

# A REFERENCE GUIDE TO FINISHING WOOD CARVINGS



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Disclaimer: I am definitely not an expert in either carving wood or doing the finishing work on a carving. Take a look at most any of my finished pieces, and you will probably agree (hopefully in silence so as not to hurt my delicate ego). But I believe that one of the best ways to learn something is by preparing to teach someone else. So in preparation to lead a workshop for the monthly meeting of the James River Wood Carvers, I have consulted with other members, read articles and books (okay, just one book but it was a really good one), watched numerous Youtube videos and scoured the internet. I have also tried most of the techniques I will share and have learned a thing or two along the way. Hopefully you will find some benefit from my report. I will be focusing on carvings done with basswood. But these tips and techniques can also be used on many other types of wood.



## **Step One: Preparing your Carving Piece**

Do not skip this step. Any rough areas will only be magnified by whatever finishing process you decide to use. Dirt and oily fingers will prevent stains and paints from adhering.

- I. Clean up any fuzzies, splinters and rough spots on the carving
  - A. Use a sharp knife or sandpaper (200 or 400 grit)
    1. if you sand your piece, make sure you sand the entire piece to help stain and/or paint coat evenly
  - B. Use a burnishing tool to run over areas with nicks or bits
    1. a small wood dowel that has been sharpened like a pencil tip works well to get into nooks and crannies
    2. brown craft paper (like from paper bags) works well for smoothing raised grain
  
- II. Always start with a clean carving
  - A. Add a few drops of dish soap to a cup of water
  - B. With a toothbrush, gently scrub the carving with the soapy solution
    1. do not dunk the carving into the water
  - C. Do a quick rinse under running water to remove the soap
  - D. Pat the wood in a clean old towel to remove excess water
  - E. Typically you will want to let the carving dry completely before staining or painting
  
- III. Make sure you have removed all pencil marks because they will show through your paint
  - A. Try using a sand eraser which is an eraser that has a slight graininess like fine sand paper (can be purchased in the art section of craft stores where drawing supplies are found)
  - B. If that doesn't work, use a sharp bench knife or craft knife to slice off the pencil mark
    1. be careful not to slant the knife too deep when using this method

## **Step Two: Pre-Treating the Wood**

This step is very important if you are planning to paint or stain your piece. All hardwoods have pores and are porous (soak up moisture). Different wood types are more porous than others. Even within the same piece of wood, some areas, such as the end grain, are more porous than other areas. Pretreating the carving seals and hardens the surface of the wood. Stain and paint will flow along the hardened surface of the wood forming a uniform coat of color. Without a pretreatment, stain can look splotchy and paint can bleed.

Depending on the effect you want, there are numerous methods for pretreating the wood. Below are a few of the methods carvers use. You may find you prefer a certain technique, but don't discard the others. Each has a place in every carvers tool kit.

### I. Sanding and buffing

- A. If you want a completely natural, uncolored finish (such as with a comfort bird) you can sand the piece using progressively finer sandpaper (200 to 400 to 600 and even higher) until you get the smooth finish you desire
- B. A final rub down with a piece of brown craft paper will result in a beautiful shine

### II. Sanding Sealer/Wood Conditioner

- A. A brush on sealer that soaks into the wood pores and hardens the surface wood will provides a smooth surface for stains or paints
- B. Apply 2 or 3 light coats, allowing each coat to dry completely

### III. Minwax Natural (209) penetrating stain (Cousin Jack Carvers. January 24, 2021)

- A. Brush on or dip the piece into the can, then let it drip off and wait 6 hours to allow for complete drying
- B. This will darken the wood and raise the grain but you can use a piece of brown paper bag to burnish and smooth the grain before proceeding to the next step

#### IV. Boiled Linseed Oil (BLO)

- A. Can be used straight, although mixing it 50/50 with turpentine allows it to soak into the wood more easily
- B. Brush or dip the carving with BLO or the 50/50 mix
  - 1. wipe excess puddles and drips with a rag or paper towel
  - 2. most people seem to prefer letting the piece dry for several hours or overnight
  - 3. Doug Linker sometimes paints shortly after wiping it off as seen in his video, *How to Paint/Finish Your Wood Carvings* (December 13, 2020)
  - 4. BLO provides a good surface for painting without too much bleeding of colors.
    - a) if it is not dry enough, colors may run together
  - 5. BLO will change the coloring of the wood, especially on the end grain
- C. **WARNING:** Dispose of all rags and paper towels that have BLO on them properly and immediately. Do not leave them in a pile or throw them in a trash can. They can spontaneously combust and start a fire!

