

In my honest opinion

John Plater looks at the sensitive issue of giving and accepting advice



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN PLATER

I have written before about making judgements of a piece of woodturning. It is something that one is asked to do in a formal context, such as judging competition pieces, or in an informal chat with colleagues during a club night. It might also be a part of the process of an online woodturning forum. It is easy to pick up on torn grain or tooling marks and be critical objectively. It is less easy to be critical of the design of a piece because that is very subjective and what right has the viewer to criticise something with which the maker might be happy? The maker had his or her reasons for that particular design and that can never be wrong, can it? After all, the person has engaged in a creative act and might have poured time, money and effort or heart and soul into a piece. Torn grain on a curve is a fact, a bump in a curve could be a fact, the wrong curve altogether can only ever be opinion, can't it?

GENTLY DOES IT

If one is asked to comment on pieces of turned work, it is important to look for positives in the work before any negatives. Praise where it is due. Even if it is little more than a 'well done for trying' at the start of someone's woodturning journey. Then it is important to turn any

negatives into positives with the aid of constructive comment, rather than rejecting it out of hand with destructive comment. A mistake has been perceived and pointed out. By suggesting ways in which the mistake might not have occurred or suggesting a remedy which might be applied, there is a positive way forward. Progress might be made. It is a harsh reality but it is possible to learn by one's mistakes. By definition then, I am learning a lot.

IN MY HONEST OPINION

Accepting constructive criticism is a very personal thing. Some may appreciate learning by their mistakes and may find it easy to accept helpful advice. Some may disagree with comments made and argue their case accordingly, or simply ignore them. Some are happy to listen to criticism in a one-to-one conversation but do not like any perceived failings to be discussed in a public arena. Some woodturning clubs will organise an open critique of work so that all will hear about everyone's efforts. Others will limit the public element of the critique to who came 1st, 2nd and 3rd. In this way the onus is placed on the individual to question the reasoning for themselves if they want to. IMHO, the latter approach

is very respectful of people's feelings but still offers a way out for those who want to hear why.

COMPETITIONS

By entering woodturning competitions one is offering up the work to the view of the judge. By showing a piece to others online or even offering it for sale the work is going to be looked at with a critical eye. Fundamentally, if one does not want to be criticised, don't show the work. That, however, would not recognise the power of accepting constructive criticism as a mechanism for progressing with one's woodturning. I have spoken to craftspeople who find it difficult to accept any criticism and are desperately upset by others' comments or if their work does not sell at a show. It is a fine line between needing to progress and having the strength of one's own convictions such that the views of others might be ignored.

A final thought on this topic. Working out a set of words of one's own to offer as constructive criticism to another person is itself a worthwhile exercise. IMHO, if one answers with honesty and integrity and without recourse to supposition and misplaced accepted wisdom, it is a situation which may be of benefit to both parties.