

Sign carving can add a new dimension to your shop's capabilities

Try your hand at carving!

by Rob Cooper

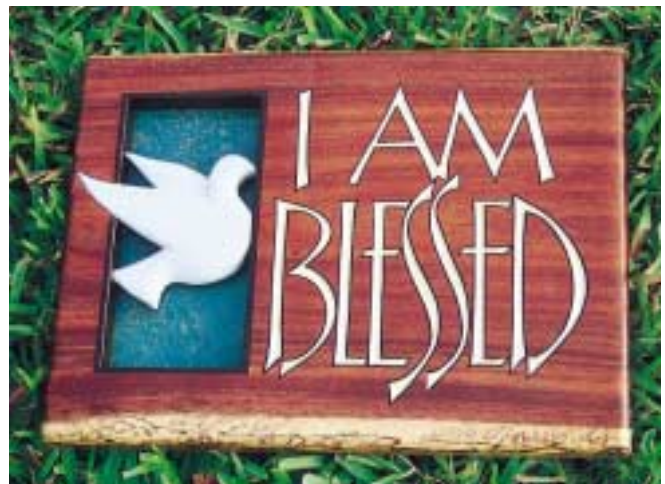
Here are some of my recent hand-carved wood signs. Probably the biggest difference between these and the ones I had in the

article a year ago is that the earlier ones were mainly gifts, but most of these were paying jobs. The market for carved signs here in

Miami is, at best, small, but there are people out there who want something other than red Helvetica on a white plastic panel! A lot of people seem surprised when I tell them that these signs are carved by hand, with a chisel—they naturally assume that the letters are cut on a machine. Often they don't appreciate how much work goes into carving a sign.

Mastering carving technique comes with practice. But the most important aspect of a carved sign—or any sign, for that matter—is the lettering, layout, and balance. Father Catich, who wrote *The Origin of the Serif* (one of the definitive lettering books), said it best, and I quote:

"Letter designing is the important skill, not the cutting of letters in stone [or wood]. The technique of stone cutting can be quickly learned, but the art of shaping and arranging letters into a harmony of solids and voids, text and margins, letter parts to letter, letters and words to the alphabetic family, etc., is a much more exacting



skill, which takes years of practice, shop experience and love of letters.”

This is something I am very aware of even before I get the chisel out. I can't think of a single carved sign that I've been 100% happy with. When I finish it and step back to take a look, I always seem to find something wrong with it. A customer will come to pick up their sign and be over the moon, and I'll be sitting there looking at the "R" that should have been wider, or the serif that should have been lighter, or whatever. Being able to criticize your own work, and more importantly, learn from your mistakes, is one of the most important aspects of lettering—carved or not.

Most of these signs are carved in Honduran mahogany. It's available locally at a fairly reasonable price. When I first started carving it, it seemed very hard compared to redwood or butternut, but with time I've gotten used to it. Keeping a sharp chisel is very important. I also like to carve West Indian mahogany. It grows here in Dade County and has a beautiful grain.

A while ago, somebody asked me what angle I sharpen my chisels at. To be perfectly honest I wouldn't have the foggiest idea. What I can tell you is that two years ago, Kerry [Kruger] bought me a diamond hone for Christmas, and it works great. It's a piece of metal covered in diamond dust, and all you have to do is rub the chisel over it a couple of times and it will be sharp enough to shave with!

I will be the first to admit that I don't know much about wood or correct technique. Probably the biggest hassle I've had is getting good advice on finishing unpainted wood. Some people recommend marine varnish, and others tell me it will only last 6 months. It's an extremely hostile environment for signs here in Florida, so I often oil the panel with tung oil or seal it with Thompson's Water Seal. My reasoning is that it's a lot easier to re-seal or oil a sign than it is to sand off the flaking varnish. If anyone out there knows of a good system for finishing wood signs, please call!

