



*Baguette*, 2009, Fiddleback maple with wenge dividers and end caps, 3" × 12" × 3"

# Considering the Purse

Denise DeRose

**M**ost woodturners are men. This is no surprise to anyone in the field and probably provides an explanation for why woodturning and purses have, until now, been on separate and nonconverging tracks. I started to consider the two topics together after seeing a woman carrying a wooden bandsaw box as a small purse. After all, purses are vessels. Why not turn a purse from wood? The possibilities seemed, and are, endless.

After much experimentation and numerous purses, I have learned that there are many considerations to making a successful handbag from wood.

## Form and function

Although it would be nice if my purses were put in a shadowbox and displayed as art, I have to assume that they will be used, and used hard. The consideration of use leads to several conclusions as to size, shape, and weight. A wooden purse has to be big enough so that you can get your hand into it easily. It should also be big enough, at a minimum, to carry keys, a wallet, and a cell phone. The shape depends on the kind of purse being made. Clutches should be small enough to be carried easily in a hand, and oval shapes are better than round ones. Shoulder bags

should be flattened discs or other shapes that will nestle easily against a body. Fully round vessel shapes protrude too much, are awkward to carry, and bang into things. Handbags should have a handle that can be easily gripped.

Thin-walled vessels are often considered the mark of a good woodturner, but the same cannot be said for purse making. A purse's wall must be thick enough to support the necessary hardware and screws, but not so thick as to make the bag unnecessarily heavy.

## Finish

Because handbags are worn against clothing and carried in

all kinds of weather, the finish must be water safe and colorfast with no potential for bleeding or rubbing off. Handbags will get banged around, so the finish must also be durable and renewable. For this reason, I prefer polymerized tung oil with a paste wax that can be renewed by the owner.

Texturing the wood is a good option for purses so that dings and scrapes will not be readily visible, but any tex-

(Below Right) *Pagoda Bag*, 2009, Fiddleback maple, macassar ebony, stainless steel handle, 12" × 8" × 2½"

(Below) *Porthole Bag*, 2009, Redwood burl with sapele back, inset of English walnut, 8" × 8" × 3½"



(Left) *Harra Bag*, 2009, Redwood (body textured), milk paint, silver leaf, snakewood lid, 14" × 8" × 4"

turing must be smooth so that it will not snag clothing or pick up lint.

### Hardware

Good hardware for purses is hard to find. Although many low-price hinges are available, hinges used on purses must be sturdy, but not clunky. Additionally, there should be no square corners that will catch on clothing. I always round the corners of hinges by filing them. Also, after installation, I touch up the screw heads with a file to ensure there are no rough edges. Woodworkers seem to have a penchant for brass hinges; however, fashion more frequently calls for nickel or stainless steel. See the sidebar for good sources for suitable hinges.

### Glues

When a glue joint is necessary in a handbag, it must be carefully considered. I have found that CA glue is notorious for lacking side-to-side shear strength. Because purses get dropped, yellow glue is a better choice. Additionally, when I make a purse with a glue joint, I frequently use decorative biscuits made of contrasting woods across the glue line to strengthen the joint and to hold the two pieces together. When attaching a decorative element, I drill the element and the purse to connect the two with a short brass peg and use flexible CA glue or epoxy to attach it firmly.

### Leather and lining

I hate to admit it, but after making purses for a good while, this woodworker had to buy a sewing machine. Without a lining, cell phones, keys, and lipstick clatter around noisily inside a purse. Having considered and rejected Suede-Tex as a solution, I resorted to fabric or suede linings and pockets in most of my bags. Linings should be glued into the purse interior with a fine-grade spray adhesive or Barge glue and also affixed with screws and grommets.

Additionally, there are universally accepted principles governing the desirable length of purse straps. Consultation on this point may be a good way to involve a wife/girlfriend in your woodturning hobby/obsession.

### Planning ahead, otherwise known as design

When a handbag idea lodges itself in my brain, I am anxious to execute it immediately. Too frequently, I am left at the end thinking, "How the heck am I going to attach this, now that I have glued that?" Planning ahead in handbag design is crucial to avoid inconvenient and vexing assembly problems. Failing this, handbag making provides opportunities for creative tool making. I now have several handmade, right-angle, thumb-driven screwdrivers that will reach into impossible nooks.

### It ain't no salad bowl

Making a handbag isn't like making a salad bowl or even a hollow vessel. In general, you will spend more time doing it than you can imagine, and more time off the lathe than on. There are good reasons why purses are usually made of fabric or leather, and in the course of making a wooden one, you will likely discover most of them. Good luck! ■

*Denise DeRose lives and pursues purse making in Oakland, CA. Visit her website at [www.denisederose.com](http://www.denisederose.com).*

(Below) *Deco Bag*, 2008, Spalted poplar with zebrawood base and handle, tortoiseshell notion, 6" × 6" × 2½"



(Below) *Uptown Bag*, 2009, Bleached ash with wenge inset, patent leather top and strap, 8" × 11" × 4"

(Left) *Clamshell Bag*, 2008, Maple, claret fabric dye, hammered copper and snakewood handles and trim, 13" × 11" × 3"

### Purse hardware sources

Ohio Travel Bag  
800-800-1941  
[www.ohiotravelbag.com](http://www.ohiotravelbag.com)

UMX-Universal Mercantile Exchange, Inc.  
800-755-6608  
[www.umei.com](http://www.umei.com)

S. Axelrod Co. (minimum order \$100)  
212-594-3022  
[www.axelrodco.com](http://www.axelrodco.com)

Lee Valley Tools Ltd.  
Lee Valley Hardware  
800-871-8158  
[www.leevalley.com/hardware](http://www.leevalley.com/hardware)