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## **Pattern Turning**

In the late 1980s, many turners explored polychromatic lamination, the process of gluing bits of wood in contrasting colors into blocks and then turning it. Depending on the way the pieces are configured, various geometric patterns emerge. In a sense, the patterns are like a mechanized inlay. Glued-pattern turnings are the opposite of “raw wood” turnings, for they do not rely on any happy accidents of nature. Instead, they are all about control. Surfaces are usually sanded smooth, and forms are either flat plates or simple vases, so nothing competes with the pattern. The technique is not new: European amateurs have been making polychrome wood vessels for centuries, and instructional texts were published in England during the 20th century. In America, several amateurs had been investigating the technique since the 1940s.

The most obvious designs made possible by laminating wood are rudimentary: patterns of squares, dots, stripes and chevrons. Seeking more complexity, turners glued blocks and recut them, reassembling the fragments. One turner, Fletcher Cox, elaborated a process of boring holes into a board, gluing in short plugs of dark-colored wood, and then repeating the process with a lighter wood to create the optical illusion of light spots casting shadows. Another, Virginia Dotson, specialized in laminating thick and thin sheets of contrasting woods. Her most impressive work involved resawing and re-lamination, creating striking diagonal patterns.

**Michael Schuler** (b. 1950) is one of the most adept pattern turners. His vessels are carefully engineered; he typically cuts 104 narrow wedges off a block of wood that has been glued into diagonal layers, each wedge like a sliver of pie with a pattern inside. The wedges are glued into a disc, the disc cut into a series of concentric rings, and stack-laminated into a hollow

cone. (The process is repeated on a smaller scale for the bottom of the vessel.) The diagonal lines appear as short dashes on the vessel walls, both inside and outside. By varying the thickness of the layers and changing the direction of the diagonals, Schuler can make almost endless variations of color and composition. His #729 (1994) demonstrates ingenuity: four broken double Xs dance across the sides, a pleasant display of skill in both design and execution.

Turnings made with the polychromatic lamination technique are inherently conservative. The more complex the pattern, the simpler the turned form must be, to avoid putting surface pattern in conflict with overall form. Most pattern turners use vessel forms derived from the Modernist vocabulary of James Prestini or from the vast library of ceramic pots. And patterns are by nature decorative. Pattern turnings fit comfortably in domestic interiors, offering visual pleasure and delight that falls firmly with the context of the decorative arts.