

Wood Carving Workshop

By Danr Bjornsson, CSO

Danr bjornson

Introduction: This workshop will teach you, in a hands-on format, the basics of woodcarving. For a small materials fee, you will have the use of the instructor's tools (if you did not bring your own), a small block of aspen wood, some practice patterns, and a selection of carving patterns.

Safety is of primary importance when carving wood, because blood stains your carving.

Do not touch any of the tools or materials until told to do so.

Carving tools are extremely sharp. Do not put the tools down where you and those around you are unlikely to see them. Do not make gestures with tools in your hand. Do not drop the tools on the floor. Build safe habits from the beginning.

Anyone who wishes to observe, but not participate, must keep a safe distance from those handling the tools.

Before carving, ensure that your workpiece is firmly clamped to the table.

Woodcarving tools are categorized into several groups.

Knives are the primary tool for chip carving and for detailing all types of carving. With sufficient patience and care, any type of carving can be accomplished with a knife. A hobby knife is fine to get started. Carving knives are available in a wide range of blade shapes.

Chisels are used for all types of carving. They are most useful for shaving a surface down to a smooth finish, and making straight cuts. A straight chisel and skew (angle) chisel should be included in a basic carving kit. A bent chisel is also useful in some situations.

Gouges are the most commonly used category of tool, particularly in relief and round carving. Gouges are so named because the tool is made to gouge a channel of a particular shape. A basic carving kit usually includes a V-gouge, a straight (semi-circle) gouge, and a bent gouge.

Other tools include tools to hold the workpiece securely (clamps, vise, etc), oilstone and strop (for sharpening), mallet (to drive the chisels if desired), and a workbench (to hold the work at a comfortable height). If you create the items you carve, a variety of woodworking tools are also useful.

Caring for your tools is the key to successful carving.

Tools must be kept "razor sharp" in order to cut cleanly. When sharpening, pay close attention to the bevel and sharpening angles. The bevel angle narrows the cutting edge of the tool. The sharpening angle is slightly steeper and sharpens the last 1/16th to 1/32nd inch of the cutting edge. If you make too enough errors in the sharpening angles, you may damage the edge.

It is also possible to damage the edge by dropping the tools or allowing the cutting edges to strike other tools. Keep your tools in a roll that prevents this, and handle them carefully.

A new or damaged tool should be sharpened on an oilstone. Create the bevel angle, if required, then create the sharpening angle. Do not worry about creating a "wire edge," as this will be removed later.

A newly-sharpened tool, or one you have been using for more than a few minutes, should be stropped. A strop is made from leather with stropping compound spread on it. The strop will remove the "wire edge," if any. Draw the cutting edge, at the sharpening angle, across the strop opposite the direction you would cut. When the edge of the tool shines like a mirror, you are ready to carve.

Gouges require special care, because of their shape. Whether sharpening or stropping, work the outer bevel first, then the inner. Pause often, to check the edge closely. Improper angles or uneven pressure can remove the corners or create flaws in the cutting edge of gouges.

Tools gradually lose their edge during normal use. As you carve, pause every few dozen cuts to re-strop the tool. Periodically, thoroughly strop all your tools. Over time, with care, this constant stropping will make your tools surprisingly sharp, which will make your carving easier.

Guidelines to handle the tools are described below, but you will find your own exact style.

If you are cutting right to left, the "carving hand" is your right and the "off hand" is your left. Reversing the direction of the cut reverses the designation of the hands. With practice you will become ambidextrous. Hold the tool in whichever hand makes it easiest for you to make the cut you are trying to make. The grain of the wood and the shape of the cut determines which direction you will cut. Do not let left-handedness or right-handedness be an obstacle to this.

The carving hand grips the tool by the handle and pushes. It does most of the work to cut through the wood. Some situations require a tight overhand grip, pushing with the fingers, while other situations require a loose end grip, holding with the fingers and pushing with the palm.

