

SELLING YOUR CARVINGS

Some Tips On How To Get Started

By Walter Houle

The idea of selling your work has always seemed to intrigue wood carvers. The fact that someone actually pays money to possess a carving that you created with your own hand out of raw materials is attractive and certainly does something for the ego. Actually going out and making sales to the public, however is something that few carvers try and even fewer are successful at, especially over long periods. This article will explore the phenomena of selling to the public here in the Southeast. It is based on interviews with carvers who have been successful selling their work in various venues. The experiences and advice to those thinking about starting a sales effort should be helpful.

Before trying to sell your work, it is necessary to determine exactly why you are selling in the first place. It is apparently very difficult to use woodcarving as a sole source of income. Unless you are a nationally known and ranked artist, the labor intensiveness of your craft places a limit of the amount of cash that can be generated. The carvers that I talked to all regard carving as a second income that provides extra money for travel, tool and materials. Another frequent mentioned reason for selling is that it is just plain fun. In order to sell successfully you should enjoy meeting and talking to the public. Several carvers mentioned that they sell in order to get rid of accumulated carving and to get funds for more materials. For them the selling supports their carving habit.

"Getting married, detailing birds, and selling your carvings are things that should be resisted as long as possible."
Opal Powers

If you expect to make a living from carving it is evidently also necessary to teach, sell tools and supplies and to write books. Even then, a comfortable living would have to depend on other income.

Once you decide to go ahead and to try to sell, a detailed plan is necessary. Selling carvings is hard work and must be approached as such. A monetary goal should be established before; you start. Be aware that it will take several years to develop a clientele so your goals should be modest at first and gradually increase. A marketing plan scheduling the places where you will offer your carving is next. Most carvers start at local craft shows and gradually expanded to out of town shows. Generally, selling on consignment in gift shops and galleries has not been too satisfactory. The key to selling success is repeat business. The most successful carvers eventually are able to cut down on shows and derive most of their business from past customers who are reordering. Flyers, newsletters, etc., to former customers telling them about your latest creation and giving details about where you will be next appearing will bring in satisfied former buyers. All this, of course, takes time. Be patient. Customers will be comfortable with you and trust you only after seeing you and your work more than once. Go to the same shows at least twice even though results the first time were disappointing. An attractive, well-lit booth is a necessity. Take some time and spend some money on a first class setup. It will pay off.

Since you can't carve everything well, specialize. Get good at a genre, be it ducks, songbirds, Santas, spirits, caricatures, canes, chip carving, or whatever. In order to be successful, you need to be come known as a serious artist of a particular type of carving.

"Specialize, Specialize, Specialize
and also have fun."
Doc Holland

Now comes most important part. How do you price your work? This has been a most discussed subject because there is no ready answer. Your price has little or nothing to do with the time spent or the cost of the materials. It has everything to do with what the traffic will bear. Look critically at similar work at shows and see what sells and for how much. Compare your offerings and decide if yours are better or worse. (Opinions of family, spouses, and close friends don't count.) Remember there is no accounting for the taste of the public, selling is full of surprises. Set a minimum price that you will be willing to accept and try it. Excessively low prices do not necessarily translate into increased sales. High prices sometimes stimulate sales. Adjustments, up or down, may be required, but do not be too hasty. Again, be patient, give it a season or even two before deciding selling is not for you.

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In summary, make a plan, set realistic prices, and make a serious effort to become well known. You must specialize and develop patience. Have fun and stick to it—and good luck.

If all this sounds like too much work then you are like most of us who enjoy carving and get satisfaction from selling an occasional piece informally and giving the rest away as gifts. Woodcarving truly is its own reward.

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