Carving Lab

A basic exercise for beginners

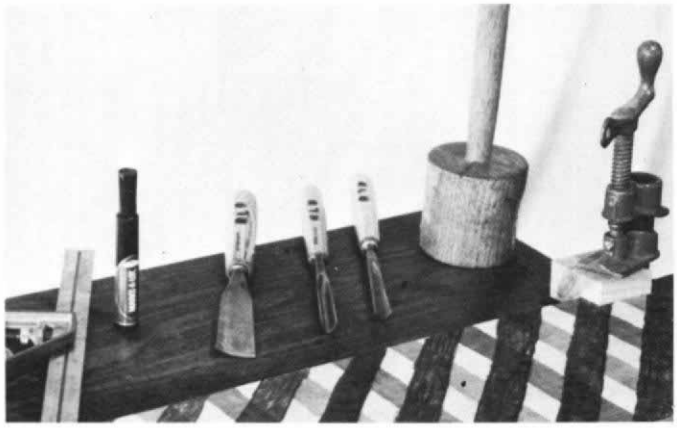
by Robert L. Buyer

Woodcarving classes are usually unstructured meetings where a teacher advises and helps a student with a carving project. This method has the advantage of enabling a student to produce a finished carving immediately. The disadvantages are needless time spent fumbling around, often discouraging results, and at times the creation of poor work habits. This is how I learned to carve. I've often thought that some simple exercises in basic tool handling would have helped me tremendously, and would have reduced the time it took to learn.

Therefore, in preparing to teach woodcarving last year, I developed a tool lab to introduce the basic techniques. It went rather well, and I hope it will help both novice carvers and other teachers. I am not advocating hours of tedious exercises, one after another, which must be mastered and yet produce only chips. These exercises concentrate on the gouge, parting tool and veiner, and how the various cuts are affected by the grain of the wood. Just experiment with it and observe carefully at each step.

You'll need a piece of soft wood (pine or bass) at least 6 in. wide, 10 in. long and 1/2 in. thick; two clamps for holding the wood to the bench; one or more carver's mallets, preferably of different weights and styles; a carpenter's square, soft pencil and a broad felt-tip marker; and three straight (not bent) carving tools—one gouge (such as a 5-sweep, 20 mm), one veiner (about 12 mm) and one parting tool (about 6 mm).

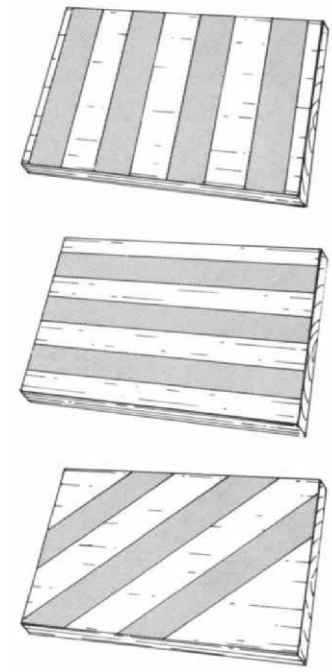
Please don't rush out and buy a kit of tools just for this exercise. If you have access to professional tools through a school or a friend, by all means use them. If you don't have access to tools and are sure you want to take up carving, then the three tools needed for this exercise constitute a beginning set and should be bought individually. You will be ahead of the game, both artistically and financially, if you buy full-size, professional-quality tools one at a time. As you gain skill, you will learn exactly which ones to buy next. A few fine tools are much better than a roll of small, clumsy ones. Swiss tools (my favorites because of their iron, shape and octagonal handles) currently cost between $5 and $10 each, and the three specified here can be purchased for about $20 total.



Carving lab equipment includes (left to right) gouge, veiner, parting tool and mallet. Clamps hold down board marked for cutting; lines parallel to grain are drawn on underside of board.

1. Draw a series of parallel lines on the wood, about an inch apart. Draw some lines parallel to an edge, some perpendicular to this edge and some at a 45° angle. With the marker, shade between the lines to make a band parallel to the edge of the board, another band perpendicular to the edge and a third band on the diagonal. Now clamp the wood securely to the top of the workbench, with the clamps as close as possible to the ends of the board.

2. Use the gouge and mallet to cut across the grain and remove the shaded band perpendicular to the edge of the board. Hold the gouge in your minor hand (left if you are right-handed) and the mallet in your major hand. Drive the gouge across the board from near to far, first cutting one edge of the shaded band, then the other.



3. Make a cut along the grain to remove the shaded band parallel to the edge of the board, again holding the gouge in your minor hand. Use the mallet to drive the gouge along the board from right to left, first cutting along one edge of the shaded band, then the other.