#### V. Spray On Acrylic or Polyurethane (Matte finish works best)

- A. Use at least two light coats for full coverage, allowing each to dry between coats
  - 1. many of these dry quickly (15 minutes to a couple of hours)
  - 2. wood will be sealed but both acrylic and oil paints will adhere very well
  - 3. good choice if you are concerned about your paint colors bleeding
  - 4. quick and much easier to clean up after than BLO

#### VI. Acrylic Paint Wash/Primer Base

- A. Use a neutral color or white depending on your paint scheme
- B. Mix in a 1 to 1 ratio with water to form a wash
- C. Brush this over the entire piece and allow to dry
- D. Apply a second or even third coat for even coverage
- E. It forms a seal and allows you to paint other colors on a uniform “palette”

## VII. Water Wash

- A. Use when you want a gradual blending of colors (ombre effect)
- B. Start with a damply moistened wood carving
  - 1. you can use a spray bottle or a couple of coats of water with a brush if your piece is already drying out from washing it

## **Step Three - Painting and/or Staining**

Whether you choose to stain, paint or leave your carving as raw and naked as nature intended can be a difficult choice. I have heard and read from many wood carvers some variation of the following advice. A poor paint job can ruin an excellent carving but a really good paint/finish can go a long way to improving a mediocre carving. So paint only if you think it will enhance the look you want.

By the way, there is no law saying you can't combine techniques. Stain only a portion of your carving, do a little wood burning to bring out certain features, paint only the eyes. Do as much or as little of a technique as you think your piece needs. But remember, if you are a wood carver, first and foremost you want your carving to be the prime focus. My advice, "Less is more."

If you choose to paint your wood carving, here are some tips I have found useful in using acrylic paints. I cannot attest to their application with oils since I have never painted in oils.

- I. Inexpensive (cheap) synthetic paint brushes work well for acrylic paint
  - A. For small, detail brushes, however, check to make sure the brush hairs are shaped well and don't have stray pieces that will interfere when you are trying to paint things like eyes or eyelashes
  - B. You'll also want the hairs to be flexible and not too stiff for regular painting
- II. Acrylic paints don't need to be artist quality
  - A. With a true red, yellow, blue, white and black you can mix any color you want
  - B. Inexpensive craft acrylics work fine for most wood carvers and they come in many different colors including metallic and enamels

### III. Painting with a Wash

- A. Most of the time you will want to add water and thin the paint
  - 1. allows the paint to flow better and won't hide the wood grain
  - 2. think of it as a stain
- B. To increase the intensity of the color you want, paint one coat of the wash at a time, allowing each coat to dry somewhat between layers
- C. Making a Wash:
  - 1. place a drop of your color near a couple of drops of water on your pallet
  - 2. wet your brush and use it to draw some of the paint away from the main drop of color
  - 3. dip the brush into the water drop and "pounce" it into the splash of color until it forms a milky, translucent consistency of evenly mixed color wash (no little clumps or dots of paint)
  - 4. if you will be using a lot of this color, increase the amount of your wash by adding more paint and water to get a bigger puddle
- D. Generally, when making a wash with lighter colors you will use less water (milky consistency), and for darker colors you will want to use more water (inky consistency)

IV. Use scraps of carving wood to test paint colors before using them on your carving

V. Keep a small spray bottle and a dropper bottle with clear water when painting

- A. Use for keeping your pallet paint puddles wet
- B. The spray bottle is also good for helping to blend colors on your carving as you paint

### VI. Layering Colors

- A. Keep colors from turning muddy when layering one color over another by letting each layer dry completely
- B. Use the matte acrylic sealer between color layers (allow to dry)

## VII. Dealing with Wood Stains or Glue Patched Areas

- A. Use watered down gesso as a base coat
- B. Covering your carving with the gesso first, you will create a clean canvas on which to paint
- C. To allow the wood grain to show through, make sure you water down the gesso first

