion. It was not automated in the way that our current power lathes are, but the principle of the turning of the wood was identical; the wood is turned continuously in one direction, allowing a woodturner to shape the wood more quickly than when using a reciprocal-revolution lathe.



Most historians agree that there is some evidence that Romans used a continuous motion wheel for turning, but the first diagrams we have are from about the sixteenth century AD.

Image Source: The Woodturner's Workshop

The Great Wheel lathe was powered by (you guessed it) a large wheel, often as tall as a man's shoulder. This wheel was equipped with a crank or handle (sometimes on both sides) that allowed someone to turn the wheel. The wheel

was connected to the workpiece by means of a belt or strap, like the straps used in the reciprocal motion lathes. The workpiece, similar to previous lathe setups, was mounted between two vertical "puppets" above a lathe bed.

This setup evolved to include a mandrel, which was a primitive sort of headstock. It was also wheel-shaped and, when the belt was attached from the great wheel to the mandrel rather than the workpiece itself, it increased the revolutions per minute for the workpiece. This allowed the wood to spin more quickly and the woodturner to shape it more efficiently.

The Flywheel Lathe

The flywheel lathe (or treadle lathe) is quite similar to the great wheel lathe, except that the flywheel was not as large as a great wheel, and it did not require another person to turn the crank. The earliest diagrams we have of this kind of lathe were drawn by Leonardo DaVinci in the fourteenth century AD.

Instead of including a separate wheel that was attached to the lathe with a strap, the flywheel was mounted on the lathe and the crank was attached to a belt, which was in turn attached to a treadle that was operated by the woodturner's foot. The woodturner would push down on the treadle, causing the strap to pull the crank in a counter-clockwise motion, which made the flywheel rotate.

On the other side of the crank was a vertical piece through which the crank passed. The wood blank was mounted onto that part of the crank, which caused the wood blank to turn as the flywheel turned. Because the flywheel was still quite large in comparison to the lathe, it ensured that the wood blank would continue to turn past the dead spot that might occur as the treadle rose back up. This sort of lathe was also the first kind of lathe that used a movable tailstock.

While the clear advantage of this kind of lathe is the fact that it allowed a woodturner to both operate the lathe by himself or herself and use continual motion while doing so, the fact that it was operated by a treadle made the woodworking slightly less efficient. Although the wood turned only in one direction, it did so rather slowly, making the speed of turning comparable to the pole lathe.

Mechanically Powered Lathes

After the industrial revolution, lathes changed again. Continuous motion lathes began to be powered by water wheels or water turbines, which made the motion and speed of the lathe faster and more predictable than when powered by a flywheel and treadle. Steam engines were introduced in woodturning in the 1800s, and by the end of the nineteenth century, combustion engines had evolved to a point where they could be made small enough to power a lathe. Today, electric motors power almost all lathes, making them fast and reliable.

The Transformation and Evolution of Woodturning

Clearly, there have been many changes to the art of woodturning over the centuries. Lathes have transformed in shape and size, and the methods of powering the lathes have moved through various stages as woodworkers found ways to make things more efficient and motorized. Because of this, the speed and accuracy of lathes have changed, and the kinds of tools used have changed with the lathes.



The one thing that has not changed, however, is the dedication to craft. Woodturners today still employ many of the same techniques that woodturners used in antiquity, and whether a woodturner uses a lathe with an electric motor or a simple pole lathe, a woodturner spends many hours perfecting their grip, angling tools in new ways, and experimenting with different kinds of wood and tools as they seek to hone their abilities and create beautiful and useful wooden implements and ornaments.

Modern Woodturning Lathes and sources



4.0 (40) T32536

Grizzly 8" x 13" Variable-Speed Benchtop Wood Lathe

$269.00

~~$299.00~~ You Save $30.00 (10%)

Shipping $29.95

Delivery est. by 6/10 - 6/15

Fastest delivery by Fri, 6/5

Pickup

Available in Springfield, MO

Grizzly.com



20" x 35" Woodworking Lathe, 2 HP, 220V 1Ph...

