

A few thoughts on competition cutting – by Martin Winterbottom

Some time ago I volunteered to be trained in competition judging and more recently a conversation with a well respected fellow faceter caused me to think again about the process of judging, what this has done for me and what hints and tips might arise.

Looking back to see what guidance on the practicalities of cutting for competitions had already been provided I found a detailed article by Jim Finlayson in the December 2000 edition of Stonechat – Issue No.29. I'm not intending to repeat the contents of this other than by stressing the most important points for me.

I was amazed to find that the rigour of the training and the practice of judging caused my own cutting to improve noticeably. Having already had a go at some of the guild and international competitions I was already trying to improve, but knowing a little more about where to focus my efforts definitely helped. The training was really about learning a structured way of really looking at a stone. I quickly realised that the cutter has the most intimate knowledge of the stone with its strengths and weaknesses. The judge follows closely behind without the distractions of the joys and disappointments when things have gone well or with difficulty through the hours of concentration needed in the cutting work. I wonder what proportion of time is spent looking and thinking rather than cutting. I suspect the answer is a high proportion

Judging is carried out using a clear 40 watt filament bulb and a 10x loupe, taking care to exclude light from other sources which might detract from the single bulb. Much has been said about good lighting for cutting already, but just knowing the judging standard gives a good starting point on what type of bulb to go for. Good examination of each facet is easier when judging as the stone can be rotated and moved more easily than when in the machine. It is surprisingly easy to overlook finer pits and scratches and the discipline of repeated checking until sure is vital.

I'm stating the obvious when I say that there is no substitute for normal good faceting practice. Whatever techniques you use are OK provided you can produce beautifully polished, scratch free, flat facets, meeting perfectly! Any faceter knows that this is more easily said than done but time and effort spent on achieving accurate meet points and at the same time bringing the polish to a good standard is key to top class cutting. A high proportion of marks are awarded for meet points being achieved and this is an all or nothing decision by the judge made for each meet in turn. This is however shaded by the marking for 'facets uniform' where marks are given for the nearness of the meets where out as well as the uniformity of shape of each of the facets relative to others in the same set on the stone.

Elimination of scratches and removal of pitting at pre-polish and polish stages are vital to good marks. Again a substantial proportion of the marks depend on a good finish to each facet and development of good individual cutting practice that leaves you in control is the only way to improve – again I know this is easier said than done and needs real perseverance. There is real pleasure to be found when things are going well too – real satisfaction.

One feature that seems to recur in many stones I have seen is lack of attention to the girdle. The crown and pavilion may be really good but for some reason, even where the girdle facets are well proportioned and meeting well, some cutters leave scratches and pitting that can only be described as embarrassing. This may be fine for commercial cutting but in competitions where a few more marks are to be had, starting the stone by thinking about the girdle can only be a good thing. This leads to more care with size accuracy (where it is specified), uniform girdle facets coming from careful transfer dopping and a girdle width that is within the specification.

A few times where a stone size has been specified this has been either overlooked or ignored by a cutter submitting a stone for marking. This is fine when considering other aspects of the cutting but can seriously affect marks if they matter to you. Another minor but avoidable way of losing marks is to submit a stone which has not been cleaned. Racing to get the stone in the post is probably an excuse but a last minute wipe to remove the last traces of dop wax will only take a few seconds!

Sometimes marks are lost for visual effect and this in my experience has always been as a result of the material chosen being too dark. For example a very dark tourmaline or amethyst which just does not allow the light to come back through the stone from the pavilion facets is a poor choice. It is a shame to see beautifully cut stones in other respects losing marks here and I would always go for paler colours if at all possible.

It might appear a strange thing to say, but I find the occasional task of judging stones a real pleasure. I never cease to be amazed at the skills that are demonstrated and although marking sheets record areas for improvement, every stone is always a result of several hours' focussed work by the cutter and well worth the relatively short time under close scrutiny. The conversation with my faceting friend touched on display of stones – they all look good irrespective of the marking not like the occasional wilted leek at the local vegetable show! Simply submitting a finished stone whatever the marking shows is an achievement in itself and I would encourage anyone to have a go.

The challenge of competition cutting is for each individual, but for me it is always a personal challenge to produce the best result I can at the time. I have had the privilege of handling and marking some stones of a standard to which I can only aspire – great fun.

Happy competition cutting.