## VIII. Inexpensive Paint Pallets for mixing washes and colors:

- A. Cheap plastic white pallets can be purchased at many of the dollar stores
- B. Plastic coated freezer paper is available at most grocery stores (use plastic side up); tear off as much or as little as you need
- C. Use a clear piece of plexiglass (8" x 11") or picture frame glass for a pallet
  - 1. place some newspaper under it and check to see if your wash is translucent enough to read the letters
  - 2. it is easy to wash clean
- D. White styrofoam plates are another inexpensive choice
  - 1. available at any grocery or dollar store
  - 2. can be washed, reused and eventually discarded
  - 3. not so great for the environment, however

## Special Effect Techniques for Painting

### I. Dry Brushing

- A. Use a fairly bushy round brush with slightly stiff bristles
- B. Wet the brush with water and pat of excess with paper towel
- C. Load the brush well with a slightly thicker wash than you normally would use (don't use full strength)
  - 1. to load the brush, lay it flat into the paint and pull it away on the pallet so it draws the paint along the pallet
  - 2. continue doing this, each time rotating the brush until all sides of the brush have been fully loaded with your paint
- D. Using your rag or paper towel squeeze the bristles gently until it looks like all the paint has been removed from the brush

- E. Test the brush by swishing it back and forth on the paper towel or a piece of white paper
  - 1. it is ready if you see light streaks but not thick dark lines of paint
- F. When the brush is ready, sweep it across the high points where you want the highlights (hair, eyebrows, and so on)
- G. Reload the brush as needed

## II. Layering

- A. Using a wash, not full strength, start with the darkest color first
- B. Apply the number of coats of that color to reach the desired coverage
- C. Allow that color to dry completely
- D. Spray with a light coat of acrylic sealer and let it dry
  - 1. this will keep the layers from looking muddy
- E. Repeat the steps above with your next color
  - 1. don't be careful about coverage
  - 2. you want some of the first color to show through in random places

## III. Painting Eyes

- A. For painting the whites of eyes and pupils, using craft enamel acrylics will give them a shiny, wet look. Don't mix with water, use full strength. (I credit Kathy Overcash, a member of the James River Wood Carvers, for teaching me this trick)
- B. Use the wrong end of a paint brush to dip in black paint and make a round pupil. This technique can also be used anywhere you want nice, round dots.
- C. Add a glint to the eyes by using a toothpick dipped in a little white paint and then placing a dot of it at 2 o'clock on the pupil of each eye.
- D. Use a permanent black Sharpie, fine or ultra fine, around the eyeball and pupil to outline and define the eyes. (Thanks again to Kathy Overcash)

#### IV. Antiquing with Water-Based Gel Stains

- A. After painting is completely dry, apply 2 or 3 coats of acrylic sealant letting each coat dry fully.
- B. Brush the gel stain over the area you want to antique, making sure to brush it into cracks and crevices.
- C. Using a soft, lint-free rag, gently wipe the surface to remove excess. Don't leave puddles of the stain in cracks or it will remain sticky long after you want to be finished.
- D. Once it is completely dry, finish your piece with some form of sealant.

#### **Taking Care of your Brushes**

(Irish, 2018)

- I. Always begin painting with a clean, wet brush that has been brushed on paper towel to remove excess water
  - A. Do this even if you are "dry brushing". It keeps the paint from being drawn up into the metal ferrule and will be easier to clean.
- II. Keep some paper towels close by to wipe off paint between colors.
  - A. Then dip the brush into your rinse cup and swish it around
  - B. Wipe on paper towel again
  - C. Repeat if the paper towel still shows color
- III. Do not leave your brush in the rinse cup. This will distort the brush shape.
- IV. Between uses, lay your brush flat on a paper towel or place it, brush side up, in a holding cup.
  - A. Never store brushes downward or laying against something that causes the bristles to be bent
- V. At the end of your painting session, clean the brushes thoroughly using a dab of dish soap and warm water.
  - A. Use your fingers to gently push the soap into and through the bristles starting at the ferrule and working towards the bristle ends
  - B. Then under a gentle stream of water, continue using your fingers in the same way until the paint and soap are rinsed out
  - C. Run the brush across a paper towel to make sure all the paint is out
  - D. Use your fingers to reshape the brush bristles

VI. Use a dedicated set of brushes for white painting

- A. Doing this will insure you don't accidentally add black or red to white eyeballs!

### **Step Four - The Final Finish**

Regardless of whether you choose to stain or paint your carving or just want to leave it with the raw wood look, you will want to seal the wood to prevent it from drying out or leaving stains from being handled. There are many different ways to seal a carving. The method you choose will depend on your plans for the carving. Here is a description of some of the methods.

