

Judging a Scrollsaw Contest:

Observations from Rick Hutcheson after being a judge at the Iowa S.A.W. Convention

Many wonder what a judge looks for to determine the winners of a contest. I cannot speak for the other judges, who did a great job too, but I can tell you how I came to my decisions. Thank goodness all the items were grouped into the categories that they belonged in. There were too many categories as far as I was concerned, but the rules for the categories were set previously, so that is how each entry was determined. I don't even remember all the different categories; we were given a scorecard for each one and told which items were in that group. We did not know who submitted each entry; there were no names on any of them. There was a list but the judges were not allowed to see that prior to the judging of the contest. That insured the judging was not partial to a person rather than the entry itself. From there we made our picks of the winners, and sometimes it was hard to pick only 3 places.

So the real question is what did I look for on each entry. First of all I looked at all of the items in the category to judge from a distance. I made mental notes of what caught my eye as being the most appealing. Now this was real hard the way some of the items grouped because a large fretwork clock may have been in the same category as a very simple plaque. After looking at all the entries I would know the ones that I felt were in the running as being the best of the group. Now it was time to move in closer and look at some of the details.

The first of the details I would look for was the cutting. If it was words on the plaque, did all the letters that were the same, really look the same. I knew most of the patterns were pretty accurate and by looking at all of the "h" for example, did they all look the same. Were the straight-line sides of each letter straight to the eye, did the "L" look like the sides were straight and even, or were the sides tapered or barreled? If it was a clock with a deck type railing, did all the spindles on the railing match. Any entry that had a repeat pattern, did all of them match the way they should? Really just looking for the seminary of the pattern. If there was a straight line cut on the entry, was the line straight to look at. If there was a circle, did it really look smooth and round, or have a wavy edge. Where pieces joined to meet another piece, did they fit right? How about miters on some of the clocks and boxes, did the miters fit tight?

So everything still looked good, it's time to move in closer. Looking at the edge of the cut. Was it smooth and uniform? Were there a lot of nicks and bumps where starting and stopping took place? If the bumps were sanded out, did the sanding marks show? The edge should look smooth and uniform all along the cutting line. How about the turns and corners, were there any burn mark on the wood? If the detail called for a square corner or a pointed tip of grass, were the details sharp or just close? I realize that this may seem very technical, but it comes down to this close look to determine the better of one entry over the next.

With all of the looks and detail done in my mental list, it is getting down to a few entries now. So I look at the finish. I use gloss finish, but can appreciate the matte type finish too. No matter what finish was used; I look at the final results of that finish. Maybe it's not the finish I would have chosen to use, but that was what the entry had, so I look at it. In looking at the finish I look for uniformity. Does the finish look the same across the whole piece? Is that finish smooth or is there still those dust specks in it that give it the sandpaper feel? No matter what finish was used it should look and feel smooth. Now to move in closer and look at the application. Looking into the corners and edges I should not find drops or blobs of finish anywhere on the piece. There was some nice work done, and then ruined with the way the finish was applied. Some had runs in the finish; some had big dried globs in the tight areas. This lack of detail really narrowed the good work from the best. By now I had my mental notes of what I felt were the best of the entries in the category. So I would stand back and think of the good and bad findings of each entry, then again mental notes of how I would place them. At times I would have to look closely again to compare a couple of entries before making the final decision of which I felt was the best. In the end I had to make the final decision of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place and that was done after a lot of decisions and inspecting.

All of the judges did a wonderful job of selecting the winners. It took the judges about 2 hours to judge all the categories and find the winners, but it was well worth the effort. If I had had an entry into the contest, I would have expected the same fair treatment that everyone received in this contest. It was hard to do at times, but I think the decisions were all based on the real merits of each entry. To me the hardest part was at times it didn't

seem like apples were being compared to apples. We had some beautiful work that could have been made in a couple of hours to compare against work that could have taken weeks to make. But that is the way the categories divided the entries.

As a judge you have the right and obligation to move items from one category to another if you agree this is desirable. Different people with different tastes do the grouping into categories during the mad rush at the start of the contest to get everyone registered. Consider yourself the final judge on placement of projects within any one category.

As a judge you are expected to be impartial, open minded, and exercise a critical eye when making your final decision. Asking yourself how you might have made it different can be a poor question, please judge on how it compares to the other items in that category, trust what you see or don't see, and have faith your background and experience are working together to reach a logical conclusion. You are the judge!

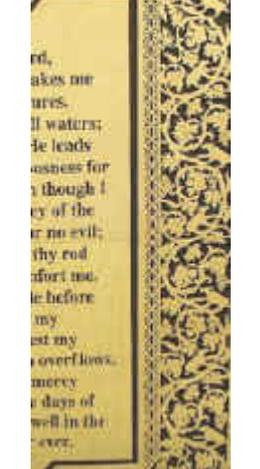
Judging Picture Examples

Below are some pictures of examples of things that were noticed by the judges in previous contest events. I (nor the other judges) am not trying to be critical of the work; in fact I am not sure who the makers of these projects even were. These projects were available, so I used them as examples of the types of things the judges look at in detail. I realize that some things noted here might seem insignificant, but the judging gets down to fine details for the final decision. Some of the comments are mine, and others were comments from the other judges. Some of the details do not show up in the pictures as much as they do looking at the actual project, so I hope you can understand the concept of what I am trying to show.

