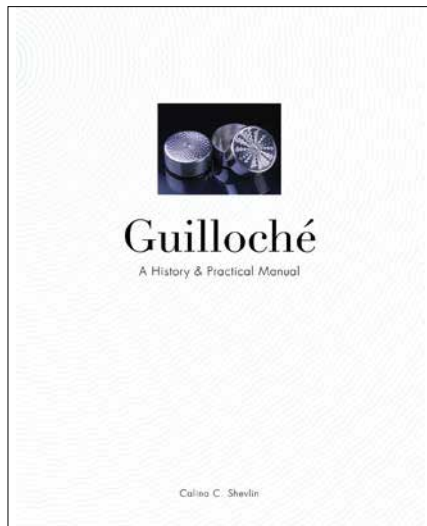


Book Review

Guilloché: A History & Practical Manual

David Wood-Heath



Guilloché: A History & Practical Manual

Author: Calina C. Shevlin

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The request to review this book has been an ordeal for several reasons. It is much easier to criticise a work than to create it and furthermore I am mentioned kindly in several places. Criticism of one's work is hurtful, especially after the monumental efforts which have been expended in writing this book. The need to do so saddens me greatly and I wish it were not necessary. Nonetheless, if one sets out on the stated aim of preparing a 'History and Practical Manual', there is a duty to ensure as far as possible that what is stated within it is factual, or tempered where there is doubt. Unfortunately, this is not always the case because in

many places, generalisations, ideas or personal opinions are given as facts, without appropriate qualification.

I am also conscious that I, merely a cognoscenti for the subject and therefore an 'amateur', am commenting on the work of someone who earns their living by engine-turning and who, therefore, is a professional. Despite this, I am quite frequently requested to comment or talk on the subject and admit that on occasion I seem to be credited with a level of knowledge which I know I do not possess. For this reason, in preparing this review I have also sought and have been freely offered the opinions of several professional engine-turners, and other very experienced and knowledgeable cognoscenti who have similar interests in engine-turning, in order, as far as possible, to ensure that my comments are fair, balanced and accurate. However, any errors in the comments are mine alone!

Calina's intention is to throw light on to what was, and still is, a hidden, obscure and secretive world where, it is my understanding, engine-turners working for certain Swiss watch companies are contractually forbidden from communicating with engine turners from other companies. The need for such a book is evident given the resurgence of amateur and commercial interest, not least in the Swiss and German watch industries for engine-turned dials, which provide a primary marketing image. The subject, which might seem limited in scope, is surprisingly broad and like the products, it has many unexpected facets. Therefore, anyone attempting to write a comprehensive book is undertaking an immense challenge. So Calina has to be commended for her intentions and efforts.

A researcher into engine-turning is a pilgrim into a little known subject with early researchers taking the greatest risks. Unfortunately, published errors

can also misguide their followers. Therein lies the danger: an error, once in print, especially in an early book on a subject, can come to be regarded as fact. Even if the error is subsequently revealed, it remains in print to misinform others in the future.

I have met Calina, and after she visited my workshops I took her to meet Martin Matthews, the watch case maker and author of the only previous book devoted to engine-turning, *Engine Turning 1680-1980 The Tools and Technique*. (Calina's book is not the first to be written on the subject as is claimed in the preface). From this meeting and the contents of the book, it is very apparent that Calina is devoted to the subject of engine-turning and has an unquestionable desire, clearly expressed in the book, to stimulate interest in it and to provide technical information to aid others who are interested or who might be tempted to try the subject practically.

It is apparent that Calina has made immense efforts to write her book over a period of years and has researched and obtained a lot of good information and photographs which have hitherto not been available. Apart from Martin Matthews' aforementioned work, the section 'Engine-Turned Cases and Dials' in *Watchmaking* by George Daniels, the catalogues of the makers of engine-turning machines and brief essays in other publications, there is very little published technical information available even to a determined researcher. Not all of what is available is in English.

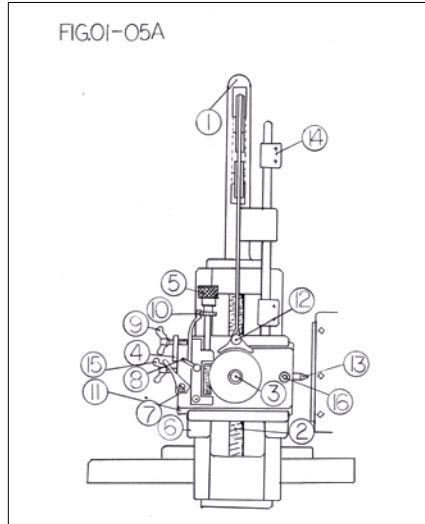
Many aspects of the book are very informative and useful, and many of the photographs are delightful. Calina is generous with her credits to other engine-turners. Her detailed research into the intensive training formerly available in Switzerland (chapter two, 'Instruction and Learning') is a complete revelation to me and other aficionados. Calina



The book is very well illustrated throughout.

is to be congratulated in her efforts in revealing this unknown information. Chapter 10, 'Artistic Applications Emerging', is a generally excellent chapter on the history and future of engine turning and it mentions some historic individuals and companies, and current practitioners. However, awareness of the foregoing good factors cannot obviate the fact that the book is liberally and regularly marred by errors of fact, history, opinion, questionable or fanciful statements and erroneous technical content.