As for carving technique, just do

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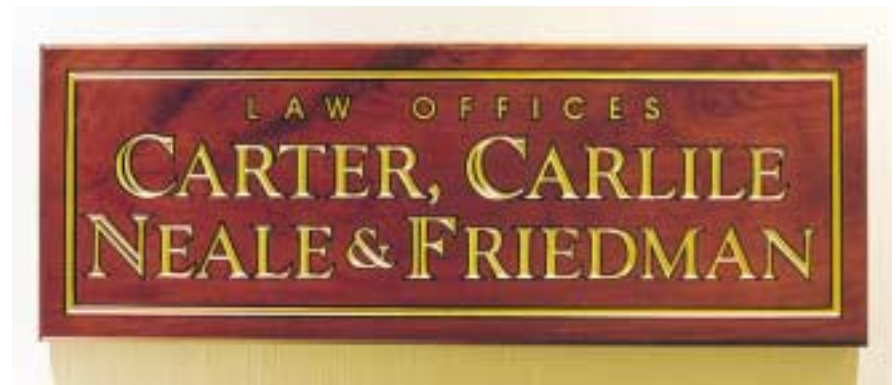
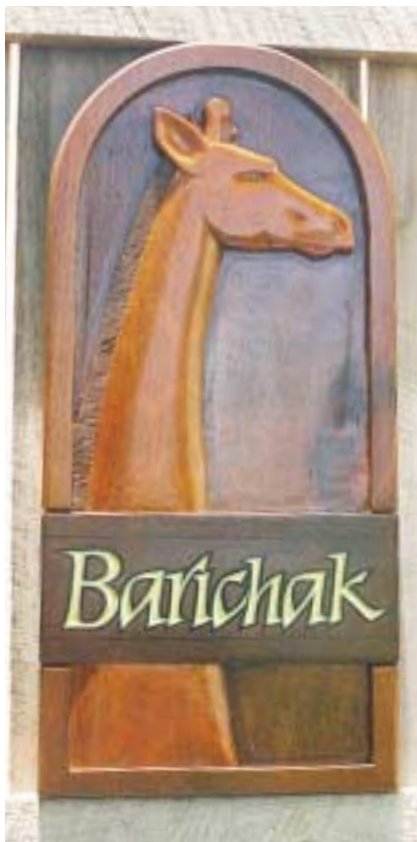
it! *Carving a Traditional Cape Cod Sign with Paul White*, by Douglas Congdon-Martin, [available through *SignCraft*] shows excellent step-by-step photos of Paul's technique and will get you off to a terrific start. Mine is a simple technique that is difficult to describe.

Holding a chisel at the angle I want, I make an incision, beginning at the outer edge of the cut and aiming toward the center of the stroke. I then repeat the process for the opposing angle of the stroke. I have found that if you cut, or slice, the wood instead of

gouging it, it will be much easier.

This is just the technique I use. Every carver probably has a different style of carving. I've showed people who aren't even lettering artists how to carve in five minutes—there is no magical technique. If you're into hand lettering and you start carving, you'll see what a can of worms you will open—it's very addictive and rewarding, and almost as a side benefit, you can make money at it!

Hess: 2-in.-thick Honduran mahogany with slate roof and bottom cap. Lettering is carved and gilded. (Nice hair!)



I Am Blessed: I carved this sign from a solid piece of albezia. The lettering is carved and gilded, and the panel behind the dove is Formica.

Trosuk: I did this one about three years ago for Pete Trosuk, who works here at Kerry's shop. The panel is Graphikore, a balsa panel (Baltek Corp., 10 Fairway Ct., Northvale, NJ, 07647, 201-767-1400) with carved and gilded lettering.

Blanchard: The customer brought me the panel for this sign; he found it floating in the Atlantic Ocean. We had no idea what kind of wood it was, but after I sanded it, a friend identified it as Florida live oak. It was very hard and stringy wood, but it carved nicely. The lettering is gilded.

Barichak giraffe: I carved this sign for Don Barichak, who works here at Kerry's shop. It's carved from a solid piece of Honduran mahogany. The spots are done with a glaze, and the lettering is carved and gilded.

Carter, Carlile: This law office sign was done for Bill Allen and Cathy Zawaski from T.B.I. Design in Boca Raton, FL. They supplied me with the design and a full-size pattern from which to work. The wood is West Indian mahogany. These pieces came from trees knocked down by Hurricane Andrew. It's a fantastic wood to carve.

Just Friends: 2-in.-thick Honduran mahogany. Lettering is carved and gilded.

Mark Lawhon: Honduran mahogany with carved and gilded lettering.

Rutt: "Rutt" is carved into a piece of West Indian mahogany and the top panel is marbled by

the dipping method. Background is plywood. I used silver leaf on the hammer and chisel.

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Nichols: Honduran mahogany with carved and gilded lettering. The black panel in the background is marbled with gloss black on flat black, which looks great in life but is impossible to see in this photo.

Mark Anthony: This is a piece of albezia that we bolted to the tailgate of the owner's truck. "Fine Woodworking" is carved and gilded.

Perini: I carved this one in a marbled mahogany panel, then gilded the lettering.

Classic designs: Carved and gilded slate mounted in West Indian mahogany. □

Rob Cooper lives in Miami, Florida. He is working on a step-by-step article showing his slate carving technique. Watch for it in an upcoming issue of SignCraft.

