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Big Thoughts About Carving...

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Introduction

Carving seems to me more and more an 'inner game'. I often think that I only do a few 'things'—let's call it 5—when I am carving. These are not so much techniques as attitudes that I have—focuses, ways of working.

It's hard to overemphasise how profound these things feel to me sometimes. I seem to mention them to students ("Here's a pearl. Catch!") but I'm never really sure if they get it.

Anyway, judge for yourself.

I have more to say about some of these points than others



1

We carve away wood, but what really matters is the wood we leave behind.

Carving is a 'glyptic' (reductive) process: you reduce your material until you are left with what you want.

When you carve, you take wood away. You create space, not wood.

Your final carving is untouched, uncarved, wood—yes? Every time you 'touch' it, you carve it away.

Carving is about creating spaces. So, you work with *space* even as you are interested in *form*. Space and form are inseparable, absolutely bound as one.



Most beginners concentrate on the *reducing* side of things: the wood they are taking away. But this goes on the floor, or the fire; no one is interested in it. What they are interested in is what you left behind.

You have to place your attention on what's left when the chisel comes away: its mass, how it 'articulates' with the next mass; the flow of the surface; lines and edges.

That's your carving.

2 Surfaces, lines and junctions - that's all there is!

Any carving is 'mass' (matter; stuff) or 'volume' (stuff that has been worked). As such it occupies, inhabits, space. No big surprises there, eh? But have you really thought about what that means? Consider where the two meet:

What happens when mass meets space?

You get surfaces. That's what you see and touch, and only that.

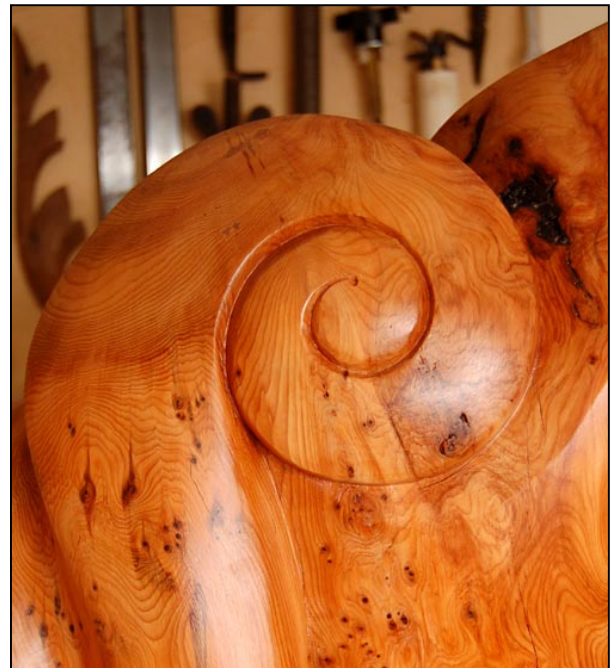
And where do surfaces meet?

They meet at junctions, which are nothing other than lines.

Junctions occur at the changes of plane: within a relief carving between one element and its background for example, or the outline of a piece. Additionally, there are softer lines where you have a more subtle change of plane, such as those that arise from tool facets worked into the surface. Then again, you have actual lines simply drawn into the surface, as in hair or fur.

So, really, that's all you have: surfaces, lines and junctions. Think about that a moment:

No matter what you have made: when you have finished, all you can see are surfaces and lines.



As you carve you will be concerning yourself with the three-dimensional quality of what you are making. You need to get this mass, your original lump of wood, shaped correctly; flowing as it needs to flow; interesting, and appropriate to your subject. However, before you could say you have finished, you must give every surface and line its proper due.

So many times carvings fail not so much because of incorrect three-dimensionality, but because the surfaces and lines are poorly worked, untidy, unclear or running untrue.

Look at every surface, line and junction. Consider them. Judge them. And take the trouble to correct them if you need to.

3 Carve from the Floor!

It'S that song: "The leg bone's connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone's connected to the hip bone..." etc.

Consider this: Your cutting edge is the finest, sharpest tip of a wedge.

When you push it through the wood fibres, your cutting edge is followed by the bevel. And this is followed by the blade. And the blade is connected to the handle, and the handle is connected to your hand and—feel free to sing along but I warn you it doesn't scan well—to your arm... your body... down through your feet to the floor.

So you really are carving from the floor! We can even throw in Newton's Law about action and reaction: without the floor for you to push against you wouldn't make a mark on that wood!

But I am really talking about several things, different 'floors'.

How we physically carve:

Many beginners stand too close up to their carving. Whenever you can, stand a little way from it and lean into, and even onto, your work. You'll see quite small people pushing a gouge through hard wood quite efficiently when they use their body weight correctly.



In addition to putting your body weight behind your cut, keep your elbows in to your body and move your body around to follow the tool by shifting your weight between legs.

Keeping your elbows into your body like this drastically reduces stress on your elbows.

How we mentally and emotionally carve:

To get the full picture of what is happening, you have to add other dimensions to all that physical connectivity: the lighting, temperature, sounds and smells in the workshop; how you are feeling (engaged or bored; happy or angry); your focus or restlessness of mind—all that stuff—and you cannot help but be directly connected with it!

You could think of this as a sort of 'inner floor'.

Something that has intrigued me since I started carving, and is true of all and every activity, is the complete yet changing nature of what 'we' are in any moment, expressed in what 'we' are doing in that moment. This is so obvious if you look that I cannot be said to be making any airy-fairy or mystical observation. On the other hand it's only apparent if you look! Otherwise we just smoothly and dream-like pass from moment-to-moment, minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour through our lives.