The off hand guides the tool and provides backward pressure against the carving hand, so you don't accidentally cut too far or too fast. It guides the tool in the proper direction.

Some situations, such as large cuts or hard wood, require the aid of a mallet. Use an overhand grip with the off hand, and gently tap the back of the tool with the mallet using the carving hand.

Understanding wood grain is fundamental to making clean cuts in the wood.

It is easiest to cut across the grain.

Cuts at an angle to the grain create a smooth side where the grain is at an acute angle, and a rough side where the grain is at an obtuse angle. The more obtuse the angle, the more likely the wood will be to tear or splinter. This is made worse if the tool is losing its sharpness.

Cutting along the grain causes the tool to drift, i.e. follow the grain wherever it goes.

Gouges cut in two dimensions, across their width and through their depth. The wood grain is a factor in both these dimensions, so you should plan your cuts with this in mind.

When choosing a piece of wood to carve, note the properties of the grain and anticipate whether another piece would be better suited to your needs.

With harder wood, take thinner cuts to preserve control over the tool and yourself.

Woodcarving techniques are divided into three types, each of which meets a particular need.

Chip carving creates a pattern or design through a series of small "chip-shaped" cuts. It is best suited to situations where the decoration enhances the wood, not the other way around.

Relief carving creates a 2-dimensional carving, with some depth to add realism. It is usually used when the carving itself is meant to be the main point of interest. The depth can be very small, but appear deep, because the actual depth of carving is between adjacent elements.

Statuary, or "in the round" carving, is a 3-dimensional carving. It is used when the carving is meant to be as realistic and possible and/or viewed from all sides.

To choose a technique for a particular job, consider the purpose of the carving, the desired design, and the capabilities of the wood and its grain.

In this workshop, we will first practice chip carving, to get a feel for the tools and the wood.

These are the types of cuts which make up a chip carving pattern. Nearly all chip carving cuts are accomplished by one or two careful cuts. The first row on your practice board shows the order of the cuts to make. Try to make the cuts smooth and meet in the bottom so the chip comes away cleanly. Then, try the other cuts shown. Share the tools with your neighbor so everyone can get a chance to try each of the cuts.

Relief carving is more complicated than chip carving, and consists of four main steps.

Transfer the pattern to the wood. There are period methods involving grids or chalk, and modern methods involving opaque projectors, carbon paper, and a number of other things.

The "setting out" step consists of making a "stop cut" around the pattern. Using a V-gouge, cut a groove near, but not on, the outside of the pattern, all the way around. This stop cut will help prevent you from overshooting your cuts during the next step.

The "groundwork" step consists of roughing out the background with a gouge or knife. Depending on the grain, you would usually want to cut from the outside toward the stop cut. You might choose to let the background gradually taper out, or cut the entire surface down to the background depth. When you reach the desired depth, you can smooth it with a chisel or texture it with a gouge.

The "detailing" step consists of bringing the stop cut to the edge of your line using a knife or chisel. You can round the edge over, or leave it square. The V-gouge, knife, or skew chisel are best for getting into the corners. Where internal parts overlap, gently cut the underlap down with a chisel or knife to create depth. Then, add the final details to your design using whatever tool seems appropriate. Finally, you can sand the surfaces smooth or leave the tool marks as they are.

Now, we will try our hand at relief carving.

Turn your block of wood over and clamp it back down. Choose a pattern you like and trace it onto your block of wood with the carbon paper. Then, give others a chance to use the pattern.

Set out as described above. Plan your cuts as you wait your turn with the tools.

Cut the groundwork as described above. Before you start cutting, decide how deep you will go. It is not necessary to reach this depth in a single cut. After you have used the gouge for a while, see if your neighbor would like a turn. While he is using it, practice smoothing the groundwork with a chisel.

Once the groundwork is done, start detailing.

If you plan to carve in the SCA, a copy of the MK criteria is included for you to focus your research and plan your projects. Happy carving!

