

THE FINE ART OF FINIALS

Janice Levi

jlevi@rightturnonly.net

254-729-2542

204 Private Road 5822, Groesbeck, TX 76642

www.janicelevi.com

TOOLS:

3/8" spindle gouge

Roughing gouge

1/2" skew

Detail gouge

Parting tool

Thickness gauge/caliper

A treatise on turning finials

You have selected a beautiful piece of wood and turned a globe for your Christmas ornament. Next you select two different species of wood—one for the top finial and one for the bottom finial, or icicle. You want this to be a special ornament so you add all the feature items that you have learned to turn over the past several years—captured rings, beads, coves, “V” cuts. You finally put it all together and it’s not quite what you had envisioned. It’s not “terrible,” but it’s not “wonderful,” either. Of course, the ornament will be appreciated and loved because you made it, but let’s look at a few simple steps that might make the ornament even better.

First, what is the goal in turning the ornament? Usually, the obvious goal is to turn a keep-sake to give to a friend or loved one. But beyond that, the goal is to turn an ornament that will be pleasing to the eye. If you have selected a beautifully spalted or figured piece of wood for the globe then you want the finial to complement, rather than argue with, that globe. So keep the wood species for finials to one. Don’t overload the eye with too many types of wood all jumbled together.

If we go back to art class, you might recall that dark and light colors create different responses. Light colors, such as white or yellow, jump forward and call attention to themselves while dark colors, like black or dark brown, recede into the background (*Photos 1, 2*). If the wood for the globe is highly figured and you want that to be the focus of our attention then selecting a dark wood that recedes will be more complementary than a light color that calls attention to itself. Conversely, if the globe is rather plain, then perhaps a more figured or colorful finial would be in order (*Photo 3*).

If the globe wood has several colors represented in it, you are always safe to choose a finial that matches one of those colors (*Photo 4*). Keep in mind that the darker wood will recede while the lighter wood will forge ahead. I like to turn spalted wood and I almost always choose a dark wood like African ebony or blackwood as the finial (*Photo 5*). For one thing, there is black represented in the globe, and

for another thing, I want the globe to be the focus of attention and the black finial will complement while receding.

So, you have chosen your globe wood and a complementary wood for the finials. What should you consider next? All too often, I see finials that overwhelm the globes in both size and feature items. Let's look at the size of the finial first. We turners often like to impress others with our turning skills and so we go about turning a two inch globe with a twelve inch icicle! Well, that may be impressive, but it is probably not very aesthetically pleasing. How does one go about achieving "aesthetically pleasing?" The ancient Greeks figured that out about 2500 years ago. We call it the "Golden Mean." Basically, it is a ratio applied to height and width and length. (I'm not the expert here and a whole lot of you mathematicians may be cringing, but I'll do the best I can.) The ratio of 1:1.618, when applied to a bowl, a hollow form, a lidded box, or a Christmas ornament, will result in an aesthetically pleasing appearance. So, if my globe is two inches in diameter then the bottom finial should be about three and one-fourth inches long. However, I prefer to stretch that ratio a bit and use the "rule of thirds." Applying that rule would allow for a two inch globe to have a four inch finial. Well, I am a woodturner; I like to be a bit flamboyant.

At any rate, our goal in turning our ornament and finials is to have an end product that looks good. The last thing that we need to consider, then, is the number and type of feature items that appear on the finials. To begin with, the lower finial, or icicle, is often turned way too thick. You are not turning a ball point pen here; you are turning an icicle. It should look delicate, like an icicle. Remember that the finials are to complement, not steal the show, in the completed ornament. I apply the Golden Mean or the "rule of thirds" to the icicle itself. If it is four inches long, I divide that into thirds and the lower two-thirds should be relatively free of beads, coves, and "V" cuts. If there are features at the end of the icicle, they should not be larger than one-third the total width of the largest feature that will appear in the top one-third of the icicle (I am not including the base of the icicle in this measurement) (*Photo 6*).

The top finial needs to look like it is related to the bottom finial, or icicle. You have chosen the same type of wood, now choose similar cuts. If you use sharp angle cuts on the bottom finial, use some sharp angle cuts on the top finial. If you use beads on the bottom, use beads on the top. You get it (*Photo 7*)!

