

Workholding - How to Hold Carvings During Carving

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Question: (by kwinn) I'm fascinated to see how other carvers organize their workspace. Specifically, when you are carving a small piece, how do you hold or support the carving?



Janel - I've noticed in pictures on your web site (like this one) that you seem to have a large block of wood topped with a big glob of white stuff. Is that some kind of clay? Can you tell us more about it?

I've developed my own style in this regard as well, and that is to use a car-washing sponge. I use the kind that has one flat side, and the other side tapers down on both ends from a peak in the middle. This makes a very comfortable rest for both wrists with the work positioned in the middle. For small pieces, I usually add a second sponge underneath to raise the work and avoid back strain. The sponge is flexible so it tends to help hold the piece once you push down a little. This setup has worked well for me, but I'm thinking I want something that is a little firmer for doing small work on very hard material.

Answer: (by Janel) In office/school supplies you might find yellow, blue or white poster tacky sticky stuff. I use the white stuff and did finally remember to notice the brand name: Elmer's. It is handy for quite

a while, until it dries out and/or too much of the sawdusts are kneaded in. Elmer's brand Tac and Stick (something like that) a white putty-like material. I take half or the whole package, knead the wad, then stick it to the end of the cedar carving peg described in the above post. Keeps the little darlings from slipping away when I am carving.

It is handy in various ways. I put a little bit on the end of a short skewer stick to hold tiny inlay pieces, that gets set into a smaller blob back on the carving peg, for one instance.

I find it loses some tack and knead-ability with age sitting in the drawer (I buy several and use them over time). It also loses those qualities as it is used, that is if you let it receive some carving debris as you work.



Here is what I use: The white stuff on the carving peg is Elmer's brand Tac and Stick.

(by Don Fogg) I got some of the poster tacky stuff too and it does hold stuff well. It was a bit of a problem getting it all off when I turned the piece over. It didn't stick permanently, but it took some time.

Unable to leave well enough alone, I kneaded in some Sculpy polymer clay to the tacky. It blends nicely and did reduce the tendency to stick as much. I am still playing with the ratios. It is helpful to use different colors so you can see how well it is blended.

(by Doug Sanders) I hold carvings in my hand when I work on them with knife and chisels. I've found that often, especially with fine line engraving and gouge work, it is actually the left hand (holding the carving) that moves and rotates while the right hand with the tool stays rigid.

Wood engravers (for printing) use a similar technique where the boxwood endgrain rotates beneath a rigidly held burin. Maybe some of the metal engravers can comment if this manner is used in

their work. You can get much smoother curves this way.

I've tried resting/bracing the piece both in a vise and on a block of wood and I find myself still turning the piece so often that it's a hassle to loosen and tighten the vise.

When I need a bit more support I'll brace my left hand against my left knee- I sit cross legged on the floor, so this isn't too much of a stretch. Speaking of stretching, I once was polishing a piece with a cord covered in abrasive powder- needing a third hand (one to hold the piece, two to grasp the cord and run it back and forth through the hollow) I realized I could hold the carving with my toes.

My wife walked in and now I'm sure she thinks I'm completely nuts -looking like a circus contortionist.

(by Janel) I have seen photographs in books about contemporary Japanese netsuke-shi sitting on the floor also. I recall seeing a heavy block of wood as a base, with a peg affixed to it for pressing against. It is interesting to see your confessions about sitting on the floor! What fun!

The cedar 4 x 4 is screwed to the table top from underneath the table. I sit on an office chair that is adjustable, and never considered sitting on the floor for real. I looked at the photographs and acknowledged the difference. My furniture for tools needed while carving are all up at chair height.

Bravo for standing! Some potters stand while throwing, and I did while throwing tall pots, but only my old workbench is tall enough for standing at. I have succumbed to the existing furniture to choose the way I work at carving!

I am quite interested in going to the studio and trying the holding in hand, turning the wood while holding the tool stationary.

(by Doug Sanders) As Katfen suggests, hand-holding can take some strength. If there are periods where I don't carve much (a month or so) , my hands feel tight and cramped the next day after starting up again. As for sitting on the floor- I've notice that when I'm in a chair, I get fatigued faster- maybe for me, I can put more leverage into things, or move and twist my back more (when cross legged) which keeps things revitalized. I don't seem to wound myself too often..

It does take some getting used to, as well as flexibility in the hips. Oh- and my work bench is about 12" high... I'll use the bench of course for things like sawing, cutting inlays, scribing, some engraving, etc.

I get the feeling I use a knife more than others- this way I can get away with hand holding for a lot

longer than if you switch to saws, files or big gouges (1/2"+) right away.



Lee Valley tools sells a pin vise (tagua nut optional) I've never tried one myself.



(by E George) I have a Peg Vice. It is useful for some work. The wooden handle can be removed and there is a small square plate on the bottom of the clamp which can be held in a small vice (I hope the attached picture is correct size and shows this plate). The result is a poor man's engravers block.

I made “bumpers” for the pegs out of high molecular weight plastic that I purchased from Woodcraft. I find that it holds the piece better. You could make bumpers out of Neoprene (spelling ?) tubing or rubber.



(by Ko Baas) I never use any holding device. Just hold the piece in my left hand and the tool in my right. Mostly as you would hold a hammer, sometimes with delicate work as you would hold a pencil. I move the workpiece just as much as the tool. With combined movements.

(by Doug Sanders) An eagle claw grip is generally not needed for the miniature work we all do. It probably goes without saying, but the sharper the tool, the looser you need to grip the item. Obviously there are some tasks where you need both hands free (punch work, certain drilling occasions...)- that’s where the ticky-tacky white stuff or a vise comes in handy, or need to brace the item against a hard, resistant surface (sawing, filing, etc)