

# Chip-Carving

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

WITH A SIMPLE TOOL AND SOME IMAGINATION, MAN COULD TURN A BLOCK OF WOOD INTO A PIECE OF FINE OR FOLK ART. TODAY'S ARTISANS WORK IN THE SAME TRADITIONS.



Spoon racks were an important inspiration for traditional artisan Tom Douglass 20-some years ago when he began chip-carving. "They're time-consuming but not impossible," he said. This example with an arched sunburst top holds reproduction spoons by Thomas and Patricia Hooper of ASL Pewter.

Chip-carving requires only three things—a piece of fairly soft wood, a knife or even a broken seashell or sharp shard of flint, and a person with some artistic sense. You slice into the piece of soft wood at an angle and then make a second slice so you can remove the “chip” from the surface. You can create incised designs in the wood, from intricate geometrical patterns to shapes of pin-wheels, hearts, flowers, or almost any other image.

In that the three components of chip-carving have been around for tens of thousands of years, the art has an extensive history, one that has taken two diverse paths. For millennia skilled woodcarvers have decorated the great cathedrals and palaces across Europe and Asia with incredibly intricate moldings, panels, walls, ceilings, and furnishings. At a more earthy level, peasants of every culture around the world used simple tools to carve countless items of rustic beauty.

This second form of chip-carving—the folk art—prevailed in America from Pilgrim-era chip-carved Bible boxes to the surge of tramp art in the early 1900s to today's resurgence in chip-carving among traditional craftsmen.

Chip-carving stands out from the more grandiose form of wood-carving known as relief, or bas-relief, in both tools and the required skill. Relief carving uses knives, chisels, and gouges to remove expanses of wood to create a back-



ground so the main figures can stand out in higher profile, often in three dimensions much like free-standing sculpture.

Fine relief carving requires a skilled artist or master woodcarver. Chip-carving—with its much broader base of practitioners—yields simple yet beautiful ornamentation for breadboards and boats, spoons and battle shields, canoe paddles and cupboards.

## ANCIENT HERITAGE

“It may safely be taken for granted that the earliest form of carving would be in the form of incised or chip work,” noted Paul N. Hasluck in his still-respected 1911 *Manual of Traditional Wood Carving*.

From the earliest recorded history, woodcarving techniques and designs—like many other art forms—spread as ethnic tribes swept back and forth across continents, imposing their cultures on the conquered.

Egyptians six thousand years ago carved designs onto wooden furniture. Egypt had little wood, but the country’s extremely dry climate has preserved some of its wooden artifacts. Greeks, on the other hand, had ample supplies of wood and carved it profusely, but we know of them as avid woodcarvers only from written accounts of the time because actual examples no longer exist.

Greek woodcarved ornamentation so impressed the Romans that they adopted it for their own

This c. 1750 spoon rack from the Hudson Valley displays elaborate chip-carving over its entire surface. The edges and racks are carved with a diamond design, complemented by an array of carved pinwheels, lunettes, and glyphs, with a large heart flanked by pinwheels at the center. The surface has shades of reddish brown, blue, and white. This type of chip-carving was a specialty of the Dutch artisans in northern New Jersey.

wooden furnishings. As the empire expanded, the Romans spread these same design motifs across the European continent. Then, with the rise of Christianity, the empire’s woodcarvers developed unique designs—the cross and cross-circle, vine, and dove, as examples—stemming from the new faith.

Rome collapsed in the 5th Century under the onslaught of barbarian kingdoms, but a new cultural force, the Islamic Empire, swept westward across Africa, eventually conquering Spain in the 700s. The Arabs were phenomenal carvers of highly complex panels, ceilings, pulpits, and furniture, but their artistic sense clearly differed from that of Egypt, Greece, or Rome.