4. Now remove a diagonal band of wood, still holding the gouge in your minor hand. Use the mallet to drive the gouge across the board from near to far, cutting along one edge of the shaded band, then the other.

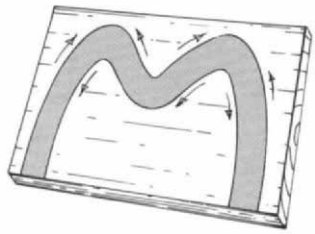
5. Observe the edges of the diagonal cut you just made, and note which edge is smooth and which feathered. Repeat the cut that made the feathered edge, but this time drive the

Above, gouge cut across the grain, made toward the carver. Minor hand powers cut, while major arm rests on stock for control. Right, major hand powers gouge cut across the grain, made away from the carver, with minor forearm as anchor and elbow as pivot.

gouge from far to near. Now this edge will be smooth.

6. Carve away another diagonal band, this time using the veiner to cut each edge line. Drive the veiner from far to near for one edge and from near to far for the other, so that both edges are smoothly cut. Then use the gouge and mallet to clean out the wood between the veiner cuts. Carefully compare these results with the band cut by the gouge alone. Repeat, but this time use the parting tool instead of the veiner.

7. Use the felt-tip pen to draw an arch-like design on the wood, as in the diagram. The band should be about an inch wide, and the design should begin and end at the edge of the board. Carve out the band, using the veiner or parting tool followed by the gouge, as in step 6. Change direction as necessary to get smooth edges all around the design.



8. Now repeat all of the preceding steps, but change hands—carving tool in the major hand, mallet in the minor hand. Try the exercises again, this time without a mallet.

9- If you have more than one mallet, or access to other carving tools, try the same exercises with them and carefully compare the results using large and small tools of the same shape, or tools of different shapes, but the same size.

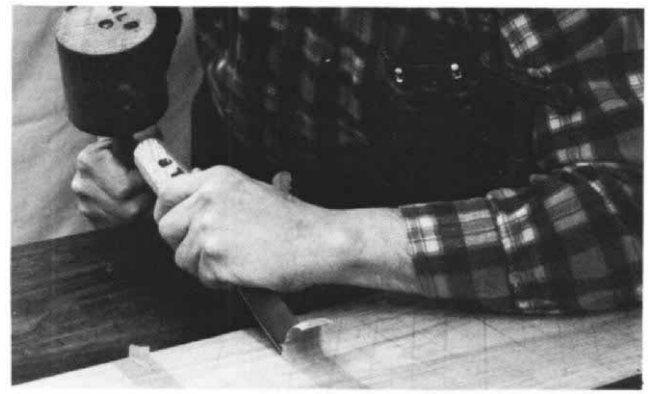
By now it should be very clear that a carving tool produces a smooth edge on the side that cuts with the grain, and a feathered edge on the side that cuts against the grain. The tools can cut toward you or away from you. You can hold them in either hand, and you should be able to select the proper tool for a task. You are well on your way to becoming a carver.

The following is advice about using carving tools. These points are presented not as gems of wisdom cast off by the sages, but as the condensate of the blood, sweat and tears of a dozen years of carving.

—Drive parting tools and veiners without rocking motion. Drive gouges with one rock per cut, to get a slicing action.

—Use the proper-size tool. Never "bury" the corners of a carving tool in the wood. If both corners are not visible you are cutting too deep or using the wrong size or shape of tool.

—Always keep two hands on tools: either one on the carving tool and one on the mallet, or both hands on the carving tool. Never use the palm of the hand as a mallet.



Mallet powers gouge; guiding hand holds center of tool and pivots from elbow.

—For easy identification, position the carving tools on the bench (not on the work) so the cutting edges face you.

—To rough out carvings in-the-round or remove the ground of a relief carving, cut across the grain, usually with a veiner and mallet.

—Draw lines on the carving with a parting tool.

—Finish cut with gouges, using a slicing cut and no mallet.

—In lettering: First, incise the center; second, cut from each side to the center; then cut serifs.

—In relief carving: First, remove ground; second, set in edges; third, smooth ground close to final depth with no. 3 spoon and/or carver's router; fourth, model carving.

—Use a soft pencil and dividers frequently to check dimensions on the plans and redraw on the stock.

—Whenever possible establish "points" of measure on the carving and plans. Mark these points with an *X*. Points are usually extremities (such as the tip of the nose, center of the head, bottom of the throat) and joints (ankle, knee, hip, shoulder, elbow, wrist).

—Begin the carving at the place containing the most excess wood. Continue by carving away layers of wood—do not work on one area until it is complete, then move on to another. Instead, work on the carving as a whole, going around and around and making smaller and smaller cuts as you approach the final dimensions.

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