

Historic spindle work endures

Turnings of Old St. Paul

By Alan Lacer

Take a tour of old St. Paul and walk among the one of the nation's most exemplary collection of Victorian-era homes. Here, you can feast your eyes on remarkable spindle turning that has been lovingly preserved for more than 100 years.

The exaggerated entasis on this column brings it to life. The largest diameter is just below the center with a gentle curving upwards and downwards. This restored home is on Holly Street.

More than 25 years ago, I was sitting in a Shaker meeting hall when something amazing happened. There was a turned column in the middle of the room—unusual in itself—and the more I looked at it, the more impressed I became with the turning.

Rather than just a straight line, the column's shape was a slow, asymmetrical convex curve. This was not a run of inches as you might do on the outside of a bowl or vessel, but a pleasing curve over an 8- to 10-foot span.

Since then, I have marveled at really outstanding between-center work—heresy in the turning world. Production machines, poor designs, overuse of details, and mediocre execution led many turners away from doing, esteeming, or even noticing such work. Little wonder bowls and vessels became the dominating forms of turning in the last 30 years.

Miles of Victorian homes

There is a place where you can find outstanding examples of great turning in old St. Paul—just minutes from the AAW's headquarters in the historic Landmark Center.

The Summit Avenue area near Minnesota's capitol is a showcase of architecture from the 1850s to about 1900 that includes a wide range of styles.



How could a turner not fall in love with this grouping of porch columns? Four columns like this anchor each corner of the porch on Holly Street. The upward taper contributes to the light, lifting feel a single column can't duplicate.

Preservationists bill the five miles of Summit Avenue as the longest stretch of inhabited Victorian homes in the country. This last point is significant, as the Victorian style heavily used—and at times overused—turned elements.

And if you look around in a 25-mile radius of St. Paul, you will find an amazing array of turnings—both on the outside and inside of homes and other buildings.

This region was an enclave of wood and production wood-working in the later half of the 19th century. Minneapolis had its origins in sawmilling and dominated the country for many years in the quantity of wood sawn.

In the mid-1870s, there were six woodturning shops in Minneapolis and four across the Mississippi River in St. Paul. There was even



Intricate spindles add interest to this square column from the 1870s. Notice how the corners are cut away to allow the insertion of small spindles.

one shop specializing in bone and ivory turning and one lathe manufacturer (Tannahill) during this period.

Learning by example

How can a modern turner benefit from really good architectural turnings of 150 years ago? Here's a starter list:

- entasis in columns (more on this later)
- convex and concave lines
- the power and importance of the convex curve
- creating a pleasing look from multiple elements on the same turning



This column incorporates carving at the top, giving a hint of a floral pattern or perhaps a rim of a bowl or vessel.

- carving and texturing after turning (a great deal occurred in fluting, reeding, and spiraling of turned work)
- symmetry and asymmetry
- multiple turnings placed together
- the use of negative space (especially in a grouping)
- the vocabulary of turned elements (much borrowed from classical architecture)
- the play of square to round
- uncovering pleasing design ideas contained within the turnings (can you see pepper mills, vase or vessel forms, lidded boxes, and surface treatments to translate into your work?)

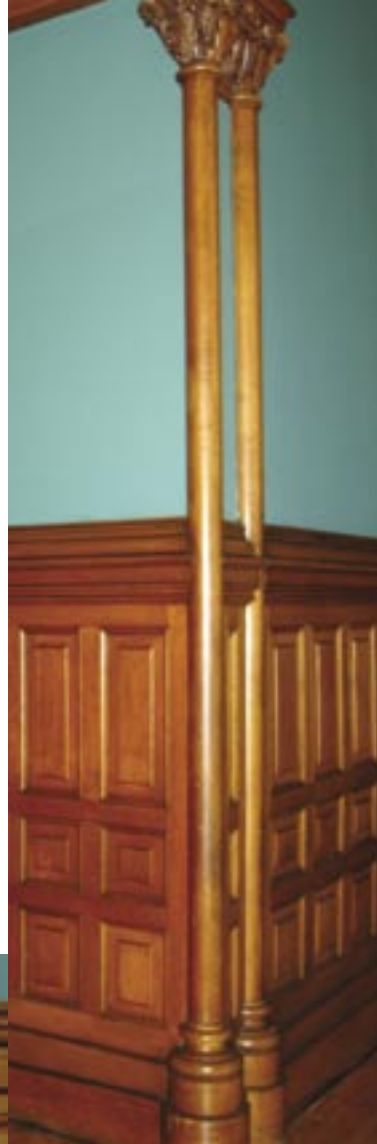
Columns

Let's start with a look at columns. In this region, you can find a large number of columns—both indoor and outdoor examples—some great, some average, some poor.