“Pictorial work finds no home in Islamic wooden arts,” wrote Harvey Green in his recent book, *Wood: Craft, Culture and History*, “but marquetry and inlay have been highly developed in those areas, encasing boxes and occasionally larger forms in unending visual complexity.” In other words, the Muslims favored chip-carving’s intricate geo-



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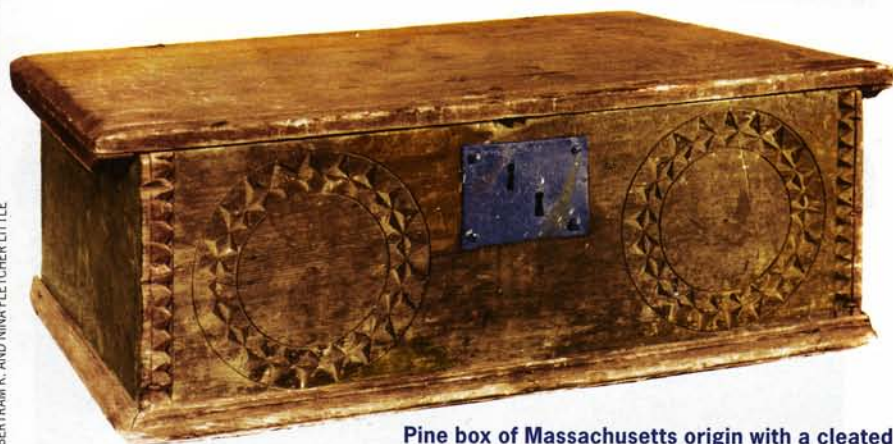
metric designs over images of people, animals, or foliage.

Meanwhile, skillful artisans half a world away had been creating what many regard as some of the finest woodcarving the world has ever seen.

## FAR EAST INFLUENCES

Ancient Hindu temples surviving from the 3rd and 4th Centuries display luxuriously carved doors and ceilings, comparable to the finest Elizabethan-era woodcarvings of a dozen centuries later. In ancient China, elaborate chip-carved moldings and scrollwork proliferated in that country’s palaces, while Japanese craftsmen beautified their temples with flowers, vines, and lotus images chip-carved on panels.

Not only did chip-carving proliferate among the sophisticated cultures of the European and the Asian mainlands but also on far-flung South Sea islands, most notably Fiji.



Pine box of Massachusetts origin with a cleated lid and original double lock. The chisel carving suggests a transitional date of about 1700.

RICHARD MERRILL/COURTESY OF HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND, GIFT OF BERTRAM K. AND NINA FLETCHER LITTLE





**Earliest dated chest of drawers from New England, built c. 1678 in Essex County, Massachusetts. Called the "Vocabulary Chest," it is particularly noteworthy because chests from that period rarely had drawers of equal height. The second drawer has prominent chip-carved floral designs, and another has a chip-carved band of scrolled hearts. The chest's façade is decorated with white and red paint on black.**

Using small triangles or squares as a basis for complex designs, these native carvers covered entire surfaces with a precision European carvers have rarely matched.

"To appreciate what chip-carving may be at its best, one should see some of the ceremonial adz handles and paddles produced by the primitive men of the South Pacific islands," wrote Harris W. Moore in his 1922 volume, *Chip Carving*. "When we remember that these primitive craftsmen used a bit of shell or a shark's tooth as a cutting tool, we can appreciate better their devotion to their art."

At least one 19th-Century New Englander knew the work of carvers on those remote islands. Herman Melville, in his classic 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*, created Queequeg, the South Seas cannibal serving as a harpooner aboard the whaling ship *Pequod*. He spent his spare hours

carving images onto the pine lid of his own coffin—undoubtedly using chip-carving—producing "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth" in hieroglyphs.

### REACHING THE ZENITH

Northern Europe's cultures became uniquely proficient in chip-carving, either through their indigenous craftsmen or, again, the influence of invaders.

"Woodcarving was a most prominent feature of Scandinavia quite from the earliest Viking times, as might be expected of a country so richly endowed with the material necessary to the craft," Hasluck stated.

