



Welcome to the wonderful world of Wood Carving! Woodcarving is an excellent pastime enjoyed by people of all ages. There are many forms and styles of woodcarving. Whittling and Chip Carving, done with just a knife. Relief Carving, which mainly uses chisels and gouges and Sculpture which also uses mainly chisels and gouges and Power Carving which uses rotary and reciprocating tools. The common bond that all forms of wood carving styles share is “The Knife”.

In this introduction to woodcarving you will learn the fundamentals including Safety, How to Maintain your Knife, The Characteristics of Wood, and the Basic Cuts that you will need to become familiar with! With simply a small piece of wood you can practice the techniques while carving absolutely nothing specific. Just whittle away and learn to control your knife. Try cutting with the grain, against the grain and across the end grain so you can get the feel of how the knife reacts to the wood.

SAFETY

- The carving knife must be kept extremely sharp to. Always keep the blade covered except when it is being used.
- Focus on your knife and the project. You don't want to be distracted while you are working with your knife.
- Keep your fingers, hands, arms, and legs out of the way. The use of a Leather Thumb Guard, Carvers Finger Tape or a Kevlar Carvers Glove is suggested for all students. Though I carve most of the time without the use of these items it is not a very wise idea. I have cut myself countless times. Another option is to use the fingertip of a leather glove. Some wood carvers wear a leather or Kevlar glove on their other hand. Both thumb sheaths and gloves are available commercially.
- Take your time and be patient. Don't try to take off too much wood at a time. Keeping your knife under control by removing small amounts at a time is good practice. As you become more confident you can then become more aggressive.
- First Aid - Regardless of how careful you are it is inevitable that you will occasionally cut yourself. Always keep a supply of Adhesive Bandages at your disposal. When you do cut yourself think about what you did wrong that led to the accident and strive not to let it happen again.