The book is in English and presumably intended for the English speaking world, yet certain parts of the terminology include some odd names for the components of the machines. Some are perhaps American and others are a translation of continental terms, mainly of French origin from Swiss catalogues. Examples include 'pawl' for ratchet, 'stand' for tool slide, 'blocking' for fixing or 'locking' a component and 'broche' for lever. Some parts of the machines are incorrectly named: for example, 'headstock' is used when the part being described is a centring and levelling chuck. Some caption letters to identify machine parts on photographs and diagrams are misplaced. This could hinder comprehension of certain technical instructions and recipes. Since Calina is from the USA and now works in Switzerland this terminology is perhaps not surprising, nor perhaps the rather Swiss favouring views expressed in places. There are times when the text is convoluted or incomplete and



the intent of various parts of the text prose in its discursive and rambling style is either difficult to understand or incomprehensible. The same general comment applies to the captions on certain technical diagrams.

Calina undoubtedly has far greater practical experience of engine-turning than I have. However, in my opinion she has difficulty in conveying this adequately in a written form. This, plus errors in the book, detract from it greatly. I believe Calina has made such tremendous efforts to include a vast accumulation of information, she has actually tried too hard and perhaps to some extent, some of the errors, misinformation or difficult phraseology may stem from this. The more obvious errors in the book are indicative that it was not subject to an adequate peer technical review or proof checking prior to publishing and for this I believe the publishers are culpable.

I was aware that the book was being written and undergoing a long period of gestation and I looked forward to it greatly. However, although parts of it are delightful and informative, I was very disappointed. Furthermore, certain statements in it caused me such annoyance that I had to cease reading it and put it aside for a while! From telephone calls received and from discussions with other cognoscenti it was very apparent that I was not alone in this reaction.

With regards to the 'recipes': a reasonably knowledgeable engine-turner who attempted certain ones



would probably readily perceive the vagaries or inaccuracies. However, if an unaided beginner were to attempt to follow them, they would find themselves utterly bewildered.

There are several references to me on captions for photographs of some of my machines. I was happy to authorise their use but unfortunately, in several cases the captions have been mixed up and put to the wrong photographs. There are also references to me on

pages 5 and 113 which are kindly. This is appreciated because I and other like-minded enthusiasts agree with the sentiments expressed by Calina that the subject is of great historic and technical fascination, and is potentially ripe for future artistic development by innovative exponents.

To aid my memory, whilst reading the book I marked the pages where I found content which I believe to be in error, or at least questionable, or where the intent was difficult to comprehend. Many pages were found to warrant such marking to a lesser or greater degree. Of

144 pages, in my view 35 had significant errors or items of concern, 24 had errors of somewhat lesser concern and 26 had errors which were more minor. Other pages were also marked to identify peculiarities, but which I did not classify as erroneous. I will not attempt to list all such findings in this review précis but limit them to a few representative examples in the appendix. A copy of the book, annotated with all identified matters of concern plus a full schedule of comments (totalling 34 pages of typed text), will be placed in the library of the Society of Ornamental Turners

and will thus be available for future reference.

In summary, despite the foregoing, I believe the book is visually beautiful, not expensive and worth buying despite the errors. Many of the photographs of work pieces are delightful. Anyone interested in the subject would find much to enjoy in it. Perhaps only the more informed readers, particularly from the ornamental turning or engine-turning world would be aware of, or become aware of the errors, at least until they review it more closely or try to comprehend certain parts of it.

Appendix

The following points are a small selection of some of the problems encountered in the book.

Page 8:

'The first rose engine appeared between 1740 and 1760 in Eastern France or Western Switzerland.'

Incorrect. The principle of rose engine turning was known in the 1500s, probably originating in or around Augsburg, Southern Germany.

Page 9:

'The two people who introduced guilloché to the world and brought its presence to the masses were Peter Carl Fabergé and Abraham Louis Breguet...'

'Fabergé was one of the first to publicly combine the art of guilloché and examples [although there are few examples that pre-date Fabergé].'

'Fabergé was also the first to have an actual workshop for guilloché.'

Incorrect and fanciful statements. Engine Turning and Enamel were popular and quite common from at least the 1750s, long before Fabergé or Breguet. Many such objects exist, especially gold boxes. Whilst Fabergé had at least one independent work master who had such a workshop, he will not have been the first. Other workshops will have existed long before him.

Page 11:

'While Louis Abraham Breguet used guilloché exclusively on his watches...' – Exclusively? Abraham Louis Breguet also continued to use enamel dials.

Page 19:

'There is also an automatic rose engine mentioned, which again, without photographic evidence is difficult to imagine. The only machine that is like a rose engine and could be automated is the ornamental turning lathe.'

Incorrect. There are automatic rose engines specifically for engine turning, particularly by Gudel and Lienhard. I have two and know of others.

Page 31:

'Neuweiler & Engelsberger ... The company only manufactured the Straight-line machine.'

Incorrect – it also made rose engines.

Page 33:

Two photographs refer to a *'Plant Straight line Brocading machine – David Wood-Heath'*.

Incorrect. It was made by Linden in the USA, not by Plant.

Page 70 shows diagrams of the 'centring and levelling chuck' (although it is not titled as such), but which has been described as a 'headstock'. Incorrect. The chuck is a separate device, comprising several parts, screwed onto the headstock.

Page 87:

'... it is rumoured that Wedgewood used a rose engine to cut into his vases and bowls before firing, I have seen images at the Wedgewood museum, and I am not sure it was a rose engine that was used, but it must have been an ornamental turning lathe or some bastardisation of one.'

Incorrect. Wedgwood (not Wedgewood) used a normal trade rose engine, not a bastardisation of an ornamental turning lathe. Information and images of it are readily available on the web. Rose engine-turned work on clayware was a regular product of Wedgwood and some other potteries and some is still produced today by enthusiasts.