

The Art of Finial Design & Turning Techniques

by Patrick Sikes

A well crafted finial can add grace and sophistication to boxes, hollow forms, and ornaments. While a great finial can make your piece soar, a poorly designed finial can make your perfectly formed, colored, and finished hollow form feel awkward and detract from the final appearance of your piece.

Understanding Good Finial Design

To understand the fundamentals of good finial design let's first look at some examples of poor finial design.



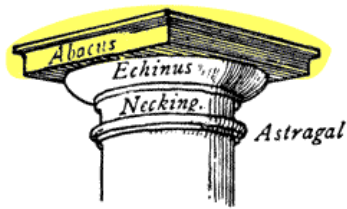
So what is wrong with all these finials? They don't follow these simple fundamentals of finial design:

- 1) The overall length of the finial should be proportional to the size of the vessel or ornament.
- 2) Finials should be designed to have long flowing slender shapes and not be chunky, thick, or heavy.
- 3) The "weight" of the finial should be within the first third of the length from the base with the remaining two thirds being longer, thinner, and lighter in appearance (following The Golden Mean). The tip should not add too much weight.
- 4) The major (i.e. widest) elements of the finial should fit within an imaginary line drawn from the tip to the base. The line should be straight or slightly convex, but never concave (i.e. the middle element should not be wider than the base of the finial).

Finding Your Finial Form

Now that we have some simple rules to follow, how do we find inspiration to creating our finial designs? Like many of the forms in woodturning, we look to other objects, both man-made and from nature to draw our inspirations.