MAINTAINING YOUR KNIFE



Figure 1 - KNIVES

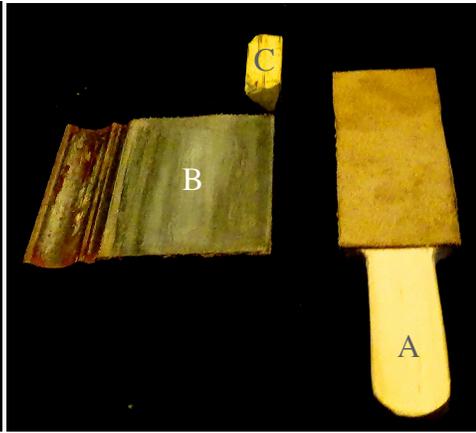


Figure 2 - STROPS

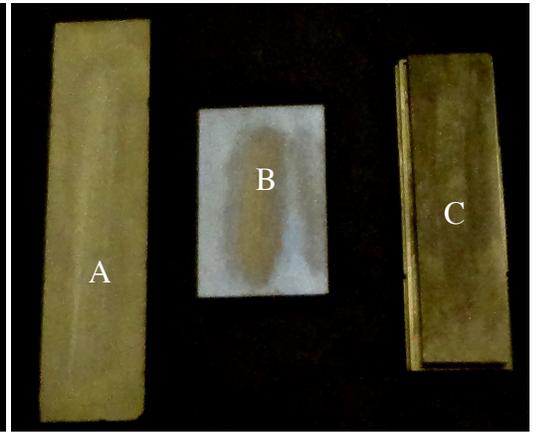


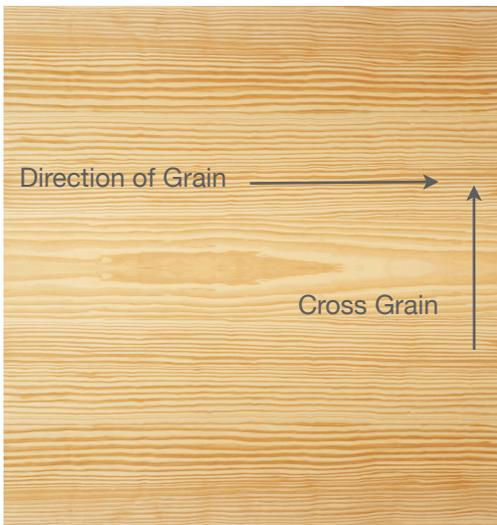
Figure 3 - SHARPENING STONES

- The Knife - Carving with a sharp knife is Mandatory for woodcarving! A sharp knife is far safer than a dull knife because it doesn't catch on the wood as easily. The best knife to begin with is a Detail Carving Knife such as a Flexcut (Figure 1 - A) or other manufacturer's knife that meet the following criteria. A small straight blade about 1-1/2" long. This works well because it is more precise when making small cuts and the straight blade is easier to sharpen and are available at many wood working stores, craft stores and online. A folding pocket knife is because of the possibility of it closing on your fingers. An alternative to a detail knife is to begin with an Exacto set which comes with removable blades in a variety of shapes and sizes. Most, if not all, carvers that begin with the latter knives quickly invest in a good Detail Carving Knife.
- The Strop - The Strop is simply a piece of leather that the knife is stroked against to maintain its sharp edge. A stropping compound (Figure 2 - C) is applied to the strop. To use the strop, place the knife blade on the strop and pull the blade (move the blade backwards) so it doesn't cut into the leather. Run it a few times on one side then flip it over and do the same on the opposite side until the blade drags across it smoothly. Strop frequently while carving. You can purchase a strop or make your own by gluing a piece of tanned leather (fuzzy side up) to a flat board (Figure 2 - A). Pay special attention to the tip of the blade. The tip usually gets more use than the rest of the blade so may want to strop it more often.
- The Sharpening Stone - You will eventually need to sharpen your knife, especially if you do not frequently strop or in case of accidental damage to the blade. In fact, over the years, I have bought knives and carving gouges that needed a honing prior to use. A sharpening stone with both a coarse and fine side works well in most instances (Figure 3 - A). Make sure it is well lubricated with a good stone oil (highly refined mineral oil). To Sharpen hold the knife blade flat on the coarse side of the stone with the back edge of the blade slightly elevated trying to follow the same degree of angle that is on the cutting edge. If you put down a drop or two of oil on the stone and push the edge to the stone you will notice that the oil will raise up when the blade is at the correct angle. Move in one direction several times then flip the knife over and do the same on the opposite side. Keep alternating the sides. If you hold a blade edge to a light you will see a glint of light off the edge where the blade is dull. Keep sharpening until you remove all the dull, shiny spots and then use a stone of finer grit (Figure 3 - B). When you achieve a sharp edge on the blade you can then go to yet a finer stone such as an arkansas black stone (Figure 3 - C) for a final finish. When completed with your sharpening then Strop your new edge. Now you should be able to keep it sharp by simply stropping it frequently.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WOOD

Though most wood species can be carved, some are much more desirable than others. Choosing the appropriate wood for a carving project depends on several factors. Is the wood soft enough to cut easily with a carving knife, or will you need to use chisels, gouges and a mallet? Will it have a natural finish that shows the grain, or will it be painted? Will the carving require fine detail such as song birds and waterfowl and complex high relief scenes? These are just a few of the questions the carver must contemplate before selecting the wood species that will be used. Below are the most common wood species used.

