

Chris Pye



101  
Master  
Woodcarving  
Secrets

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**Chris Pye: Woodcarving Workshops.tv**

## **101 Master Woodcarving Secrets**

If you have a copy of 101 Master Woodcarving Secrets© by myself, Chris Pye, then you must have subscribed to Woodcarving Workshops.tv - or at least answered a questionnaire about why you didn't! In either case, thank you. This distillation of my teaching experience is a way of showing appreciation for your support.



**What you've got here:** These are not really true arcana, rather the 101 most common pieces of advice I've given to woodcarving students over the years - I keep class notes of any carving-related observations I make and find myself repeating time and again. You are reading a distillation of the notes: new information based on real-world experience; old saws and new; points I've made elsewhere; thoughts and advice I've plucked from the air, both practical and philosophical - all sorts, even contradictions, and with some 'secrets' left hanging in the air - all thrown into a cherry bowl for dipping into and thinking about.

I'm hoping these secrets might potentially, even radically, alter the way you carve. They're offered in small bites - so accept them as such, chewing and digesting bit by bit. In each case, try and see what I'm getting at and how a particular thought could apply to your own situation.

**How to Use 101 Master Woodcarving Secrets:** I made the font size quite large, thinking you might like to print it out, cut up the text and stick these important pieces of advice around your carving bench where you'll see them!

You can print and use 101 Master Woodcarving Secrets© for yourself. You may copy and distribute this document to your woodcarving friends. But you may *not* alter the document in any way or use the copyright content elsewhere without my express permission. (Hey, I'm a friendly guy! Just write.)

**Lastly, before we begin:** My appreciation and thanks go to my great friend Mark Kimble, a man with a keen eye and sensitive pen, for proof-reading and editing this document.

I hope you gain from what you read here and that your carving excels as a result of fresh understanding.

*Chris Pye*

## 101 Master Woodcarving Secrets



1. At the end of the day: it is just a piece of wood.
2. Most students go into their carving with too little research, correcting mistakes as they go along, putting all their errors - along with their hopes - into the one carving. Better to carve a second and burn the first - but we rarely do, which is a great pity.
3. In the early, rough stage of a carving, aim to place the grooves or troughs you make with your quick gouge just above the final surface. Then, you need only remove the crests between to be close to the finish.

4. The more you can visualise (feel) what you want to carve, the more likely you are to be successful. Research and preparation increase your ability to succeed.
5. A lot of carving involves thinking backwards.
6. Setting in by stabbing straight away into the wood creates side pressure from the wedge of the outer bevel. This side pressure may weaken or break short grain. Eliminate the pressure by lining in first (often with a V tool), allowing the wood to crumble away as you subsequently set in.
7. Setting in by 'matching' - ie. using the sweep of the gouge to match exactly the cut you want - is the best way to copy something. It's also the basis for repeat carving, particularly on mouldings.
8. When setting in, keep your elbows in and your weight behind the chisel. Carve from the floor.
9. It's not a real frog. It's a woodcarving (meant to represent a frog).

10. Relax! Ease your neck and shoulder muscles regularly while you're carving.
11. In particular, check your breathing. Many carvers unconsciously hold their breath for long periods.
12. Protect your back muscles by working at the right height.
13. If you have never carved before, the work can be tiring on the wrists. Rather than suffer, find ways to strengthen your wrists and grip. For example, try suspending a weight - something like a brick tied with a light rope to the middle of a short bar. Hold the bar horizontally, with your hands at either end. Slowly wind the string - and the weight - up and down. (My own teacher had me do this.)
14. Sharpening tools has the same relevance to carving as tuning has to playing a guitar well.
15. Many students don't appreciate the immense Importance of tool corners in getting a clean cut.

16. What if you've 'carved it off' by mistake? You can often work apparent magic and 'carve the wood back on' by adjusting the *relationship* of parts.
17. Sharp! Sharp! Sharp!
18. Never tell anyone about mistakes.
19. Never let out work that is not 100% your best.
20. A rasp or riffler is sometimes useful for consolidating forms, before returning to carving tools.
21. As you carve, pay more attention to what you leave on than what you take off.
22. Carving differs from modelling in the stronger changes from plane-to-plane that arise from the sheer act of cutting. Modelling requires a totally different technique from carving, and one must respect the difference between the two.

