



## Get started carving

BY MARY MAY

The word “woodcarving” conjures up a variety of amazing images: figurines or caricatures with comical expressions, realistic, lifelike three-dimensional wildlife, decorative geometric chip carving, massive animals and scenes realized from tree trunks, and highly ornate details in decorative architecture and furniture. The array of approaches can be daunting for someone who just wants to add flair to a box or chair. Since each style requires specialized tools and skills, I’ll focus here on decorative furniture-scale work, namely the core kit of tools that will get you started, and a primer on how to use them. Now and later in your carving career, try to learn as much as you can about the necessary tools and equipment. It will make your journey much more rewarding.

### Get some gouges

For centuries, woodcarvers have worked with gouges 8 in. to 11 in. long. These are held with both hands, providing great control and safety. They also pair well with a mallet.

Gouges are identified by two numbers. The first indicates the curvature—called the sweep—of the gouge. The lower the sweep number, the flatter the gouge. The gouge’s second number is the blade’s width in millimeters. Note that as the width increases, the sweep’s radius also increases. Often when purchasing tools, charts are provided that represent particular curvatures and sizes so you can match the tool shape you desire.

I recommend fishtail gouges over straight ones. They work much better with detailed carvings, as their fan-shaped edges fit better into tight corners. However, gouges less than 6mm wide generally are not available as a fishtail, nor are curvatures greater than #8.

Photos: Barry NM Dima

# Types of gouges

## Straight gouges



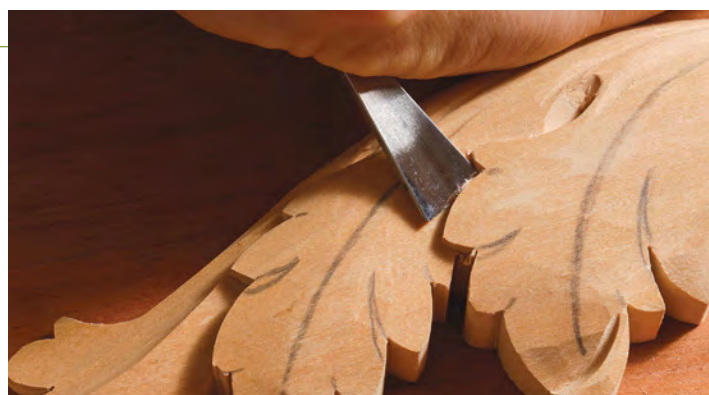
Straight gouges have a blade that stays straight along its length until it tapers at the handle. Because they tend to be stronger, straight gouges work well for heavy wood removal or sculptural carving using a mallet. But they also work nicely under hand pressure.



## Fishtail gouges



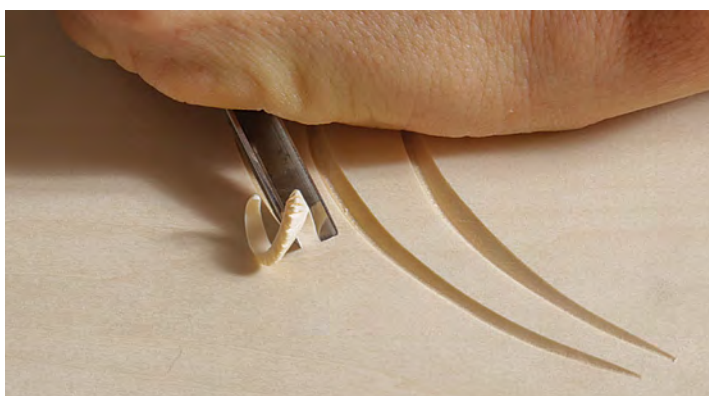
Fishtails have splayed corners. These gouges are May's favorite for detail work, since they are more slender than straight gouges and, more importantly, their sharp corners fit well into tight areas.



## V-tools



V-tools work for everything from flowing, gestural lines of varying thickness and depth to rough excavation in relief work.



## Spoon-bent and back-bent

Bent gouges are for deeper work where your hand may get in the way or a straight tool may not reach. A spoon-bent gouge (right) lets you work into deeply recessed areas. A back-bent gouge (far right), with its bevel on top, is helpful in making convex cuts.



## Workholding



**Double-stick tape is easy and reliable.**

*This method works with flat-backed or delicate carvings. Two-sided tape is strong enough to keep the carving stationary provided you adhere it to most of the carving blank. Make sure the backer block, which you'll secure to the bench, is larger than the carving.*



As your skills develop, you may expand into spoon- and back-bent gouges. When you get there, I recommend a #8-10mm spoon-bent and a #3-8mm back-bent.

With gouges, quality is critical. Budget carving tools will likely nip a budding woodcarver before they even start. Often these gouges have cheap metal that is not properly tempered, or they may be too bulky to carve delicate details. Here's a test: If it sharpens quickly, it will dull quickly. Seek out these brands that temper their tools specifically for holding a sharp carving edge: Pfeil (aka Swiss Made), Auriou, Stubai, Two Cherries, Hirsch, Dastra, Henry Taylor, Ashley Isles, and, for an antique option, Addis.

For your mallet, look for a turned one that weighs 1 lb. to 1½ lb., depending on your strength and type of carving. Choose a wooden one for heavy work and a metal one for more delicate taps.