Early Britons made no impression in woodcarving until the invading Normans instilled in them a fondness for the craft in the 11th Century. "One feature may be noticed as showing the source of that vigorous spirit that gave the Norman architecture distinction and strength," wrote Hasluck. "This is the employment of chip-carved patterns, such as the sunk star and other designs."

The next three hundred years produced a crescendo of European woodcarving—much of it to embel-



**These 18th-Century boxes show the geometric designs popular with folk art carvers. The top box has the initials "A C" on the sliding top, "1785" on one end, and "A W 1795" on the bottom. The bottom box has "S D 1765" carved on the back.**







**Built in Massachusetts in about 1650 by cabinetmaker John Houghton, this oak and pine rectangular chest features three recessed and chip-carved panels across its front. The front panels' leaf designs retain traces of the original brown paint. The chest measures 44 1/2 inches wide.**

lish the magnificent cathedrals—as artists moved through the Gothic period and into the Renaissance. Woodcarvers employed combinations of chip and relief carving to decorate choir stalls, lecterns, rood screens, triptychs, and the retables behind elaborate altars. By the 16th Century the finest carvers employed their skills in the sumptuous manors being built for European royalty, where they plied their trade on massive doors, mantels, cabinets, and furniture.

While master woodcarvers created their highly ornamented rococo designs, Europe's peasants continued to carve humbler wooden items. "In Germany and Switzerland chip-carving became known as *Kerbschnitzen*, which means 'engraved carving,'" Wayne Barton wrote in his book *Chip Carving: Techniques and Patterns*. "It was used to decorate every wooden tool, piece of furniture and utensil around the house and barn—as well as the house and barn. Everything—water buckets, breadboards, spoons, milking stools,

cupboards—was carved."

This was the spirit of chip-carving Europeans would bring to the New World.

#### **SHEDDING THE LAVISH**

Although folk-oriented chip-carving found a new home in early America, the more profuse and lavish woodcarving styles practiced throughout Europe did not.

"Not only were the colonials in the strictest sense of the word provincials, but they numbered among themselves comparatively few persons of sufficient wealth and desire for rivalry in such matters to induce them to pay for the elaborate carving and inlay work so typical of the finest eighteenth-century cabinet-making in Europe," wrote historian R. T. H. Halsey in a 1918 edition of the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. "As a people who were generally poor, they had on the whole to satisfy themselves with simpler forms and comparatively little ornament."

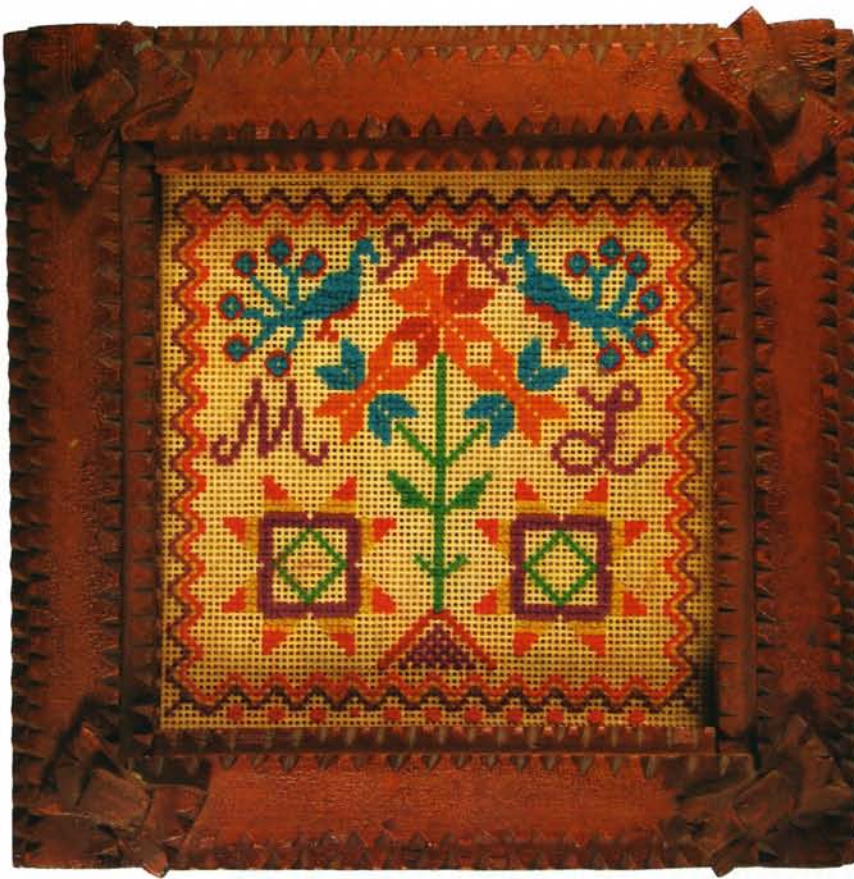
Plus, something in the American character—perhaps a penchant for

