

DESIGNING RIMS

Many's the trick twixt the cup and the lip

LUKE MANN

THE MORE I TURN THE MORE I REALIZE that the possibilities for rim design are endless. I enjoy turning as many variations as my imagination, ability, tools, and time allow. But as I think about it, most rims seem to fall into one of three categories: flared, returning, and collared. In describing what characterizes each type and sharing some of the technical concerns peculiar to each, I hope to stimulate you to venture out and expand your own repertoire of forms.

At the risk of sounding philosophical, "lip" may be a better term than "rim." (Ever try describing something without one?) As our lips form the margins between face and mouth, exterior and interior, public and private, the turned lip becomes the boundary between out and in, bound and loose, obvious and mysterious. Our own lips function in forming verbal and non-verbal communications. The slightest movements express volumes. A lip of wood, combined with other bowl elements, express as well, suggesting things heavy or light, hard or soft, inhaling or exhaling, welcoming or rejecting...imagine what you will. Though some of this becomes clearer by thinking and talking about it, perhaps there will always be some mystery to how such subtle changes transform a piece.

Facework tends to be larger in diameter than in height, dictated by dimensions of available wood, lathe capacities, and the practical concerns of bowl design. Consider a bowl of such typical configuration resting on your table. Notice that most of the exposed visible wood lies across

the interior of the bowl. When something is placed in the bowl, this surface is obscured, rendering the bowl (your bowl) all but invisible—unless you somehow accentuate the rim, that is. If we don't pay any attention to this feature and simply bring a 1/4-inch wall up into space and end it, something may be lost—in this case, your bowl from view. Your friends will come for dinner and comment, "Hey, what a nice looking salad! How did you get it to stay so round?" Instead, they could be saying, "Who dropped the rabbit food into this impressive rimmed vessel?"

The rim is a great place to experiment. Present in every bowl, this fea-

ture can be manipulated to improve both the visual and the tactile experience of a bowl. The very location of this element makes it a focal point. Some degree of horizontal surface here is a great way to display the wood while exploring form and surface texture. Treatments can include turning grooves, carving, cutting, piercing, tying, painting, bending, bleaching, and dyeing. The sky is the limit (literally). A rim can give an appearance of mass or weightlessness. An extended rim offers surprise, enticing curious eyes and fingers to investigate hidden surfaces, drawing more attention to the piece.

Let's take a look at how the three types of rims shape up:

- In the flared rim (Figure 1) as the bowl wall approaches its terminus it simply flares, increasing thickness to expose more wood at the bowl's edge.
- In the returning rim (Figure 2) the wall rises upward from the foot and then turns in toward the center of the piece before terminating.
- In the collared rim (Figure 3) the wall heads out, away from the center of the turning, ending either above or below the horizontal.

As I begin working a piece of wood, I smooth off what is to be the top opening of the bowl before stopping the lathe to examine the surface. If I find an exceptional display of anything such as color, spalting, insect holes, ray or crotch pattern, or other figure, I will often opt for an extended rim to include some amount of this display. I may even take the piece to a hollow form, maximizing the exterior on display.

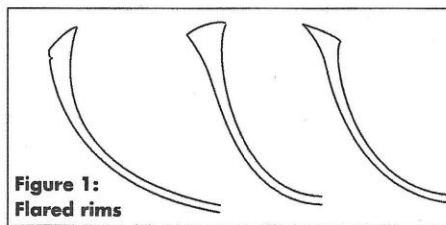


Figure 1:
Flared rims

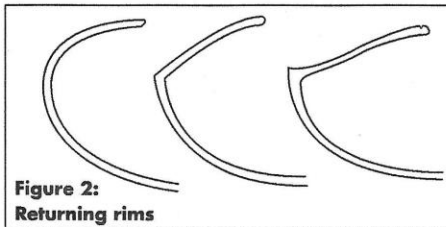


Figure 2:
Returning rims

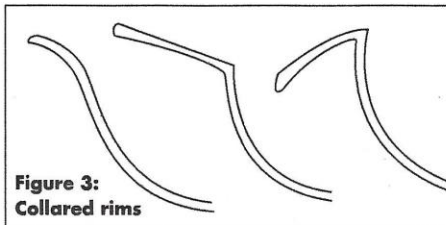
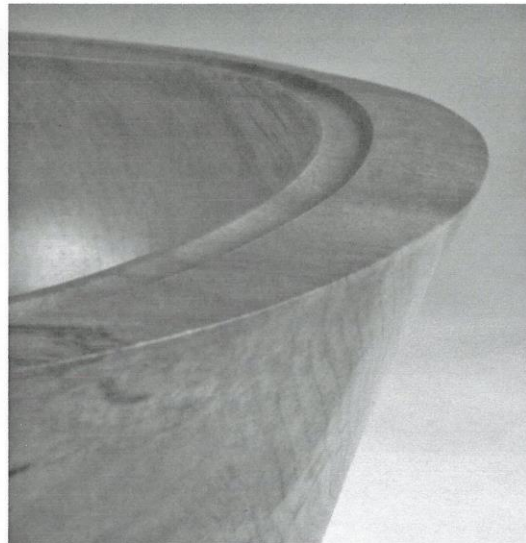
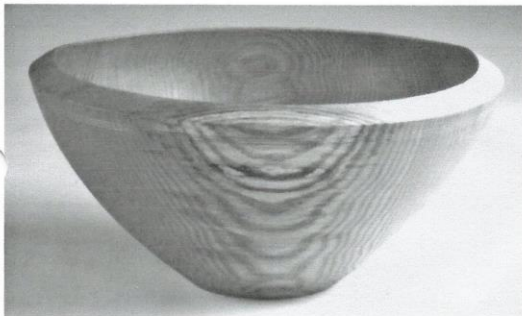
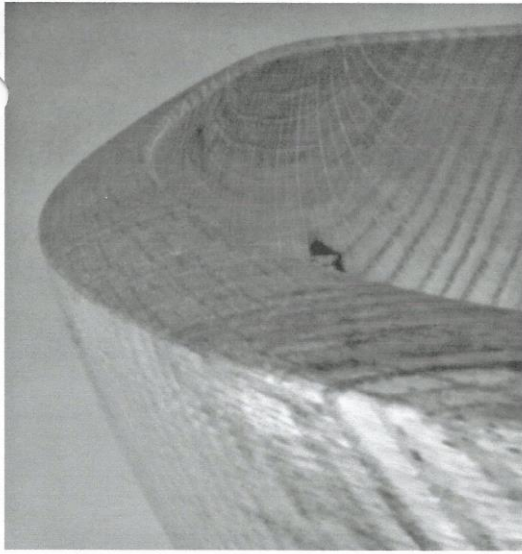