23. Always work from the mass, the form, into the space. Never 'just make a hole'. Such holes tend to get bigger as the wood around them is shaped, ending up quite corrosive to the form.
24. Thus: position edges and forms three dimensionally in space first. Undercut them last.
25. The two grips which I teach, and have named in my books and in the website lessons: 'High Angle' and 'Low Angle', will accommodate 99% of all your carving work.
26. In Pen & Dagger, the thumb of the lower hand (pen) is crucial as a pivot.
27. In the Low Angle grip, put your body weight behind the cut and keep your elbows in.
28. When roughing out, always work across the grain. The chips break off and fall away in small pieces, and you needn't worry about grain direction.

29. Always look for interest. Squeeze the lemon of interest.
30. Sometimes leaving something out is more important than putting something in.
31. Copying is a good way to learn, early on. But in the end, copying generates nothing new. What's always new is *you*, and your own creativity.
32. Drawing to improve your chances of a successful woodcarving, or to improve your eye, or to capture ideas, is not the same as drawing for galleries.
33. If you draw a sculpture in the round, draw its side and back views too: think 3D right from the start.
34. Other than more carving, drawing is the next best practical way to improve your carving skills: look and draw, draw, draw.



35. Cut the wood cleanly as you go along, so you won't need a long 'touching up and finishing off' session at the end. Finish as you go.
36. To create the 3D effect, a painter must play with colour, a drawer with shading. Carvers play with depth. Removing wood is playing with depth. Make full use of what you have: of hard and soft edges, of undercutting, of planes.
37. The carving tools you buy are an investment. The best tools make for the best investment.
38. If you find yourself doing without a tool that might truly make a difference for a particular job, still order that tool. Chances are you'll need it again.
39. Only the actual cutting edge is sharp. It follows that if both hands and fingers are behind the edge, it is impossible to cut them.

40. The slicing cut is the cut *par excellence*. I use the slicing cut 95% of the time.
41. Smooth any knot or problem-grain by going across it with a light cut, slicing either to the left or right as necessary.
42. A sharp tool will easily cut against the grain with a light, slicing cut.
43. When you bury a quick (#10 or 11) gouge or V tool in the wood, inward pressure from the outside bevels can crack the side walls. Use these tools with less force.
44. Sometimes the work divides into two, with a particular type of holding and tool selection for the initial heavy work, then a repositioning and changing of tools for subsequent lighter work. It's normal to need several means of holding the same piece of work at different stages. Develop an easy repertoire.
45. Use the largest carving tool possible for the job.

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46. You can usually make one tool do the work of others. By using any carving tool for as long as you can, you minimise 'down time.'
47. Woodcarving involves the head, the body, and the heart and not necessarily in that order. The carvings that move us most are those in which the carver has led from the heart.
48. The three elements of design, material, and technique must always work together, consciously. Pay great attention to this.
49. If it doesn't look right, it probably isn't. The carving has to 'read' right, ie. the viewer mustn't be confused. If you can't get the right 'read,' change the lighting; use a mirror; go away and come back afresh. Sometimes you have to creep up on what's 'right'. Softly, softly.
50. Time spent working out the idea, the design, is never wasted. But at some point procrastination must end, and the battle commence.
51. You cannot spend too much time researching, but you can spend too little.

52. Have at least three carvings on the go: one starting, one finishing, and one in the middle so that you can keep a fresh flow of work moving along.
53. Have three books going for ideas and reference: sketchbook, notebook, and scrapbook.
54. Oiling darkens wood and shows up any figuring in the grain more vividly.
55. Keep the wood clean, right from the start. Dirty hands are the most common cause of dirty carving. Sweaty, oily hands transfer grime.
56. If you find sharpening a problem or a chore, you are probably not carving enough. You will not yet have learned that keen cutting edges are the gateways to excellence.
57. Most nicks and similar injuries will happen when you are taking out and putting away your carving tools.

58. As you carve, be sensitive to what is happening at the moment the wood is cut. This enables you to react immediately and change direction according to the lie of the grain, the wood fibres.
59. If the grain tears, don't persist. Stop! Reverse the direction of carving.
60. Surface texture - what is left from the chisel - is an important design element and must be used to the full.
61. Keep a few offcuts to repair splits.
62. The first rough stage of a sculpture should end up looking as if it were covered in a film of opaque 'cling wrap.' All the masses are present in relationship to each other, with the proportions, flow, and 'sense' clearly present.
63. Always cut, never tear or pull shavings or chips away.
64. Check twice... cut once.