- I. Boiled Linseed Oil can also be used as a final finish.
  - A. Brush it on or dip your carving into the BLO
  - B. Wipe off any areas where the oil puddles or drips
  - C. Leave it to dry completely
  - D. You will probably need to reapply the BLO every so often to keep the carving from drying out
  - E. It will change the coloring somewhat, and there are reports of carvings becoming very dark after many, many years
  - F. Remember to dispose of rags properly!!
  
- II. Other Types of Oils
  - A. Danish Oil and Tung Oil are popular choices which will harden the wood and give it a soft sheen
    - 1. Tung Oil provides the most durable finish of the two
    - 2. Danish Oil comes in clear to dark variations
      - a) if you choose something other than clear, make sure you try it on a scrap of wood first to make sure it won't cover up any painting, or other decorative features in your carving

### III. Food Safe Finish for Carved Spoons

- A. First, make sure you didn't use anything for the pre finishing that is toxic
- B. Use a non toxic finish such as pure walnut oil or a food-grade mineral oil
- C. A beeswax and mineral oil mixture such as Howards Butcher Block Conditioner works well
  - 1. there are many brands out there you can use
  - 2. make sure they are meant for wood items that will be in contact with food
- D. You will need to reapply these finishes periodically to keep the wood from becoming stained or dried out

### IV. Polyurethane, Varnish, and Lacquers are a popular choice

- A. Check to make sure they are non-yellowing and avoid glossy unless you want a super shiny, plastic look for your carving
- B. They come in liquid form which is applied with a brush
  - 1. several light coats, making sure to dry completely between coats, is better than one thick coat
  - 2. this will lower the chance of having it pool in cracks
  - 3. and it will dry evenly and thoroughly
- C. They also come in spray cans which are easier to apply, less messy and tend to dry quicker

### V. Acrylic Spray Sealers (my go-to choice)

- A. Acrylic spray is a very durable and long lasting protectant and often offers UV protection
- B. Additional benefits of Acrylic Sprays
  - 1. easier to control than liquids, easier to clean up and dry very quickly
  - 2. remain clear over time (unlike some varnishes and lacquers) and don't yellow
  - 3. will not alter the color of paint or stains
  - 4. readily found in craft stores and hardware stores
- C. A matte finish tends to be preferred by carvers since it gives the carving a softer look

- D. Glossy finish tends to detract from most carvings as it sometimes gives a plastic look
- E. Satin finish can be a happy median if you want a slight shine
- F. Tips for Applying Acrylic Sealers
  1. hold the can at least 6 inches away and use a sweeping motion
  2. don't aim at one spot to avoid drips
  3. apply at least 3 light coats allowing each coat to dry completely in between (usually 15 to 30 minutes if you are applying it lightly)
  4. spray from all angles to get sides and underneath areas such as noses and hats

VI. Paste Waxes such as Minwax , beeswax, or shoe polish waxes can give a wonderful, soft finish to wood carvings

- A. Use as a stand alone sealer
- B. When used over an acrylic sealer it leaves a soft, velvety feel to the wood while toning down shiny edges
- C. Reapplying wax periodically helps clean and freshen the look of a carving.
- D. It can be applied with a soft rag.
- E. Using a fairly large, stiff, round brush and lightly “scrubbing” the carving with a generous coating is a good method when there are nooks and crannies to the carving
- F. Use a soft rag to buff off the excess wax until you get a soft, smooth sheen.
- G. If any wax remains in crevices, use a soft toothbrush or toothpick to remove it
- H. Apply several coats of the wax, allowing each coat to dry 24 hours
- I. For a beautiful final look, use a soft buffing brush (like for shoe polishing) to follow the final coat of wax

## Resources and References

Denton, Michael. "How-2: Paint Carved Characters, Tips & Techniques". Whittle Designs; 2013. (This guide is available at [www.jrcarvers.com/projects](http://www.jrcarvers.com/projects).)

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*I have not credited most of the tips and techniques in this document to specific people. Much of this information is widely available, and I saw (or heard it) from numerous places and/or people. So I will list the resources I used, and tell you that none of the information or ideas are of my own creation. They are simply tips and techniques which I found in a variety of sources and organized into a reference guide for any wood carvers who may be interested. This document is not to be used for monetary gain. The reader of this document has my permission to reprint it for personal use only.*