Sources of information:

Wheeler & Hayward. *Woodcarving, A Beginner's Guide*. Sterling Publishing Co. 1972, ISBN 0-8069-8790-1. This book is good both for technique and for practice projects.

Other wood carvers, such as <http://www.woodcarvers.org>

SCA A&S sites such as <http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/topics.htm>

Sources of materials:

The WoodCraft Shop (I-64 and Hurstbourne Pkwy, Louisville KY, next to Damon's)

Numerous web merchants (search on "woodcarving tools" at your favorite search site)

Wood Embellishment

Category Rules: The category is for judging the decoration, or embellishment, of a wood piece. Models for wood embellishment can be found in many places, although wood carvings and paintings are the first choice. Artistic style should be documented, preferably with reference to period models. For carving, preference should be given to wood carving and secondly to other forms of decoration, such as stone carving. Other period art forms should be considered suggestive rather than definitive.

Documentation (0 to 4 points):

- 0: No documentation provided with entry.
- 1: Minimal information consisting of time, place and style.
- 2: As in #1, plus use of general sources; emphasis on tertiary sources with perhaps one second source (ex: use of encyclopedia articles with a possible additional use of a book or article that refers to a period source).
- 3: As in #2, plus a developed discussion making use of critical references; sources are largely secondary (ex: sources refer to period references; documentation discusses, compares, and contrasts the source's views).
- 4: As in #3, plus explanation of original research/experiment and relation of source material to it. Primary sources, if available, are emphasized (ex: sources used are from the appropriate period for the entry, such as period manuscripts, paintings or artifacts).

Authenticity (0 to 4 points):

- 0: Entry is completely modern with no relationship to period elements or practices.
- 1: Use of modern materials and methods to produce a work that would not be accepted in period but either bears some relationship to an authentic work or which might be useful within SCA Culture.
- 2: Use of **both** modern materials and methods to produce a work that looks or feels authentic to the time period it purports to be.
- 3: Use of **either** modern materials **or** methods to produce a work that looks or feels authentic.
- 4: Use of totally authentic materials and methods.

Scope (0 to 6 points): Rank the ambition, not the success, of the entry on a scale of 0 to 6 for each of the following elements and average for the total Scope score (Total of element scores divided by 5).

- Difficulty of project (a simple decoration, simple decoration repeated on a large scale, frieze, statue?).
- Decorative techniques used (inlay, veneer, marquetry, incised carving, low-relief carving, chip carving, burned decoration, gesso and modelled gesso, metal foils, painting in colors, painting in scenes, turning, etc.).
- Difficulty of techniques attempted.
- Types of tools needed.
- Extent gone to ensure authenticity of techniques used.

Skill (0 to 6 points): How well is the entry made? Rank the success of the entry on a scale of 0 to 6 points for each of the following elements and average for the total Skill score (Total of element scores divided by 5).

- Appropriateness of wood to use.
- Application of techniques.
- How wood is utilized in the entry.
- Finishing
- Success of decorative techniques.

Creativity (0 to 4 points):

- 0: Standard style with no innovations.
- 1: Logical combination of elements with some innovation or embellishment or techniques, all logical to period context.

- 2: Logical combination of elements with more innovation or embellishment or techniques, all logical to period context.
- 3: Same as #2, plus much individual interpretation and interpolation logical to period.
- 4: Same as #3, plus each element is logically innovative to itself. Elements work together in a cohesive fashion.

Judge's Observations (0 to 6 points): Rank the entry as a whole. How well do all the separately judged parts fit together? The entry's overall effect is judged in this section. This is the only section of the Criteria where the judge may allow her/his personality, private opinions and personal preferences to influence scoring.

Contributors: Elli Lutemaker, 1982; Nigellus le Haie, 1987; Thorkel the Berserker, 1997.

Editors: Bronwyn ferch Gwyn ap Rhys, 1984 & 1987; Thorhalla Carlsdotir af Bröberg, 1997.

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