

## The Story Behind the Phrase “Carpe Lignum: Torne Lignum”

by Lyn J. Mangiameli

It is now approximately the third anniversary of the introduction of the CLTL phrase and products, and I thought it might be amusing to recall a portion of how this phrase came to be. It all started as 2001 turned into 2002 with an idea put forth on rec.crafts.woodturning to develop a T-shirt for members of the newsgroup. I threw out a rough example of how we could use a Latin phrase for a logo. This idea was warmly received by several members, especially Ruth Niles and Molly Winton who took on the effort to see that woodturning theme T-shirts become a reality. What follows is the larger context of how the specific phrase Carpe Lignum; Torne Lignum came to become the logo Ruth Niles used for the now famous CLTL products.

The initial phrase I tossed out was “Carpe Lignum; Tomare Lignum,” which was meant as a take off on the familiar advice from Horace’s Odes, “Carpe Diem.” That phrase literally means “Seize the Day.” It is actually part of a larger phrase that went “carpe diem, quam minimum credula” that is translated as “seize the day, trusting little in tomorrow,” but in the context of which it has been used, often has a meaning closer to “enjoy today, trusting little in tomorrow.”

In my suggestion of Carpe Lignum, I liked not only the allusion to the “Carpe Diem” phrase, but also its somewhat double meaning in common use (i.e., both “seize” and “enjoy” the day). Thus, when understood in the context of the famous phrase which was its predecessor, Carpe Lignum could be taken as either seize the wood (reflecting woodturners’ habits of searching out, appropriating, and then hoarding most of the wood that crosses their paths) or enjoy the wood. Lignum, of course being the Latin word for wood.

Another reason for the use of a Latin phrase is that Latin was one of the first (and probably the first) language to have a word that specifically was intended to denote the act of actually turning wood in the sense we now understand and practice it. That word is “tone,” with “tonare” being the infinitive.

Since the literal translation of Carpe is “seize,” and thus the phrase Carpe Lignum would be “seize the wood,” I thought the infinitive of turn (tonare) might offer some explanation



The T-Shirt brought to production by Ruth Niles.



T-Shirt developed and marketed by Molly Winton.

of why one was “seizing the wood, that is, “to turn the wood” (to turn, being the infinitive). Accordingly, Carpe Lignum, Tonare Lignum most literally means “Seize the wood to turn the wood.”

When considering my phrase with a greater sophistication of Latin grammar, a friend of Ruth’s recommended we use a consistent verb tense, and suggested using Torne (the imperative “turn”) rather than Tonare (the infinitive “to turn”). I told Ruth I was comfortable with either as my original phrase was meant only as a passing example of what could be done, and I had not been concerned with perfect grammar.

To keep the verb tenses consistent, and also because it has equal numbers of syllables and number of letters, the final decision was to use “Carpe Lignum; Torne Lignum” This loses the implied explanation of why one would “Seize,” that is “to turn,” but it has the advantage of working well with the double meaning of the original Latin phrase of Carpe Diem that allowed for the “Carpe” to be understood as “enjoy.” Thus, “Carpe Lignum; Torne Lignum” could be literally translated as “Seize the Wood; Turn the Wood” but also understood in the context of the earlier phrase could mean

“Enjoy the Wood; Turn the Wood,” which I kind of like. It offers a couple of “catchy” clauses that turners can relate to, and associate with a phrase that many are familiar with. For me, “Carpe Lignum; Torne Lignum” is translatable while having a nice balance when viewed in writing, and a nice cadence and ring when spoken. [Still, I can understand how it might grate on the ears of those more sophisticated with respect to Latin grammar. Those who fear possible embarrassment at the hands of Latin scholars might wish to take a Magic Marker, and note the “error” on their T shirts. This might serve to distinguish not only those who are turners, but the true Latin sophisticates amongst us.]

The end result was a series of CLTL T-shirts, and later hats and even mugs based on my Latin phrase, some of Molly ideas, and Ruth’s original artistic rendering of the base of a tree morphing into a turned vase and returning to a tree again with spreading branches. Molly and I withdrew to a position of moral support (Molly went on to design her own T shirts for woodturners), and Ruth became the sole person to own the copyright to produce and market the general design. Ever sense, all of Ruth’s items have been somewhere emblazoned with “Carpe Lignum; Torne Lignum.” Lots of turners have taken a liking to them, far more than the original members of the woodturning newsgroup. They were and still are worn by turners of all levels, and many countries, including the likes of John Jordan and Richard Raffan. Seeing the world-wide interest in the phrase, Ruth came to refer to it as the “International Woodturners’ Logo,” which it seems it has now become. Thus, “Carpe Lignum; Torne Lignum” serves as a short hand way of light-heartedly sharing a couple of aspects of the mutual pastime that we as turners identify with, and share them in a slightly obscure fashion to those not “part of our club.”

As an aside, in an earlier time, “Carpe Diem” was used as an exhortation to young maidens to give up their virginity and enjoy the “pleasures” of life they had thus far forgone. Perhaps it can be said we now are doing the same with “Carpe Lignum,” exhorting the uninitiated to join in our passion for woodturning.

You can still obtain CLTL merchandise direct from Ruth’s Website: <http://www.torne-lignum.com/> as well as such places as Packard Woodworks, Crafts Supplies UK, and The Woodturning Center in Philadelphia. Molly’s own self described “lighter, more campy” design (“I’ll Be Turning In My Grave”) can be obtained from Packard Woodworks or by emailing her directly at [turningmaven@hotmail.com](mailto:turningmaven@hotmail.com).

## Musing About Turning Metal and Wood

by Archie McCallister

While facing a faceplate today I thought about how metal is milled and wood is turned. In milling a rotating cutter is forced into sliding but firmly held metal. In woodturning a sliding but firmly held tool edge is forced into rotating wood.

Consider a horizontal milling machine doing what machinists term peripheral milling and we term spindle turning. In climb or up milling the work moves in the same direction that the cutter is revolving and is forced toward the holding vise as it slides through the cutter. It produces a smooth surface and wispy swarf. In the more conventional down milling, the work is moved against the direction of the rotating cutter and is forced away from the vise. This mode can produce a ridged surface and chippy swarf if the work isn’t held firmly.

Now consider scraping and shearing wood. In scraping the edge is moved in the same direction as the revolving wood as the tool slides along the rest. It can produce a smooth surface and delicate shavings. In shearing, a tool edge is moved against the direction of the rotating wood and if not controlled can produce a scalloped surface and distorted shavings.

Machinists and woodturners know that there are other important considerations that make down milling of metal and shearing of wood usually preferable to up milling and scraping.

*[This story is from the rec.crafts.woodturning newsgroup and is reprinted here by permission of the author. Hopefully, Arch will be able to write a regular column for us in the near future.]*

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