65. Sand only if an absolutely smooth surface is needed. Sanded surfaces look hard, like egg shells, and can be as beautiful.
66. Sanding should always be a choice, not an expedient.
67. Sanding into corners may take as long as sanding the main surfaces.
68. When you look at a carving or sculpture, be aware of what your eyes are doing, how you are looking, and - vitally - what you are feeling as you look. Your eyes and heart will tell you to what to do.
69. Beware of working from another's drawings. Drawings are two-dimensional, carvings three. What, in a drawing, may look easy to carve could prove more difficult than you were expecting because carving involves more depth, more objects, or the other sides of objects.
70. When photographing your work, always take the best shots you can. Snapshots almost never do justice to your efforts and often make fine work look poor.

71. 'The person who never made a mistake, never made anything'... but it's what you do about mistakes that matters.
72. Extend your carving kit to match your work. Buy your tools on the basis of need.
73. Never put tools away in anything other than the condition in which you want them when you get them out again.
74. With the gouge, follow the contour you are seeking - like sketching in three-dimensions.
75. Two equally competent carvers will be distinguished by what they do with their competency ie. the quality of their ideas, and their solutions to design problems.
76. Swing the mallet from your shoulder, not your elbow and keep the elbow tucked into the body to minimise strain. For less strain and longer working, move to a lighter mallet.

77. Add a wrist flick to increase the power of a mallet stroke. And stand side-on, to keep your body out of the way as you use your shoulder.
78. Inspiration is not 'out there', even if the Greeks did think that we inspire divine ideas with our breath. Inspiration comes from within.
79. Frames around a relief carving draw in the viewer and set off the image. But before you begin to carve, think what a frame will do for the finished piece...and to the viewer. Ensure that the frame becomes part of the design and not merely an afterthought.
80. 'Übung macht den Meister': Practice makes the Master.
81. Always use the best wood possible. Unless the better woods are absolutely unavailable or unaffordable, never compromise. Beginners often tend to use poor quality material for 'practice', but you need all the help you can get, and poor wood really doesn't help.
82. 'It's in the book'. Or, now, on the WW.tv website...

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83. Carving is about nothing if it is not about light and shadow.
84. A bubble is merely surface. It contains nothing, feels empty, and suggests no sense of mass. A woodcarving, however, contains real mass, and the viewer must be able to sense this.
85. Ambidexterity, being able to swap hands, is a sign of the professional. Being able to reverse hands - and thus tool direction - affords great advantages, particularly in the Low Angle grip. Strengthen your less dominant hand by giving it tasks you would normally do with your dominant one (e.g., peeling an orange, cleaning your teeth, hammering, etc.).
86. Keep both hands on the carving tool at all times, unless you are using a mallet.
87. Work from the tools. Co-operate with the sweeps by letting them guide your lines and cuts.

88. Many times there are no right or wrong solutions. But just as many times there are.
89. When you think you have finished your carving, change the lighting, take the work outside, look at in a mirror. Then renew your decision.
90. Carvings can be mounted either in contrast (eg. using a different material, colour, texture, or lines) or in complement (eg. sympathetic curves).
91. Modelling (in clay) is very useful for pinning down ideas, for measuring and developing a third-dimensional sense. Model to scale if you can.
92. 'If I were you, I wouldn't start from here...' Indeed, the trick is not only knowing where to start but also being there before you want to leave.
93. Two ways to dull your gouge or chisel quickly: scrape your cutting edge upwards when you've cut up to a vertical wall, and lever-out chips of wood.

94. Carving demonstrates the laws of conditionality: All phenomena depend on, arise from, and change into, others. So the finished carving depends on the surface modelling... which depends on the shaping (the roughing out)... which depends on the selection of material... which depends on the idea... your history. So the actual origin of any carving is impossible to see.
95. As much as the sharpness of the cutting edge, the state of the bevel is extremely important in determining how well a carving tool cuts. Unless you have a particular reason for doing so, keep the bevels as flat as possible.
96. You can take it as it comes. But you will progress a lot quicker if you set yourself opportunities and tasks for learning and developing strengths. Take a path of regular steps, increasing the challenges of your projects gradually, not in too big leaps.

97. 'Bosting in' (sketching out the masses and flow of the piece) is the most important, and probably the most difficult stage, in carving. Bosting in requires courage.
98. When taking off wood by bosting in, don't nibble. You can be bold if you have properly prepared.
99. A lot of practice will make a little talent go a long way.
100. Carve the form first, and the details will take care of themselves. Sort out the major problems first. The rest follows on.
101. You can keep fiddling with a carving until the cows come home. At some point you have to finish and often it is simply when you've had enough. But still, when you think you have finished, put the carving away for a week, then come back, and refresh the decision.