the virtuous and the transcendent—rejected Europe's decadent decoration. Take for example the Windsor chair: American furniture makers stripped the English Windsor of its ostentatious carved panels and other excess ornamentation to create a simpler yet stronger profile. American carving on highboys, lowboys, and sideboards remained similarly restrained compared with the wild floral embellishments on European pieces.

Chip-carving's plainer style gained an immediate foothold in the colonies when applied to household objects, particularly the common wooden box, which encompassed many varieties of containers, even desks.

"Boxes were among the earliest furnishings in the American colonies," wrote Nina Fletcher Little in her 1980 *Neat & Tidy: Boxes and Their Contents Used in Early American Households*. "The majority of seventeenth century American boxes were carved only on the fronts and corners," with notched corners and chip-carved scrolls, rosettes, stylized flowers, and interlaced half-circles.





Amish needlework in a mid-19th-Century chip-carved frame, an example of the type of decorative carving untrained artists used to adorn the familiar items of their everyday lives.

### MAINTAINING ETHNIC STYLES

Europeans coming to America into the mid-1800s transplanted several cultures known for distinctive woodcarving—Germans and Swiss in the Mid-Atlantic region, English in the Northeast and into the South, and Scandinavians across America's northern tier—thus influencing the look of their folk art.

Some 18th-Century carvers employed a chisel in addition to the knife. "This technique was the forerunner of much decoration to be found in later years and is often referred to as *Friesland* because of the similarity of the chip-carved patterns to those used by the peasants in the Friesland and other areas of northwestern Europe," Little wrote.

Barton cited the *Kerbschnitzen* form of German and Swiss chip-carving, which is directly related to the popular Pennsylvania German designs.

"Many items made of wood were decoratively carved," John G. Shea stated in his 1992 book, *Making Authentic Pennsylvania Dutch Furniture: With Measured Drawings of Museum Classics*. "It was practiced by young and old and it produced many interesting objects

including toys, decorative birds and animals, as well as incised designs carved into butter and cookie molds. There were also carved spoon racks, small boxes and chests."

With towns and villages increasingly interconnected by the growing web of roads spreading ever westward, the itinerant peddler became a force for commerce. During the mid-1800s, peddlers and chip-carvers joined to create an art form popular in Europe and America for the next hundred years.

"The specific style of layered and notched woodcarving that came to be known as Tramp Art developed from the chip-carving done in the nineteenth century in northern Europe," according to Helaine Fendelman in her 1974 book, *Tramp Art: An Itinerant's Folk Art*. "In Germany and Scandinavia there were *wanerburschen*, or wandering apprentices who, upon completion of part of their apprenticeship with a master craftsman, would roam the countryside working in their particular trade. Nineteenth-century American craftsmen or itinerant peddlers traveled and worked in much the same way.

"Tramps, hoboes, and other self-taught wood workers sometimes taught the craft while roaming the countryside," she continued. "But



Detail from a basswood plate carved by Wayne Barton.