It's extremely important to anyone, including we who aspire to carve!

Why?

If you look closely at your difficulties with carving (or anything else for that matter) almost all of them come down to this mental and emotional side of things, the attitudes we take, the choices we make and the energy and motivation we can gather, rather than the sheer physical problems of carving. (The answers to issues like 'not enough time to practise', 'can't sharpen', 'never know what to carve' etc will be led by mental and emotional changes and choices.)

It's working with this inner reality that separates one carver from another as much as anything they do physically. And the crunch is that improving your carving, or carving anything (or even carving at all!) is a matter of working more with this part of our connectivity than the physical—usually more so.

I'm tempted to give you examples but it's better to ask you simple to consider and look for yourself.

And if you don't—if you choose not to—well, there's my point!



4 Seeing and Finding!

During one busy carving class I stopped at a bench and looked at someone's new project, commenting: "Nice squirrel!"

"It's a horse".

Now, I've been there, done that etc. The best thing to do in these circumstances is not to panic (well, not straightaway). I always start my reply with a long, drawn out "Mmm ..." sound.

So, wits gathered, I now asked to see the carver's horse drawings, pictures and reference material. There were none.

"I know a horse when I see one!"

Well so do I. And they don't look as if they climb trees and eat nuts.

Anyway, cut to the old joke, which we've all heard: 'How do you carve an elephant?'

Answer: You remove everything that doesn't look like an elephant.

It's sort of true of course. But incomplete.

One of the things it doesn't address is that the carver *must know what an elephant looks like*. The idea of "elephant" is not "in the wood"; it's in your head! If you don't know what it is you are carving, what you are 'aiming for', how can you hope to get it right?

If you *do* know because, say, you have spent the last 20 years carving elephants, then you probably do have enough information in your head and could start into a block of wood and successfully carve one.

Nevertheless, you might never have carved an elephant doing exactly *this*—I don't know, hanging from a branch eating nuts or something—so you may well still need to find out more: pose an elephant or whatever.

So "seeing": visualizing, knowing where you are heading, what wood you'll likely need to remove - "seeing" is all important. The wood is in the way and you are going to have to clear it away to your subject and then stop.

You need to have your visions clear enough in your mind before you begin. That is my first point.



My second is that **the very act of carving will give you a different result from what you see in your head.**

The way in which you clear the wood away, the tools you use and your abilities in handling them influences the result. If I were modelling, the elephant would come out looking very different.

In both cases there is a degree of exploring or "finding" going on. And this is true for every craft, including writing: I only had a rough idea of what I wanted to say when I started and it developed into the finished piece as I've gone along, influenced by what words I know and whatever skills I've developed using them.

It follows that the more skills and techniques you have the more you can explore and find.

Of course there are carvers who deliberately start into their wood with no vision or preconceptions; who may or may not have much skill. They have a lot of fun and satisfaction, and are happy when squirrels look like horse.

I have no problem at all with this approach but it's not how I work and I still think my points hold true:

The results of your carving will be depend on a mixture of what you "see" and what you "find".

So your job as a carver will be to maximize the potential of both.



5 Design and Technique

Take any carving - any 'work of art' or craft for that matter.

You can look at it from 2 different points of view or, as it were, with either eye: one eye might look at the design, the other at the execution.

By design, I mean its plan or scheme; the way in which the carver has arranged all the various parts of the carving. It would include the 'whole point' of the piece, its conception, and the way the thing communicates to me the viewer.

By execution, I'm talking about the way the carving has actually been made: the technique as a vehicle for the design and how the wood has been handled.

A good analogy is the idea of looking with 'either eye'.

Although we can choose to cover up one eye and just look at something with the other, this is not normally what we do. Our two eyes as a rule work together. In the same way, we normally see the design and the execution together as one and of course they are inseparable: you can't volitionally make something that is 'designless', even if the result is unintentional, and a design without being made is just an idea in your head.



I'm possibly making this more complicated than it needs to be. Any judge of a woodcarving competition will look at the design aspects of a carving separate from its execution, as well as putting the two together and considering the whole.

So what's my point?

The best instance will always be when great design is accompanied by great execution. However, for me, when there is an equality design always wins over technique because in the design lies the essential communication with me, the viewer.

In other words no matter how good your technique is, if your design is poor (boring, unbalanced, failing to deliver your 'message', just not 'working' etc) your carving will leave a viewer cold.

On the other hand, even if your technique is a bit rough or inadequate, but you have a great design—one that communicates instantly and strongly—and you can stop a viewer in their tracks.

Most beginners concentrate on technique—'how' of carving, and that's probably a reasonable enough thing to do. But I've watched too many of them stick at this stage: always copying the designs of others. There are surely many reasons but I suspect mostly they fear a lack of 'artistry' or design skill and this stops them from even trying. It does take a lot of courage to put your designs up for public scrutiny.

If you never have a go at designing your own carving, you'll never communicate anything from yourself no matter how well you execute the piece.

And you'll never know where the real buzz lies: in the fine execution of your own design, communicating yourself as best you can.



6 Learning to Carve

Hey, that makes six big thoughts!

True. But who ever complained of having more?

Actually this brief page is just to mention that I love to teach woodcarving and I'm told I do it well by people I trust. A big thought might be that I could help you learn good carving skills and techniques.

Here's a link to the most relevant page on my website:

[Learning to Carve with Chris Pye](#)