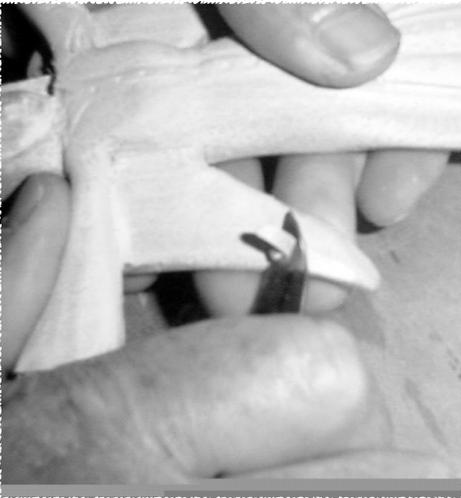
- **BASSWOOD** - This is the wood that we will be using for this Introduction to Woodcarving. For many carvers, from beginners to seasoned professionals, basswood is the wood of choice. It is soft and easy to carve, its close grain holds detail well, there are rarely knots or blemishes, and it is stable when dry. Most basswood carvings are painted. Due to its softness it is difficult to apply a stain evenly. Northern basswood is preferred over southern basswood because it grows slower and is usually denser.
- **WHITE PINE** - White pine is another good choice for many carvings. Though not as soft and tight grained as basswood it is good for carvings that do not require as much detail. It is commonly available at craft stores and is inexpensive. Many caricature carvers and whittlers use white pine extensively.
- **BUTTERNUT** - For carvings and sculptures that will be finished naturally butternut is an excellent choice. It is rich in color with an attractive grain pattern. Butternut is soft and the easy to carve with hand tools.



Wood Grain - Wood grain is primarily cells running in basically a straight direction from the bottom of the tree to the top of the tree. When cut and milled into usable material the grain doesn't always follow the parallel sides of the board. The grain often angles slightly up or down, or can even take unexpected dips and curves. Whenever possible you will want to carve in same direction to the grain. You will quickly know that you are carving against the grain. Your knife will want to dig into, and tear, at the wood. Simply reverse your direction if possible. If not then take very, very thin cuts until you can get to an area when you can reverse the direction. When cutting across the grain you will notice that the wood seems harder, and it is because you are cutting against the growth rings of the tree. When grain changes direction you can cut at an angle that is partially against the grain and partially cross grain which makes that transition easier to carve.



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR KNIFE



PARING CUT

The paring cut is performed by slicing the carving blade towards your thumb on your dominant carving hand. Use of a good quality thumb guard is highly recommended to ensure safety while wood carving. Paring cuts are very useful for shaving or slicing detail areas in a controlled manner.



PUSH CUT

Push cuts are performed by slicing or pushing the carving blade away from your wood carving hand. To add control to this cutting motion, use the thumb of your supporting hand (the hand not holding the knife) to push against that back of the knife blade to assist in making an accurate controlled cut.



STOP CUT

A stop cut is created by using the point of your knife to cut at a perpendicular angle to the wood. Then an angled cut can be made at an angle into the first cut to remove a small piece of wood. Using a stop cut will create a predetermined stopping point for the knife blade as your carve into the perpendicular cut.



“V” CUT

A V-cut is when the point of the wood carving knife is used to cut into the wood at a slight angle to make a slicing cut and then using the point again, another angled cut is made at the opposite angle into the depth of the previous cut to remove a “V” shaped piece of wood, leaving a sharp crevice. V-cuts can be useful to detail hair, fur, wrinkles in clothing, and other distinguishing marks on the wood carving project.

TIPS

- One of the most common mistakes made when learning to carve is trying to take too much wood off at a time. I recommend that a person begins by taking the equivalent of an “Onion Skin” off at a time. Think of peeling a potato and being able to see light through the peeling! This is a valuable skill for a woodcarver especially when doing fine detail, cutting against grain or cutting across grain.
- Join a local woodcarving club if one is available in your area. Woodcarvers typically enjoy sharing tips, techniques and information that can take someone many years to learn on their own!
- “Study Your Subject” Regardless of what you carve it is important to learn as much about it as possible. For instance, if your carving a bird then study the bird. Its feathers, beak, body as well as its habitat. The more you know about a subject the better your carving will be!

Useful Resources

The internet is a tremendous tool for a woodcarver. Researching, Buying tools, Communicating with other Carvers and many other uses. Here are just a few of the Hundreds that I have saved for my use.

Tools and Supplies

- qualitycarvingsupplies.com
- packardwoodworks.com
- woodcarvers.com

Reference

- avianweb.com - A great reference for all things that fly!
- carverscompanion.com - An excellent website promoting wood carving for everyone from beginner to professional.