

Chip Carving

WORKSHOP

More Than 200 Ready-to-Use Designs



Lora S. Irish

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My first memories of wood carving date back to when I was about ten years old. That fall, my father set up a small, low workbench in the red room and brought out a stack of long pine boards. He clamped one of the boards to the workbench and began drawing lines on it with his ruler and pencil. Then, with an odd-shaped knife that I now know was a large chip carving stab knife, he began cutting and shaving the wood between the lines. Over several days' time, big, beautiful stars began to appear on the board.

When one board had a complete line of stars, he would put it away and bring out a new board to work. Sometimes it would be very difficult for Dad to make the cuts as my brothers and I would be sitting so close to see what he was doing that he simply couldn't move his arms. And I remember Mom helping him put bandages on the blisters where he held the knife.

One evening, the long boards were gone and a new large, wide board appeared. This time, Dad carefully traced a design to the center of the board. We all watched as he made long, deep, curved cuts along the design lines. Magically two wondrous ruffled-neck, long-tailed, fighting roosters appeared—all made out of triangles. In a few more days' work, those roosters were joined by the same big stars.

When the rooster board was done everything disappeared—the long star boards, the rooster board,



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and the workbench; all of the knives were put away, and the wood chips were swept up.

Christmas morning that year, I discovered what happened to those star boards. There under the Christmas tree was a golden yellow pine Hope Chest decorated with chip carved stars and two fighting roosters and with a big red ribbon and tag: "To Susie, Love Dad." I cried with joy.

My Rooster Hope Chest is still my most precious possession and sits proudly on my dresser. Perhaps that was the beginning of my love of woodcarving and chip carving.

About Classic Chip Carving Grids

The wood art of chip carving dates back to A.D. 300 to 900 during the Migration Period of the Germanic people. Few wood samples have survived, but early chip carving can be seen throughout Europe and the British Isles in metalwork, created through the process of casting.

Today chip carving, also called spoon carving, uses both geometric cut shapes and free-form designs to create intricate and detailed patterns. The chips—small triangles, squares, or free-form curves—are cut into the flat surface of the wood using a chip knife or detail knife, and a chip carving stab knife.

Hope chests, carved wooden spoons, jewelry chests, clocks, candle plates, serving trivets, and decorative plaques are just a few ideas for your chip carving craft.

In this book, you will learn about chip carving tools, knife sharpening techniques, and wood preparation. The practice project will guide you through the steps to cut the three basic chip carving shapes: the classic chip triangle, the straight-walled triangle, and free-form lines.

The designs throughout this book are worked as gridded patterns that allow you to create your own unique chip carvings. To assist you in working your designs, traditional layouts are explored, and you will find a multitude of complete chip patterns in square, rectangular, oval, circular, and border designs. As an extra aid in mastering chip carving grids, there are blank graphs at the back of the book that can be traced or scanned for pattern creation.



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Large Candle Plate
See pattern on page 92.



CHAPTER 1

Basic Chip Carving Techniques

There are many styles of woodcarving: bas relief designs, three-dimensional caricature carving, wood spirit walking sticks, and realistic duck decoys...to name a few. Of all the styles, chip carving stands out as the most unique, with designs created using the geometric shapes of the triangle, square, and free-form lines. Perhaps it could be said that chip carving is to woodcarving as quilt squares are to sewing.

The craft of chip carving requires just a few tools: a good knife, a smooth board, a pencil, a ruler, and a little recreational time. As you read through this section, you will learn about the basic steps and techniques used in chip carving. We will explore knife selection, knife sharpening, how to prepare your wood blank, and how to transfer your pattern to your board.

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PREPARATION

The first step in any carving session is to gather your tools, wood, and crafting supplies. The chip carving knives and sharpening stones are available through any woodcarving supply store. Basswood carving blanks, acrylic craft paints, and graphite paper can be picked up at large craft stores or through online art supply stores. As you collect the tools and supplies you will be using, you may wish to create a kit or tote specifically for your chip carving.

Wood

Many woods can be used for chip carving, including sugar pine, white pine, mahogany, soft maple, butternut, and basswood.

Basswood is easy to carve, with tight, clean, white grain lines, and it is available in pre-routed shapes: plates, plaques, and jewelry boxes. The finished samples throughout this book are worked in basswood.

No matter which wood species you chose, begin any chip carving session by smoothing the working surface with fine, 220-grit sandpaper. Work the sanding strokes with the direction of the wood grain. Remove the sanding dust with a dry tack cloth.



Always sand the wood before you start—even if you have decided to use a precut plaque.



Gather your tools and materials before you begin.

Patterns

Grid motif layouts can be transferred to your wood using several methods.

1. Use a ruler and a 4H pencil to mark the grid lines directly on the wood surface. Use a 2B pencil to mark the chip triangles on the grid. This method creates a pale-lined grid with a darkly lined layout pattern.
2. Make a copy of the grid and layout on a sheet of paper that fits the shape of your board. Position the layout on the board, tape the edges to secure it, and then slide a sheet of graphite paper under the layout. Trace along the chip pattern lines.
3. Create a copy of the pattern on a sheet of paper that fits the shape of your board. Using rubber cement, coat both the wood surface and the back of the pattern following the manufacturer's directions. Press the layout paper in place on the wood. The glued paper will remain in place as you work the knife cuts through the paper into the wood. When the chip carving is complete, remove the remaining paper pattern pieces.



Carbon paper placed face down between the pattern and the wood is one of several transfer methods.