Again I want to state that this is not being done to be critical of someone's work, but to be used as examples to show what the judges are looking at.

	<p>A nice gloss finish, but as you rub your hand over the finish it did feel rough. Take the time to knock the feathers off that final coat of finish, to get that glass smooth feel.</p> <p>Also please notice; there are some gaps between the pieces. A tight seem less joint is much preferred.</p>
	<p>Looking at the cutouts along the edge of the stamp they are not even. This may have been exactly the way the pattern was drawn, but to look perfect the notches should have been redrawn so they all matched. Any time a project has parts that are symmetrical; they should all be the same. This applies to other things like railings on porches of the big clocks; spokes of wheels, or anything else that we know all the parts would be the same.</p> <p>Also notice the lettering is not even, the two L's on roll are not the same</p>
	<p>Though a nice piece, the nose stuck out as not being shaped to look right. Other details of the project were done nicely, but the one part just didn't fit with the rest of the project quality.</p>

	<p>A nicely cut project except for the burn on the top edge, that certainly could have been sanded off to preserve the finished look desired.</p> <p>Also there was no finish on the wood, and this type of project would normally be associated with being finished. A good finish on this one might have made it a ribbon winner.</p> <p>If the project does not have a finish applied, there should be a reason. Perhaps to accent a part, a carved area, or just a natural look to enhance the project would justify not applying a finish. But the unfinished part needs to look correct for the project.</p>
	<p>Notice the width of the frame varies and is not a smooth flowing line. Also note where the first feather meets the frame, and the frame width changes below the feather. Again this may have been the way the original pattern was drawn, but the cutter should have corrected the flaw.</p>
	<p>Note the longitude-latitude lines are not even. Also the sides of the stars are not straight lines.</p>
	<p>The eye seemed out of proportion with the rest of the project, and did not look like the correct style of eye for a bird. One judge stated the eye just did not look natural to the overall project. Again this may be a perfect match to the pattern, but the cutter needs to look at maybe a photo of a real bird to see if it looks right.</p>
	<p>Projects don't have to be complicated to be good!</p> <p>This project was noticed as a very good use of the woods colors. The proportions of the picture to the natural slab looked appealing. Even though a simple picture the choice of presenting the picture made the project stand out.</p>
	<p>A nice project, and nice color choices, but the flowing curves of the tail were not even. It is hard to see it in the picture, but look at the bottom of the curve on the orange tip, the curve is not one smooth flow but short choppy looking segments of curves.</p>
	<p>Notice the wheel rim and spokes are not even. This is another example of something we know should be more symmetrical than it has been cut. Even the outside of the wheel is not a smooth round circle, and the rim width changes around the wheel.</p>
	<p>This is sky and a moon over a mountain. A very nice use of a natural flaw in the wood was used to advantage, and fine use of the grain color for the cloud look. Hard to see in the picture, but silver foil was placed on the back to show through the hole in the wood.</p>
	<p>The roof of this clock the joint did not fit tight. Any joints should have a perfect fit or be filled with a very good colored filler to make them look perfect.</p>

	<p>Another part that did not fit properly is shown here. Many parts of the project were perfect but just a couple of flaws may be all it takes to have it judged lower than an identical project.</p> <p>Any part that can be seen needs to be perfect, were this type of flaw inside or hidden I don't feel it would have made the project any less perfect. For example if there was a trim piece that covered this flaw, I would not look inside the case to see it the joint was perfect before the trim was covered over it, I would have just been looking at if the trim fit properly.</p>
	<p>This was a plywood piece on a walnut back. Nice project, but can you see that the plywood was not sanded on the back before being applied to the walnut. This left the wood feathering sticking out from the edges. Had the feather been sanded off first, this would have been a lot nicer project.</p>
	<p>Notice where the two pieces meet the butt joint is open. This could have been from distortion on the copied pattern. If two pieces are to fit together, check the pattern before cutting that they in fact do fit. If needed leave extra wood on one piece and sand it to fit after cutting.</p>
	<p>The detail lines of many projects are hard to hide. It looks like the right drill bit was used, but the holes still show as holes. A good way to hide them is to teardrop cut the hole to the line.</p>
	<p>Notice the space between the word frame and the flowered frame tapers. This again could have been caused buy the copy machine. You need to check the patterns after making copies, because the copy machine can distort a perfect pattern. One solution to this would have been to mount the outside frame then lay the word frame in place and measure the gap top and bottom, then re-cut the side of the word frame to fit the flowered frame, so the space would be even top to bottom.</p>

The examples above were selected at random from past contest entries and are intended to highlight details a judge must consider in the process of making the best possible choice. I cannot tell you if any of the projects above did or did not win a ribbon, they were selected for the range of projects available for the details they reveal. It is often difficult and you may never see these types of errors yourself but looking closely, sometimes with the aid of a flashlight can help.

Being a judge is an awesome task and you have risen to the challenge. Hopefully these examples will help you explore the best entries in your contest and allow you to be confident that you looked at each item with an open mind, a critical eye for detail, and responded in the best tradition of S.A.W.

Rick Hutcheson (a judge from the very first S.A.W. Contest) has provided these examples with most of the commentary. He is a well-respected member of the Scrollsaw community, author in several stories in both scroll sawing and wood related magazines, and a pattern maker. His web site is: <http://www.scrollsaws.com/>