

Tackling Carving

No need for a 'carving set'

by Robert L. Butler

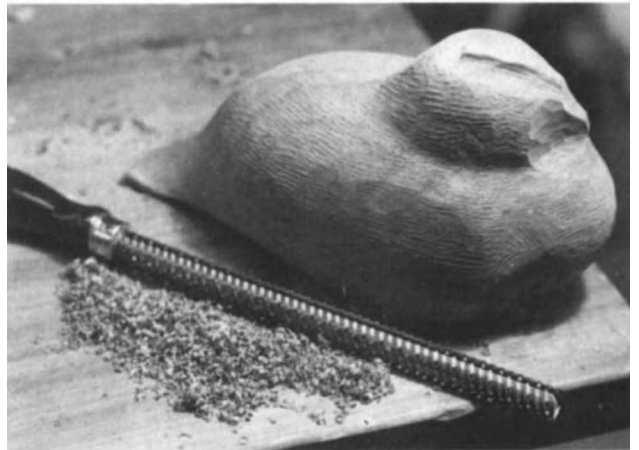
Furniture makers have recently become aware of the role of sculpturing in fine woodworking. The sculptured furniture pioneered by Wharton Esherick and recently developed by Robert C. Whitley and others uses carving as a design essential to accent light and shadow, and to form such functional elements as handles and pulls. Some craftsmen have branched out into wood sculpture as art. They start with a background and feeling for wood that trained artists often lack. But for whatever reason, a craftsman who develops an interest in carving is faced with the problem of acquiring suitable tools.

Too frequently, the craftsman new to wood sculpture buys a set of carving tools that does not meet his needs. He should be guided by the principle he followed in equipping his shop: buy a rudimentary set and add to it as experience and knowledge increase. Since most suppliers of woodcarving tools carry at least 100 shapes and sizes, it is impossible to make specific recommendations without knowing the type, style and scale of carving he plans to do.

But without some guidance, the novice may not know where to begin. I feel that sculpture of moderate size provides a realistic starting point for beginners, especially for craftsmen who intend to sculpture furniture. I have arrived at this opinion through some early false starts and later during five years of teaching woodcarving and sculpture in local adult education courses. Small, intricate carvings do not provide the experience in line, movement and form that can be transferred to sculptured furniture.

For moderate-sized sculpture, I recommend five basic tools, plus a hard Arkansas slip stone to sharpen them. They are (1) a straight gouge with a cross-section curvature of #9, #10, or #11 and 25 to 30 mm. wide, (2) a smaller straight gouge, #5, #6, or #7 and 20 to 25 mm. wide, (3) a cylindrical Surform tool, (4) a fine-cutting wood rasp, and (5) a mallet. The first four will total about \$30, and the mallet can be turned from any heavy hardwood such as maple or osage orange. A mallet could instead be cut from a branch and the handle roughed out on the band saw. The carver's mallet is preferable to the carpenter's mallet which is used to make mortises, because it carries more weight in the head and be-

Photos show what can be accomplished with four tools. Rough bosting out was done with a #11 30-mm straight gouge (top), followed by #5 25-mm straight gouge, which produced a smoother form (and smaller chips). Cylindrical Surform goes even further, while a fine, half-round wood rasp just about completes it (bottom). Area around the bird's beak will be finished with sandpaper of 80 grit prior to the usual series of sandings and finishing as desired.



cause its cylindrical form gives the hand only a glancing blow when it misses the handle of the carving tool. There is much less damage to the knuckles.

The photos show what these tools can do. I began with a #11 gouge for bosting out the rough form of an abstract bird, after band-sawing a top and bottom view. This gouge makes deep cuts and removes excess wood rapidly. At this stage, the form has many valleys and humps. Next, I reduced the extremes of these humps and valleys with a gouge of flatter curvature, the #5. I then smoothed the piece with the Surform tool, which eliminated ridges and valleys left by the gouges and enabled me to make slight changes in the overall form. Before sandpapering, I used a fine rasp lightly so as not to pull any of the wood fibers. Sculptures may be left unsanded, with the texture and finish of the gouge, or rasped and sanded with garnet paper in the grit series 80, 120, 200 and polished with 400 or 500-weight wet-dry paper.

By now, it should be evident that sculpturing of moderate-sized pieces can be done well with this set of tools. I am sure that in my own carving, 95% of my time is spent with these five basic tools.

A craftsman who has mastered these tools may discover that he is more interested in smaller carvings. He can then buy tools of smaller sizes and different curvatures, and various types of hand-held knives and rifflers. With these, he can do small animal carvings, caricatures of cowboys and goldminers, or small religious items such as creches.

On the other hand, one may wish to carve much larger objects for the yard, foyer or a large room. Such carving is done

with larger gouges and hand adzes. These tools, along with the basic five-piece set, can be used for carvings as large as totem poles or full-scale sculptures of human form. Some carvers are adept at using the chain saw for oversize and bold pieces.

As in all tool buying and usage, the limit is set only by the person and the work he contemplates. Other available tools include bent gouges, fluters, veiners, short-bent gouges, back-bent gouges and parting tools. The bent gouge is used extensively in free-form bowl carving. Fluters are semicircular in cross section. Veiners have u-shaped cross sections and make deep, continuous-cut lines. Spoons, front or short-bent gouges—they go by various names—are used for "spooning" wood, making deep, abrupt incisions. The back-bent gouge is the reverse of the short-bent, with the sharpened surface on the opposite edge. It is used to carve intricate flowers, leaves, etc. Parting tools make a v-shaped cut of various depths and angles.

Musical instrument makers use other specialized tools. The macaroni, fluteroni and backeroni gouges are designed for carving violin, viola and cello necks, backs and bellies. Like all carving tools, these may be short-bent, bent, etc. Some experienced woodcarvers even forge, grind and temper their own tools.

As in all craftsmanship, the ultimate is never achieved. A serious craftsman continues to improve his work and extend his horizons as he creates. Start with the simple set of tools and add to it as you find need and outgrow the limits of those you have already purchased.

Author's basic carving set (right) includes wooden mallet, hard Arkansas slip stone, #11 30-mm gouge, #5 25-mm gouge, fine rasp and cylindrical Surform. For smaller, more intricate work (below), add gouges, knives, chip carving tools and rifflers. For bigger work (far below), there are from bottom to top a #7 35-mm bent or long bent gouge, a #7 50-mm straight gouge, a #7 50-mm fishtail gouge, and an adze with two cutting faces—a gouge and a small ax. Carving tools other than straight gouges include (below right) a long bent gouge for deep curving, a front bent for deep incisive cutting, a back bent for carving leaves or petals, and a parting tool for deep angled and continuous cuts. Round lens cap shows relative size.