$5,999

Powermatic

Free by 6/15

Powermatic.com



Rockler VS 12–24 Variable Speed Midi Lathe

4.4 (41)

Pickup Eligible

$599.99

Rockler.com



RIKON

VSR Midi Lathe - 14" x 20" - 1-1/2 HP 1 Ph 115V

(5 Reviews)

$1399.99

Woodcraft.com

Woodturning Tooling



Sorby
Intermediate Turning Tool Set - HSS - 6 Piece
★★★★☆ (2 Reviews)
$399.99

Woodturning Tools

Price of woodturning tools is NOT necessarily related to quality. However, certain brands of woodturning tools are more consistently of high quality than others.

What seems to be expensive is not when use, wear and tear and usability is considered.

Pictured at left is one brand of woodturning tools. These are available from multiple sources including Sorby, Rockler, Woodcraft, Craft Supply and others. Sometimes quality turning tools can be obtained from garage sales, thrift stores and other lower cost source.

Woodturning Tools at Grizzly.com range from the set shown at right to another set that uses carbide inserts. Tooling with this kind of cutting edge has an advantage in that sharpness remains much longer and can be renewed. In the case of circular inserts the insert can be turned incrementally and give many new cutting edges with minimal cost. One advantage to the set at right is the handle and replaceable tooling. Much of the cost in most traditional tooling includes separate handles usually made from hardwood and non-interchangeable cutting tooling.

Most tooling companies give good warranties and are prompt in replacing defective tooling.

Again, let the buyer beware, is a good slogan to follow. Checking with other woodturners also gives a picture of what is desirable.



★★★★★ 5.0 (5) T28969
Grizzly 5-Pc. Collet Woodturning Gouge Chisel Set with Aluminum Handles
$98.84
~~$195.00~~ You Save $96.16 (49%)

Wood Mounting devices

A wood lathe is only as good as the mounting method for the item being turned. Most woodturners want a method that is dependable, east to mount use and doesn't "break the bank" to obtain. Shown at left is a typical chuck that will serve most woodturning needs. Adaptable to small diameter all the up to mounting a bowl is available for this set.

Again, multiple sources provide this kind of tooling and can allow for interchangeability depending on the application.



and set way

★★★★★ 4.8 (20) T10808
Grizzly 2-3/4" Wood Lathe Chuck Set
$249.00

Shown below are some of the more common turning centers both live and tailstock use. Not all are required to begin turning wood but as time passes, many of them will become desirable if not necessary.



Rikon 60° Live Center, MT2, 70-942



Rikon - Spur Center MT2 (Black)



Apprentice Safety Drive Center

Apprentice

$29.95



Apprentice 4-Prong Drive Center

Apprentice

$22.95



Turners Select 1/2 Inch Key Drill Chuck

Turners Select

$44.95

The Editor hopes the information in this newsletter has been informative, interesting to read and will help contribute to a more fun time working with wood in whatever form may come along.

Additional informative opportunities may come along in future newsletters.

For now, See you at the June Meeting, June 4th at 7305 NW Prairie View Road in Platte Woods, MO.64151.

Register Now! See you at the 2026 AAW International Woodturning Symposium, June 4-7 in Raleigh, N.C.

It's not too late but you missed the FIRST DAY! Catch a red-eye flight and hope you can find a place to stay.

Thanks to everyone who has helped with our plug orders in the past. We will be asking for help getting other projects to raise funds. All ideas are welcome along with samples.

The CLUB NEWSLETTER tab of the club website is at
http://www.northlandwoodturners-kc.com/

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Check out the Club Specials every month.
Enter "NorthlandWoodturners" when asked for club name.

REMINDER:
The annual dues for 2026
are still only $10.00.
Checks can be made payable to
***Northland Woodturners*.**