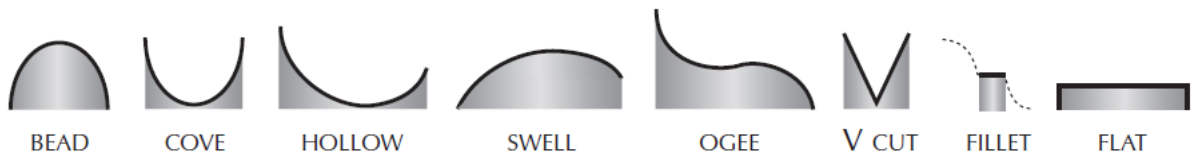
Architectural Elements



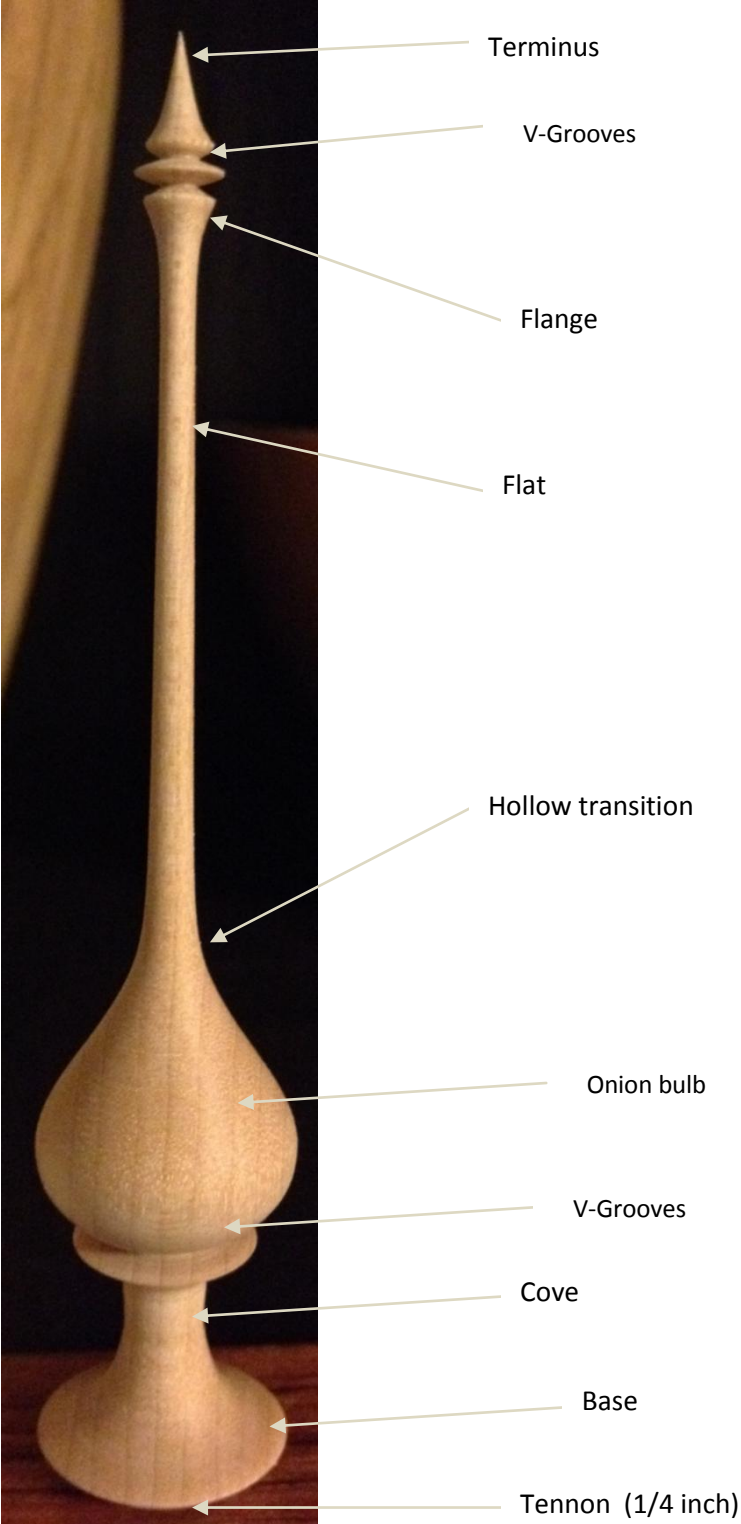
Natural Forms



Basic Spindle Turning Elements



Dissecting a Finial



Just follow some Basic Design Rules

- 1) Finials look thinner on the lathe.
 - When in doubt, take the chucked up finial off the lathe and stand it up for a better look.
- 2) The largest diameter should be the base.
- 3) The weight of the finial should be in the first one third.
- 4) The remaining length of the finial should taper to zero.
- 5) Always make elements flow from one to the next.
- 6) Use a standard tennon size (such as $\frac{1}{4}$ inch). You may make a finial that does not work on the box you just turned but it might work on something else.

Some Great Finial Examples



Cindy Drozda



Ornament
by Dick Sing



Allen Carter



Patrick Sikes
well maybe not *great*...

Turning Rules

- 1) Turn the finial starting at the terminus working back to the base and tennon.
- 2) Once you finish an about an inch of the finial, sand and never go back!
- 3) Use a point tool for fine V-grooves and a fingernail ground 3/8 inch spindle gouge for the shaping cuts.

Turning Techniques



Mount a suitable blank in the jaws of a chuck (left square here) or you can turn a tennon between centers first.



Using a spindle roughing gouge, round the blank and taper it towards the tail stock.



I use a 3/8" spindle gouge with a fingernail grind for 95% of the finial turning.



Turn the top terminal of the finial to a fine point, spear point, drop, onion, or some other form.



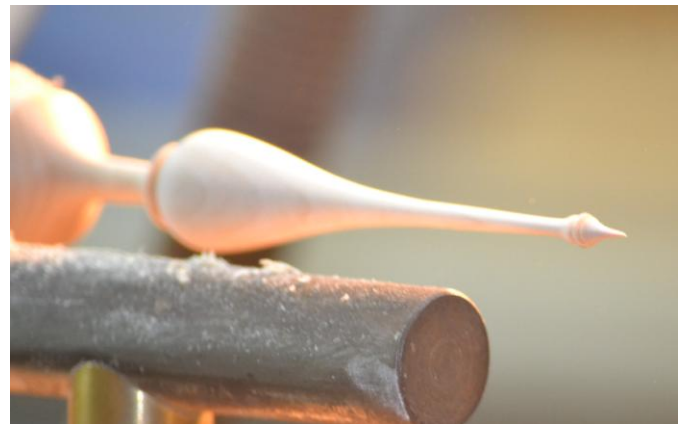
The terminal on this finial is a point with two very fine v-grooves cut below the point using a "Vortex" or point tool. Here I am working on the flat transition between the terminus and the onion bulb.



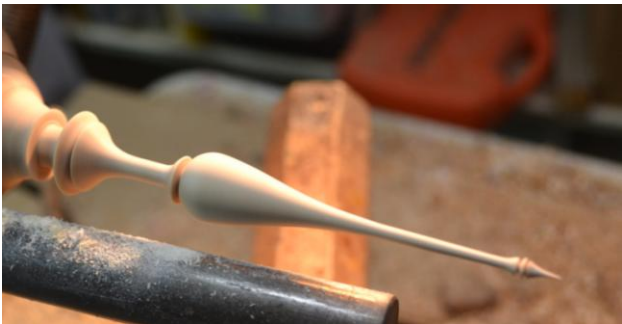
Now I am turning the onion bulb. Using the point of the gouge pointed down the curve of the bulb.



Notice here I have thinned the bulb and started to reshape the bulb. It was just too thick in the last image.



Here I have finished the onion bulb, inserted in filet below the bulb using the point tool and a cove between the filet and base. We are almost done with the turning.



Here is the finished finial reading for "ebonizing" and finishing.



Here is a close up of the terminal.



Here is the start of the “ebonizing” process. I use a black Sharpie marker. Turn your lathe on a slow speed <math><100\text{ RPM}</math> (trick for Jet Mini users, put the belt across both small pulleys).



Next I use Black Trans-Tint Alcohol based dye thinned with alcohol (1:10 or so). Completely saturate the piece in dye using a small piece of paper towel. I probably put on 5 – 8 coats of dye to completely black out the piece.



I use Deft spray lacquer again with the lathe on very slow speed. Apply 3 or 4 coats letting sit for 20-30 minutes between coats. Finally I use carnauba paste wax and 0000 steel wool to smooth the finish and enhance the shine.