Finally, you have made all the right decisions and the final result is a beautiful ornament that appears balanced and aesthetically pleasing. The woods you have selected complement each other. And, the finials are of a delicate size that are not too clunky nor overwhelming (*Photo 8*). Congratulations on an ornament well turned!

Procedure for turning the globe

1. Use a blank 2 ¼" X 2 ¼" X 4". A tenon may not be necessary. Turn the blank round.
2. Drill a ½" hole all the way through the potential globe.
3. If the globe will be 2" in diameter, make the length at 1 ¾". Use a parting tool and part down 2/3 of the way at this mark.
4. Shape the upper part of globe and as much of the lower part as possible.

5. Use hollowing tools to hollow the ornament. Stop often to check wall thickness. Check depth as you approach the bottom.
6. Shape the lower portion of the globe. Before parting off, sand and apply finish if no enhancements will be added.
7. Part off the globe.

Procedure for turning the bottom finial, or icicle

1. To fit a 2" globe, begin with a blank that measures about 1" × 6 1/2". Insert the square stock into small jaws and use a roughing gouge or spindle gouge to turn the last 2" round. To avoid vibration, do not turn the entire blank round.
2. Use a 3/8" detail gouge or a skew to create the bottom point. The widest part of the bottom feature should not be larger than 1/8" – 3/16".
3. Since you have mentally divided the icicle into thirds, use a spindle gouge to work toward the first one-third mark. A general rule to follow is that there should not be any straight lines in the icicle, so gently increase the diameter above the point from about 3/32" to about 1/8" at the one-third point.
4. Sand as you go, supporting the back of the icicle with your finger. Don't try to go back to an area that has been turned because you may break the icicle.
5. At the one-third point, you may choose to add a very small feature item such as an inverted "V" or a small bead. Use your skew to turn the "V" or your detail gouge to turn the bead. Or, you may choose to continue toward the two-thirds point without adding any additional feature items.
6. At the two-thirds point, begin adding turning features, but don't overdo it. The features should get larger and larger, ending with the base that will attach to the globe. You may choose sharp angles or beads, or a combination of both.
7. Use a thin parting tool to undercut the base. (This involves angling the tool away from the headstock to create some relief area under the base so it will fit onto the curved globe.)
8. Continue using the parting tool to form a tenon that is 1/2" in diameter by about 1/8" in length. (I always drill a 1/2" hole all the way through my globes in preparation for hollowing. This way, both top and bottom finials always require a 1/2" tenon.)
9. Before parting off the icicle, sand the last portion. You may choose to add a finish at this point. Often, all that is needed is a friction polish or wax.

Procedure for top finial

10. Using the same wood as the bottom icicle, select a design that will complement that finial but in a much shorter size. Mount the square stock into small jaws. This time, I begin with the tenon first. After rounding the blank, use a parting tool to undercut the base and form the tenon. (Note: Some turners like to start with the top of the finial so they can drill a tiny hole in the top to accept the screw eye used for hanging the ornament. This option works well.)
11. Use a skew or detail gouge to create feature items that are similar to those in the icicle. The top of the finial should be wide enough to be drilled for the tiny hole that will accept the screw eye used for hanging.

12. Sand the top finial and apply finish, if desired.
13. Carefully part off or saw off the top finial. Use an awl to mark where the hole will be drilled for the screw eye.
14. A large drill press will work to drill the tiny hole for the screw eye but if you have a Dremel drill press, that works even better. Insert the tiny screw eye with a bit of wood glue on the tip.
15. If the finials fit snugly into the globe, use wood glue and attach both at the same time. If the fit is a bit “sloppy,” attach one at a time, allowing for each to dry overnight. I don’t recommend using cyanoacrylate (CA) glue, especially if the fit is loose. I’ve ruined several ornaments by attaching an icicle off center due to a loose fit. (That’s why I always use a 1/2" hole in the ornament and tenons on the finials now.)
16. Your beautiful ornament is now truly an heirloom.

RESOURCES:

1. Screw eyes—Woodworks, Ltd. At www.craftparts.com (\$2-4 per 100, 1/32 or 1/8" interior dimension; brass and silver)
2. Screw eyes—Divine Beads and Findings on Etsy 9X3mm, 150 for \$3.50