

The Lee Valley Turner's Smock

by Lyn J. Mangiameli

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Have you noticed that about a year ago Lee Valley greatly expanded the range of products they carry for woodturning. Within a few months, dedicated deep hollowing systems (like the Kelton rigs, the Scorpion and the new Munro) and gouges relatively unknown in North America (like P&N) were prominently displayed in the pages of their catalogs. Now it is true that Lee Valley has had some turning tools in their previous catalogs, and even offered a few designs of their own (e.g., the very useful turning scraper burnisher and turning stock center marker), but it is clear that Lee Valley has now decided to become a major full-range resource for turners. This is not only reflected in the larger variety of products they carry from other manufacturers, but shows in their own development of some new products for woodturners, the first of which is the subject of this review.

In August Lee Valley introduced their Turner's Smock, and I have used one regularly since its release. Though I was quite content with the surplus Forest Service Nomex fire shirt I had used before, I have found the new Turner's Smock to have become the clothing item I now regularly wear for turning, and even for some general shop work.

The Lee Valley Turner's Smock is a crotch length, long sleeved, zippered front, unlined covering with features intended to meet the specific needs of woodturners. In many respects, the design serves well for its intended purpose, but is not without its faults. To discuss its strengths and weaknesses, I am first going to deconstruct the smock into its individual components and features, then end with a quick comment on what it is like to wear as a total package.

First off, the fabric is a tight weave 65 percent polyester, 35 percent cotton blend. Backpackers of the pre-Goretex era may recall that this fabric was often used for shell parkas, being known as moderately abrasion and wind resistant, relatively breathable, and though able to repel light misting rain or snow when given a silicon treatment, it would soak through in a downpour. Well that pretty well describes how it functions as a turner's smock. For most conditions it sheds chips and sap sprays quite effectively, but when wrestling with really wet wood, leaning against a wet lathe, or standing before a drenching spray of water and sap during roughing out, it will get wet and wick that moisture through to the inside. The cotton content makes it comfortable against the skin, but has the downside of absorbing not only moisture but sap extractives, wood stains, glues and finishes. Most turning smocks get to look grungy over time, but this one is going to do so



The Lee Valley Turner's Smock. Illustration obtained from the Lee Valley web site. There are other photos of this smock at their web site.

more quickly than many all synthetic coverings. The smock's color is a base tan with a grayish/greenish tinge to it, differing a bit according to the light source. The lighter color is cooler in the summer, but will show stains more obviously. I think an argument could be made for a smock made up of two fabrics, a more waterproof and stain resistant fabric across the contact areas of the front, and a highly breathable but slick fabric for the back, but you won't find that in this smock.

The only area where the 65/35 fabric is not used is in the cuffs, which make up the last three and a half inches of the sleeves. These cuffs are of a black stretch knit which seals well and is very comfortable. However the knit picks up chips and shavings which are difficult to remove, and if you do not clean them off they can eventually embed themselves deeply enough to poke through to the inside of the cuff and cause irritation. The knit also can become snagged when handling rough wood blanks and slightly increases the risk of becoming caught up in rotating machinery. I would prefer an adjustable flap secured with metal or plastic snaps, either by itself, or as an extension of the sleeve that would cover over the knit cuffs. The former solution would likely offer better ventilation for those using this smock in warmer climates.

Actually, the smock does use something like this for adjustment tabs at the waist. A "snug" tab is located at both sides at waist level and can be cinched with metal snaps at any of three locations. The area behind the snaps is reinforced with second layer of fabric to keep the snaps from tearing out. This adjustability allows one to have a roomier fit during hotter conditions and to accommodate more ample waistlines, or to bring in the waist to reduce full-

ness and give a trimmer fit that keeps the fabric closer to the body. I suspect it also will be popular with many lady turners.

The front of the smock is closed by a two way zipper, which I find unnecessary. Two way zippers are always a pain for me to get started, and often have shorter life than conventional zippers. Frankly, I don't see the need for a double opening zipper (turners are not going to be leaving the bottom open, nor sitting or crouching around much) but if it had to have one, I would wish the zipper to be of a larger tooth size that would be easier to initially start and be more durable. On the plus size, the smock uses a quality YKK zipper. A zipper can receive a lot of load at the bottom, particular in this crotch length smock, which could be reduced if there were a lower snap closure to take up some of the stress.

A high neck seals effectively and very comfortably, using a Velcro adjustable integral tab. This long, wide tab closure works fine when closed, but can be a real bother when left undone and flopping around. I wish there was a small snap that would allow it to be drawn back and secured in the open position. When closed, I find the tabbed collar does not interfere with full faced powered respirators. Overall, I am happy with the neck design, find it much better than the common approach of having a ribbed knit collar that offers little more in comfort, is less adjustable for ventilation, and has the same problems with retaining shavings that I discussed earlier with respect to cuffs.

The fabric is very breathable and the smock in general has proven quite comfortable in the generally pleasant San Francisco Bay Area climate where I live. However, under major exertion or in a warmer climate, heat could be a problem when the neck, wrists and front zipper are all closed (which is not unreasonable if one is trying to keep out wood shavings or sap spray). Heat rises in a top like this, and there really needs to be additional ways to control its release. I would like to see the addition of underarm zippers like is found in mountaineering gear, or at least eyelets in the underarms. Some form of venting high on the back of the shoulders might also be helpful. Another feature that would help would be to allow the front flap over the zipper to be closed by snaps, which could then be used at times with the zipper open, and thus allow more ventilation through the front, while still sealing the front from shav-

ings.

The sleeve heads are fitted (as opposed to angel wing) but the cut is ample and I have encountered no binding on my fairly large and muscular upper body. Both upper sleeves are fitted with "pencil pockets" that have a shielding layer of fabric where it is sewn to the sleeve to minimize wear and reduce the chance of poking something through to the inside of the sleeve. I am sure that some will find these quite handy, but for myself they are a needless detail.

The smock also has back pockets that some will find of moderate utility. Personally, I have never been one to load down a shirt or apron with lots of tools, finding that they just weigh around my neck, fall out when I move around, poke me if I bump into something, and generally reduce mobility. Still I have found the back pocket offers a place to easily hold the battery for my Airstream respirator, though the pockets are a lot larger than needed for the purpose. I'm not going to be stowing a bunch of stuff back there and so smaller pockets, or even clip loops, would work as well for me. On the plus side, the pockets have not filled with chips; on the down side, they are unusable and create bulk right where one does not want it if wearing a belt pack style battery/filter for respirators like the Airmate and Triton. Obviously folks will have different working styles and likely draw their own conclusions as to whether these large pockets are necessary or useful.

Interestingly, for all the pocket detailing, there is no hang loop on my smock. I mentioned this to LV and they may include this in future production.

Despite this fine edged critique, overall, I think the Lee Valley smock is worthy of serious consideration. As I said, almost to my surprise, it has become my standard attire whenever I am turning. It is well constructed, comfortable, allows easy movement, sheds shavings very well (except the cuffs) and can be just tossed in the wash for cleanup. I very much like it despite its shortcomings. There are good photos of it at the Lee Valley website (<http://www.leevalley.com>) and in their catalogs. I suggest you take a look.

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