Figure 3:
Collared rims



Flared rims: At left an oak bowl, 15 inches in diameter; at right spalted sugar maple, 13 inches in diameter. Note the maple's cove detail, which was turned on a different center from the rim itself.

Considering various options, I contemplate the implications and limitation of each as they apply to this particular chunk of wood.

The flared style is the one I most often employ when the grain is not begging me for more exposure or I have an order for a salad bowl. It is the easiest to turn and sand, presenting little or no obstacle to the disc sander. Possible in an endless variety of angles and widths, the heavier section of this rim is pleasant to grip and carry and makes for a more durable bowl. I commonly tilt the flare out and place a slight crown on its face (like that of any decent, self-

respecting lip). With a slight overhang of the inner wall, such a lip can actually help when tossing a salad or holding ungainly fruit. Liam O'Neil says this rim forms a frame for the contents and gives the bowl the impression of a substantial wall thickness only to surprise the admirer by its lightweight and pleasing contour when handled.

The returning and the collared rim seem to be less practical in their extreme state, yet most of them, interestingly, are derived from pottery shapes with a long history. Either rim may form one flowing line from wall into rim, or be separated or ac-

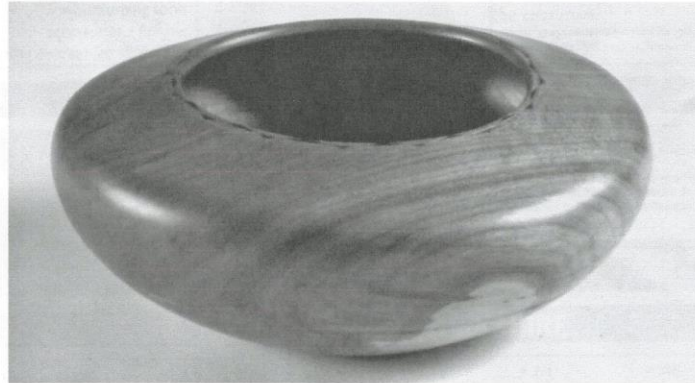
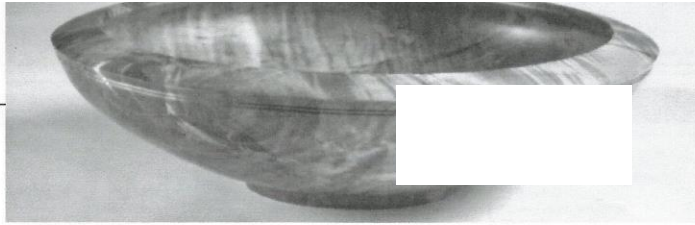
cented by some detail, change of direction, or arris. The simpler flowing contours are the more difficult to pull off, as purer forms often are, without the details to draw the attention and thus fall back on.

With obvious roots in ceramic form, the returning rim suggests a more developed container, creating a more defined interior volume. This variation can include anything from a slight overhung rim to the predominant surface area and small opening of a hollow form. As we all know, the further this rim extends toward the center, the more difficult becomes the tool access, removal of

waste, and sanding. Because there is no way to part out a cone, this design does produce more waste.

My decision to turn a collared rim may be in response to material dimensions. If a blank is shallow or crowded by radial checks from the cambium, I can turn a broad, shallow bowl or go for the smaller volume and broad outward rim of a collared bowl. While providing great space for detailing, this one draws attention to exterior space and, by intrigue, the area under the rim, in the shadows. In a pinch, this design can also be worn as a hat.

When designing your own variations, Steve Loar suggests, "Get some loose paper and just sketch (or scribble) ideas as they come to mind,



Returning rims: Top, spalted curly maple, 15 1/2 inches in diameter; above, black cherry, 11 1/2 inches in diameter. Note the carved and India ink detailing, above.



Collared rims: Top, sugar maple, 11 inches in diameter; above, spalted curly maple, 14 inches across.

drawing from the shoulder with large movements and no erasing. Remember the paper is not sacred." I re-use computer paper for this. Draw, scratch, and scribble all sorts of rims on various shaped bowls, platters, and hollow forms. Combine rim variations. Try extending a collar from halfway down a bowl side. Consider a contour or texture to hide under an extended rim for searching fingers. Or a design which when portions are cut from reveal an interesting cross section. Be sure to ignore established, accepted guidelines.

As you move from sketching to scraping, you will be challenged to determine a plan of action, a process of how to hold the piece and what sequence of cuts to follow to reach the desired result. Hopefully you will come up with some designs that are not possible with your current tools and technique. This will inspire you to adjust your designs or extend the way you work.

Luke Mann, of Waitsfield, VT, began turning bowls professionally after taking a course with David Ellsworth in 1992.