Barton says his carving styles have been greatly influenced by studying the architectural elements in castles and cathedrals across Europe.



far more common and far more often, the edge-carving and layering of Tramp Art was learned as an oral tradition from traveler to local resident, neighbor to neighbor, friend to friend, and father to son.”

The most significant trend in the 20th Century, however, was the use of machinery to shape and carve wood—coupled with more streamlined and unadorned furniture styles—relegating woodcarving to a lost art. Yet, some woodcarving has managed to survive in the hands of dedicated craftsmen who carry on the traditional methods.

#### WAYNE BARTON

For the past thirty-plus years, Wayne Barton has been on a one-man mission to rescue chip-carving from oblivion. He’s written four best-selling books on it, produced instructional videos, developed a line of carving knives, conducted classes across North America and in Europe, and operated his own school—the Alpine School of Woodcarving in Park Ridge, Illinois—dedicated to teaching and encouraging chip-carvers.

A master of several styles of chip-carving, Barton first learned carving at age five from his Norwe-

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The butternut jewelry box Barton made for his wife is an example of his “positive imaging” technique of carving away the background.

gian grandfather and about thirty-five years ago went on to study carving in Brienz, Switzerland. “I had studied psychology in college and had some, what I call false starts in life,” he said, laughing. “When I had the opportunity to go to Switzerland and study, that just convinced me.”

Talking with Barton, it becomes instantly clear that he is a scholar of woodcarving, well versed in a number of chip-carving styles, where they originated, and how they have evolved. “Woodcarvers throughout history have been so steeped in tradition that they kept repeating the same designs over and over, which is why you’re able to identify the origin of the design,” he explained. “I can look at a piece of chip-carving and tell you whether it’s Scandinavian, English, German, or whatever just by its traditional design.”

Through the years, Barton’s own style has evolved.

“My style has deviated a long ways away from where I started because I’ve discovered so many possibilities,” he said. “What I’m doing today is really a great mixture of things I’ve observed while rattling around Europe’s castles and cathedrals with their Gothic architecture and Baroque architecture, pieces influenced by the Italian Renaissance, and so forth. I’ve borrowed motifs and flavors of various architectural disciplines rather than sticking with traditional geometric carving.”

He now is pushing well beyond the realm of traditional chip-carving.

“I’m doing something I call ‘positive imaging,’ where I’m using chip-carving techniques to produce what appears to be a relief carving—where I carve away the background rather than incising the carving into the wood,” he explained. “That makes all the difference in the world by expanding the parameters of chip-carving and taking it into areas never explored.”

So what about the one-man mission?

“When I came back from studying in Switzerland way back then and started doing shows, there were a number of woodcarving competitions here and in Canada and there wasn’t even a category for chip-carving,” he said. “It was under ‘miscellaneous.’ Today I don’t know of a single competition that doesn’t

Chris Miller uses milk paint and a crackling technique to finish his work.







Miller relies on traditional Pennsylvania German motifs in his carving.



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have chip-carving as a category.”

Barton is in the enviable position of carving few pieces that haven't already been commissioned. The price of his work ranges from \$100 to \$5,000.

### CHRIS MILLER

The physical size of most chip-carved items attracted Chris Miller to the craft. A cabinet-maker for more than twenty years, he sought a skill he could work on in the evenings that would be more manageable than wrestling with big furniture.

“I was doing a lot of large pieces, and mainly the shipping was getting harder to do,” he said. “I wanted something I could work on in the evenings in my basement, so you might say I decided to downsize.”

He still makes some large furniture pieces and he does several styles of woodcarving. “But I do a lot of chip-carving because it’s a little bit different than what other people have been doing, and there wasn’t as much of it out there,” he explained.