Tips

Use these basic organization techniques and a proper hand position to help make consistent cuts.

Mark the chips. Make a small pencil or marker dot on the board to note which chips to cut. The mark will be removed when the chip is made.

Hand position one. Hold the chip carving knife with the handle diagonally across the fold of the palm. This grip position is natural and very comfortable.

Rest the side of the hand lightly on the wood with the thumb extended to balance the hand. The knife blade meets the wood at an angle that creates the angle of the chip walls. A low angle to the blade creates shallow chips; a steep angle creates deep chips.

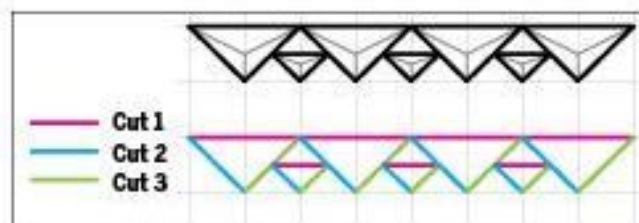
Make a cutting stroke by moving the entire arm, not just the fingers or hand.

Cut small chips by placing the point of the knife at the corner of the chip. Push the point into the wood. Roll the knife blade down until the blade cuts the complete line, ending at the end of the chip line.

To cut long chips, use a push and then a pull stroke to bring the knife blade to the end of the line.

Hand position two. Flip the blade over in your hand to cut the second leg of a chip without having to reposition the wood plaque.

Gang cuts. Repeating motifs and borders can be gang cut. Simply cut the side of each chip triangle in multiple motifs or within the border at one time. Then, rotate the board and make all of the cuts for the second leg of the triangles. Rotate the board again to make the final cut of the triangles.



Gang cuts reduce board movement.

Chip outs. Chip outs happen because of an incorrectly angled cut, grain line problems, or extremely shallow cuts. Tear outs happen because of a dull blade edge. Both misfortunes can be repaired by gluing the chip to the board with a small dot of wood glue or super glue.



Mark the chips to be removed.



An extended thumb balances the hand.



Flip the blade to cut the other side.



Watch for chip outs and tear outs.

Sharpening

Of all the elements, supplies, and tools used in creating a chip carving, the angle and quality of your knife blade edge are perhaps the most important influences in cutting the clean sides of your chips. Chip carving knives are straight-edged, short-bladed tools that fit snugly into the palm of your hand. The cutting edge of the chip knife needs to be sharpened to a low, long

bevel that thins the blade as it approaches the cutting edge. Once the low bevel is created using the coarse sharpening stone, the knife is worked over a fine grit stone to create a sharp cutting edge. Working the knife edge over first your leather strop and then newspaper polishes the blade to a perfect cutting edge.

MATERIALS LIST

- Coarse ceramic stone, 1000- to 2000-grit, to create the bevel of the cutting edge
- Fine ceramic stone, 6000- to 8000-grit, to sharpen the cutting edge
- Emery cloth
- Leather strop
- Honing compound (I use red oxide rouge)
- Heavily printed newspaper

1 Sharpen the blade. When working either stone, lay your knife low against the stone's surface, pull the knife's edge across the stone, lift, turn, and then pull the opposite side of the knife across the stone.

2 Strop the blade. Stropps have two sides: a finished leather side and a rawhide side. Coat the finished side with honing compound. Holding the knife low to the strop, pull the blade across the honing compound. Complete the stropping by working the blade over the raw leather side. Note: To keep your edge fresh, strop the blade often during any carving session. A few pulls across the strop every half hour ensures the sharpest edge possible.

3 Polish the blade. Give a final polishing to your blade by working it across a heavily printed newspaper page.

4 Compare. The upper left knife has been properly sharpened with a long, low bevel and is ready for chip carving. The lower right chip knife shows the factory honed edge.



Practice Project

Heart border trivet

The greatest wonder of chip carving comes from the intricate geometric designs that can be created by learning how to cut three simple shapes: the triangle, the square, and the free-form line. Any of these three basic shapes can be altered by making them larger, smaller, longer, or taller, or by changing the angle of the element to the rest of the design.

As you work through this practice board, you will learn how to cut all three shapes, as well as how to create the straight wall chip cut. The focus in this section is on how to cut each style of shape. As you master the simple shapes in the practice board, you will be ready to cut any grid pattern presented in this book.

As a woodcarver, I work a practice board before any carving project I attempt. The practice board can be something as simple as a scrap of wood from the same species that I plan to use for the final carving. As I begin each new step or cut, I can go to the practice board and work the cut several times before I move to my primary project. The idea is that I get the motion and the amount of pressure down pat before I start to carve on my “good” board. The common mistakes photo at the end of this section is actually from one of my practice board sessions.



MATERIALS LIST

Cutting Tools

- Large chip carving knife
- Small chip carving knife
- Chip carving stab knife

Sharpening Tools

- Coarse ceramic stone, 1,000-grit
- Fine ceramic stone, 6,000-grit
- Leather strop
- Stropping compound or rouge
- Newspaper

Measuring Tools

- 4H pencil
- Ink pen
- Ruler
- Compass
- White artist's eraser

Wood Supplies

- Basswood blanks

Other Supplies

- Sandpaper, 220- to 320-grit
- Graphite paper
- Removable spray adhesive
- Acrylic craft paints
- Sanding sealer
- Polyurethane spray sealer
- Paper towels
- Assorted paintbrushes
- Large synthetic sponge