THE ART OF WOOD CARVING: A PRACTICAL LESSON FOR THE BEGINNER (ILLUSTRATED BY AUTHOR), BY KARL VON RYDINGSVÄRD

Those who wish to acquire only a smattering of knowledge of the various crafts will probably not be greatly attracted by the art of wood carving, for there is too much hard work connected with it for it ever to become popular as a fad. But to those who are willing to devote regularly a little time and energy to carving it offers limitless possibilities, and much can be accomplished even by students who have not the opportunity to gain technical instruction. Indeed, better work can be done by giving even an hour’s time at home every day than by studying spasmodically with a teacher and doing nothing between times. The knowledge of the handling of tools and of the grain of woods can be acquired only by actual experience, although of course it is a great help to the student to be able to watch the methods of a skilful worker.

An elaborate outfit for carving is entirely unnecessary. A bench which will answer every purpose can be nailed together by any one who is able to handle a saw and hammer. But it must be made of heavy wood, and the top should be at least an inch and a half thick, and should project beyond the frame five inches in front, to allow space for attaching clamps. It must be rigid enough so that there will be no jarring when heavy work is going on. A top forty inches long and twenty-seven inches wide will be large enough even for big pieces, and a height of forty-one inches from the floor will suit the average person. Twelve tools are sufficient for simple work, and a good selection is as follows, the number indicating the shape of the tool and the fraction its size: (See tool chart, page 44f.)

Number one, half inch; number three, one-eighth, three-eighths and five-eighths; number five, one-quarter and one-half; number six, five-eighths; number seven, three-eighths; number nine, one-quarter; number eleven, three-thirtysixths and three-sixteenths; and number forty-five, three-eighths.

The grinding of these tools should be done by some one who has a prac-
tactical knowledge of wood carving. The tools which are offered for sale sharpened have a long bevel on the outside and some of the shapes ground are at an angle so that the points project. No professional wood carver would think of using such tools. The proper tools should first be ground on the outside until the edge is left the thickness of a visiting card. The remainder is removed from the inside, leaving a slight bevel there as well, which is absolutely necessary in order to do good work. The cutting edge is then put on, with small stones. The outfit should include one combination stone, soft on one side and hard on the other, and three slip stones of medium fineness and varying thickness to fit the insides of the different tools.

For very fine tools it is sometimes necessary to reduce the edge of the slip stone by rubbing it on a piece of sandpaper. For the final touching up, there must be a leather strop which has been smeared with mutton tallow and sprinkled with emery dust. Two six-inch carriage clamps and a three-inch dogwood mallet complete the outfit. Other tools will be needed from time to time, but these can be added as the work requires them.

Any straight-grained wood can be carved, but there is a great difference in the cutting qualities of the different varieties. One would naturally suppose that white pine, being very soft, would be the best wood for a beginner, but such is not the case for the reason that it splits so easily and is so hard to cut clean, requiring very sharp tools. Oak and mahogany are the woods most in use here for wood carving, and are easily obtainable even in country places.

We now come to the selection of the object to be decorated and the design for its ornamentation. There is no necessity for wasting time and energy in carving small pieces of wood merely for the practice afforded. The work will be more interesting if it is applied to some simple and useful object, and it will have value enough when finished to compensate for the time and labor expended.

In choosing the object, let it be something large enough to hold a design with bold simple lines, which present fewer difficulties to a beginner than one with many small details, which will split off so readily as to discourage the worker at the outset. A panel of soft quartered oak, which can be used for a box cover, cabinet door or something of that kind, is a good thing to begin upon. The selection of the design is a very important element in the success of the finished product. The amateur must
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strap work or the Norse dragon style are very suitable, or in fact any well-balanced simple ornament without much modeling. It is best to make the drawing in full size on paper and then transfer it to the wood by means of carbon paper.

The wood is then clamped to the bench and with the largest number, eleven, called a veining tool, a rather deep groove is made around the design on the background close to the lines. This is to remove sufficient wood so that the lateral pressure from the thickness of the tool will not split off pieces of the ornament when cutting the outlines, which is the next step in the work.

For this, select the tools which best fit the contours of the design, hold them perpendicularly and use the mallet to drive them to the required depth. A

curb all ambition to produce designs such as cupids, birds, flowers, etc., where great technique is required for successful results, but any number of admirable designs for beginners can be procured from the old wood carvings in museums, which are so frequently reproduced in the various art magazines, and which can be readily adapted to any object. Indeed, much of the charm of some of this old work lies in its crudeness, and this quality brings it wholly within the power of the beginner to reproduce it. In fact, a collector of antiques not long ago was looking about to find an amateur who would reproduce for him the missing parts of an old piece, knowing that a professional could not give the naive treatment required.

In choosing the design for the first work, let it be in low relief. The Celtic

TWO NORWEGIAN CHAIRS, DESIGNED AND CARVED BY K. VON RYDINGSVÄRD.
TWO DESKS DESIGNED AND CARVED IN NORWEGIAN STYLE BY KARL VON RYDINGSVÅRD.
little experience will determine the amount of force required. If this part of the work is done evenly and carefully, the cuts meeting in all of the corners, the background can be very easily removed. It must be of uniform depth and clean cut, but need not be perfectly smooth, as this suggests machine work too much, so that it is better to let the tool marks show. When this is done, the ornament is left standing in relief, ready for whatever interlacing or modeling the style calls for.

If the design chosen is sufficiently simple, this part of the work should present no difficulty, especially if one has a photograph to work from, and these can be purchased very readily now.

The construction of all carved objects should be as simple and strong as possible. Omit elaborate mouldings and let wooden pegs and tenons take the place of screws and nails as far as possible.

There are various ways of finishing the wood. Oak is usually stained, and there are many good preparations on

the market which are easily applied and can be obtained in any shade desired. With most of these a final coating of wax polish is used, which gives a pleasing soft gloss. Under no circumstances should varnish be used on wood carving, as the reflected lights detract very much from the beauty of the work. For the sake of convenience, the manufacturer’s tool chart is
given, showing the varying sections of the tools with their numbers in three different columns, “short bend,” “long bend” and “straight.” The amateur will find the “straight” tools sufficient for ordinary work. Most of these can be secured in sizes beginning at 1/32 and all of them at 1/16 part of an inch, up to about one inch in width.