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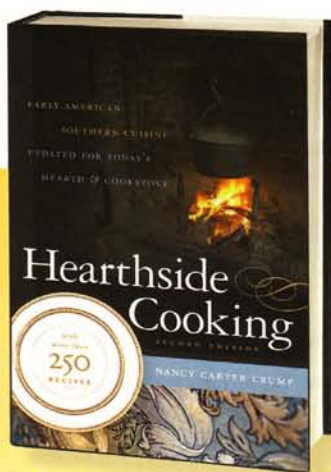


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Miller, who lives about thirty miles northeast of Pittsburgh, is drawn to the Pennsylvania German style of chip-carving. The skills he picked up after decades of cabinetmaking are apparent in his array of chip-carved pipe boxes, jewelry boxes, candle boxes, spoon racks, and other home furnishings. He recently created a beautiful olive and ochre box with Pennsylvania designs and a telltale slit in the top for tissues, a concession to contemporary living.

He said he enjoys reproducing the old Pennsylvania designs over trying to develop his own. Auctions and museums provide a lot of good examples for his carving, and many more come from books illustrating the distinctive style of folk art.

He uses the traditional pin-wheels, fans, and flower designs found frequently on early Pennsylvania butter molds, highlighting his carving with period paint colors. “I try to use the colors that come from pieces in the photos or that I’ve seen,” he said. “I use milk paints and sometimes mix them with oil paints, and over the years I’ve come across techniques for different types of crackling.”

Miller’s chip-carving, which has been chosen for the Directory of Traditional American Crafts, costs from \$50 to several hundred dollars and is available at regional crafts and antiques shows and at some local antiques stores.



Douglass uses a unique concoction of latex paint, potassium permanganate, household soap, and paraffin (among other ingredients) to achieve the well-worn patina that distinguishes his pieces.



## TOM DOUGLASS

Among other jobs, Tom Douglass worked for years as a roofer and cut countless shingles with a standard utility knife. Today that same knife is the only one he uses when chip-carving his extraordinary array of pipe boxes, document boxes, spoon racks, mirrors, shelves, and most anything else that strikes his fancy.

"My tools are very unorthodox," he said from his home in southwestern Pennsylvania. "I don't do anything like the regular chip-carvers do. First of all, I use a utility knife—just a regular one—in fact the exact same one I used to put roofing on. I've also got a little carving set I've had for years, but I don't use much of it—just the little palm chisel. Oh, and sometimes the bevel chisel, too. But those are the only knives I've ever used."

The range and quality of chip-carved work Douglass produces is astounding. A skilled carpenter, he began some twenty years ago making wooden boxes and other items. "I've always really liked those spoon racks from the 18th Century. They're just unbelievably carved and I thought they'd be impossible," he said. "Well, I found out they're not impossible. They're time-consuming

but not impossible. I started doing a little bit of carving and then a little bit more and a little bit more, and eventually I was doing a whole lot of carving."

He stockpiled his chip-carved creations—"Same problem: what do you do with this stuff?"—and eventually decided to try his luck with art galleries. The owner of a gallery in Houston put him in touch with show promoter Robert Goodrich, who encouraged Douglass to try one of his crafts shows, so Douglass loaded up his car and headed out.

"I sold some things at that first show," he said. "It went on from there and over the years I've sold about 900 pieces." His pieces are now owned by collectors across the United States and have been displayed in the White House.

While the carving on Douglass's pieces is distinctive, his finishes are also works of art. As an antiques dealer he learned how to make his restoration work blend with the original patina, and today he uses an alchemist's brew of latex paint, potassium permanganate, soap, and paraffin—heated with a propane torch and with enough corrosive to nearly eat through his workbench—to create the aged look that makes his work so popular.

His pieces have a distinct early American flavor, but they are the products of his imagination. "I never copy anything," he emphasized. "I don't even copy my own things. My inspiration isn't from looking at old spoon racks. It's from what I've seen all my life, from different art, different architecture, whatever. I just sketch it out onto the wood and go from there."

Douglass's pieces average about \$400 and can go to \$2,500. He sells through a folk art web site and at the Designer Craftsmen Show of Philadelphia. ★

Oregon writer Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.



Another spoon rack variation by Douglass.

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