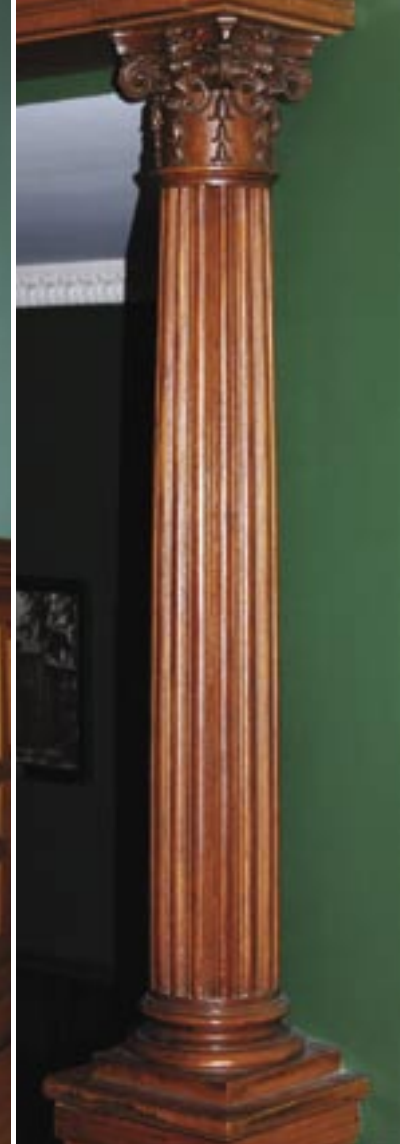
The first thing you notice is that straight columns are boring. The ancient Greeks realized this, as well as an optical illusion that occurs with a long, straight line:



In nearby Hudson, Wisconsin, these 4-foot columns harmonize with the arches on this porch. Small ball forms just below the top of each column add subtle detail.



In downtown St. Paul, the Landmark Center (home of the AAW offices and gallery) has many examples of fine turning. These 9-foot oak columns have a slender taper and curve and fascinating scribing detail with wall panels.



Inside this 1870s house on Exchange Street, tapered oak columns trim a doorway. Carved lineal lines that flow up the column are more complex than most preserved examples.

Architectural Tours

The Minnesota Historical Society conducts walking tours of the Summit Avenue area from June through September. For more information, visit mnhs.org.

Numerous cities large and small have historic districts with Victorian homes, many with extensive spindle work. Other areas recognized for preserved Victorian homes include Colorado (of note, Georgetown and Colorado Springs), California (particularly San Francisco), Chicago, Toronto, Milwaukee, and Stillwater, Minnesota. Check with your state historical society for more details.

A Field Guide to American Architecture by Carole Rifkind (Penguin Books, 1980) provides more examples.

it appears to pull inward towards the middle. The Greeks solved the illusion by a slight asymmetrical convex curve that tapers up and down from a point below the center of a column. This process is called *entasis*.

The Romans exaggerated the concept—the Greeks strove for this concept to be almost invisible—to become a clear design strategy. The architects and/or woodturners of the St. Paul area also strove for the notion in most of the columns so lovingly preserved.

Whether they knew the his-

tory is unknown, and sometimes the notion of a continuous curve was lost—there are tapers but they seem to just be straight lines. When the turner understood the slow curve that breaks below center and tapers both upwards and downwards—well, you have something! This effect—pronounced, not invisible—adds fullness, tension, or a pushing outwards that appears to be pleasing to turners and non-turners alike. It is alive, has a motion that the eye follows, and is difficult to execute over a long length.

Balusters and newels

What of the many balusters that we find in this area? A railing, whether along a stairway or simply on a porch, could be supported in a number of ways. The balusters preserved here are like nothing you can find at today's home centers.

Some of St. Paul's balusters are plain, others are overly ornamented, and some would look boring standing alone but come alive in a grouping. On a few stunning examples, the negative space created by the shapes and spacing looks deliberate and planned.

Most balusters have squares at both ends (usually referred to as pommels) for mounting on the rails. A turner can address the transition from square to round in at least three ways: square-shouldered, rounded, or a lamb's tongue (ogee). On the last two, the pattern that is created on the square becomes a design element that can be of genuine interest when well-executed.

These balusters are worthy of study on a number of points:

- balance and unity of the piece
- perspective (is there a preferred top and bottom?)
- symmetry vs. asymmetry
- fullness and pleasing forms
- static vs. alive with motion
- the discovery of pleasing forms within this type of turning

Playing with square elements found its way into columns and newel posts (usually a large vertical turning at the end of a stair or porch railing). Sometimes the turners made shallow cuts into the squares to provide a texture or pattern.

Newel posts—sometimes oversized to call attention—dominate several homes.



What style of turnings would one of the richest men of his time request for his home? The James J. Hill Home has spiraled balusters with alternating direction on the grand staircase. The house built by the Great Northern Railroad magnate has a number of interior columns and balusters, but those in this photo were meant to be showpieces. The Minnesota State Historical Society maintains this historic home.



The small urn or vase shape on this porch rail provides a dominant element for the house. The square-shouldered pommels with beads just below the square illustrate the skill of the turner.



This curved porch on Holly Street has several strong points: the fullness of the dominant bulb form and the negative space created by the grouping.



An interior newel post at the base of a stairway can be a place for the hand to rest when ascending or descending the stairway—so touch becomes a concern. You'll see examples of a ball or dome shape placed at just the right height.

One last thing of note to be learned from St. Paul's turnings: the warmth of subtle variations within matched turnings will always fall down on one point—exact uniformity is boring. Slight variations in shape, diameter, and placement of elements add life to these hand-turned multiples.

If you have an opportunity to visit this region—or any region with classic spindle work—take the time to closely observe what yesterday's turners had to say.



Newel posts are the strong turned element on a number of the houses. In both of these examples, detailing of the pommels (square areas) add interest.

Alan Lacer (AlanLacer.com) is an *American Woodturner* contributing editor. He lives in River Falls, Wisconsin.