### Which wood?

Basswood is ideal for your first carvings. It's soft, and the grain tends to be even and forgiving, letting you develop your carving cuts without the wood fighting back.

After learning the basics with basswood, I recommend moving on to mahogany, walnut, or cherry—woods more typically used in furniture



**Clamp the backer to the bench if you don't have a tail vise.**

*Pinching the board between dogs is ideal, but it's not your only option. Simply clamping the board down works too. Make sure the clamps won't obstruct your carving.*



**Raise the work and keep it close.** *For comfort, it's best to have the carving an inch or two below elbow height when standing, so elevate your work if necessary. Don't carve in a position that makes you lean over too much, or risks stressing your neck.*

## Carve with control



**Proper position.** Use both hands for maximum control and safety. One hand holds the handle to push the gouge; the other grips the metal shank to guide it. Brace this second hand against the wood for better control.



**Now switch hands.** By learning to carve ambidextrously from the start, you'll be much better suited to tackle more challenging carvings from a number of angles as your skills advance.

making. They can be more challenging because more effort and control are needed to push the gouges through the wood. Mallets will likely be needed for roughing out. But the crisp details these woods offer are worth the extra effort.

### Take care of your body

Furniture carving is an incredible skill to hone, but don't let the calm, quiet work deceive you. Hours spent leaning over a bench with a gouge gripped between your hands can take a toll on your body.

For one, make sure you're carving at the right height. You want the top of the carving to be about 2 in. below your elbows. At a standard workbench, this likely means raising your work. You can block up your bench or use a mini bench on top of your current bench. Similarly, keep the carving close to your body to avoid leaning over too much.

To protect your hands, don a pair of padded, fingerless gloves. They soften the pressure of the gouge handles while still letting you easily assess the carving with your fingertips, which I find tells me more than just my eyes.

### Sharpening

A carved surface is often the final surface, so your tools need to be sharp and stay sharp. I prefer diamond stones lubricated with water for working the bevels. These stones hold up far better

## TIP A PROTECTIVE TOUCH



Fingerless padded gloves, used for cycling or weightlifting, guard your palms while still allowing your fingertips to feel the workpiece—a crucial detail, since exploring the wood with touch often reveals more about the carving than your eyes alone.



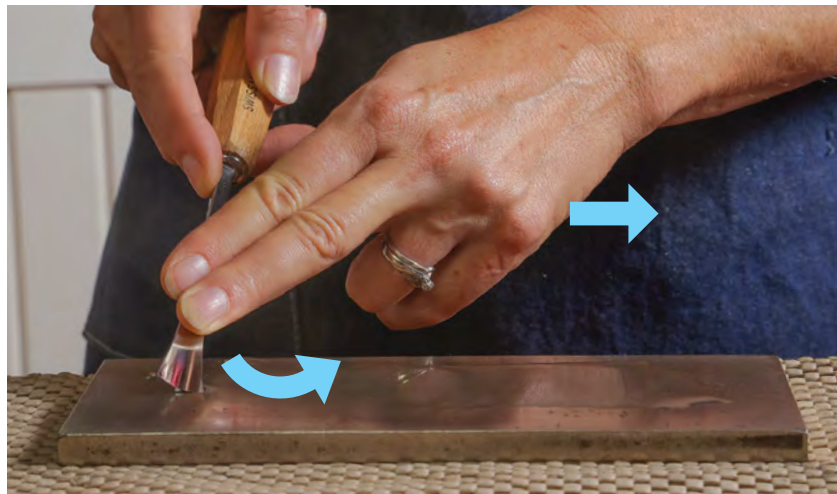
**The mallet depends on the work.** A wooden mallet is a great choice for heavy pounding, since it won't damage the gouge handle as readily as a metal one. A metal mallet of the same weight, though, is easier to grip around its head, making it better for gentler, nimbler taps.





## Get sharp, stay sharp

**Color the bevel with a Sharpie.** This lets you better monitor where the bevel is rubbing on the stones, especially the coarsest, helping you achieve an even surface.



**Start with the bevel on bench stones.** Rotate the gouge along the surface of the stone as you move side to side until a fine wire edge is created. The bevel should be flat against the stone. May starts around 1,000 grit and ends with 8,000.

**Alternate between a slip stone and the finest bench stone to remove the wire edge.** Rub a curved slip stone along the inside of the gouge, pushing the wire edge to the bevel. Then, back at the finest bench stone, work the wire edge back to the inside. Repeat until the wire edge is gone.



to the wear of sharpening gouges, as the motion can rub troughs in softer media.

Use a slip stone to polish the gouge's inside curve. This will likely be an Arkansas stone, but you can use it with water, too, provided it's not already contaminated with oil. Use only the finest slip stone you can find to avoid changing the curve's inside geometry.

A strop coated with honing compound handles final polishing and, later, touching up the edge while carving. Strop both the bevel and the inside edge. □

*Mary May runs an online woodworking school out of her shop in Charleston, S.C.*

**Finish and maintain the edge with a strop.** The final step, which is also used to touch up tools while carving, is to pull the gouge along a piece of leather charged with buffing or polishing compound. May's strop has a rounded section for polishing the inside curve. Alternatively, you can wrap leather around a dowel.

