

LEARNING TO CARVE FACES

There was an excellent discussion concerning face carving on the Woodcarver's List.

Anthony J. Last noted that one of the problems with beginning carvers is that they carve the face too flat. He stated that said that there is a 90 degree angle between the tip of the nose and both cheeks. **Ivan Whillock** bolstered this statement with other excellent observations and advice. **Ivan** indicated that most beginning carvers worry about the eyes but fail to see their bigger problem with the angle of the face. He advises carvers to put a carpenter's square across the face at the nose to cheek angle. **Ivan** also stated that another problem many carvers face is the placement of the eyes. Many carvers place the eyes about 1/3 of the way down on the head. For a realistic carving, the eyes should be placed in the center of the head. With that, **Mr. Whillock** offered the following tutorial on learning to carve faces:

1. **Learn to see.** Even though we look at people virtually every day of our lives, we don't automatically see them in terms of proportion of features and other things useful to the artist. Collect pictures not of other carvings but of people. Front views, side views, three-quarter views. Get out your dividers and compare one feature to the other. Take the length of the ear, for example, and compare that to the length of the nose, the distance between the centers of the eyes, from the bottom of the nose to the chin. Yours truly has put the comparative measurements in his best selling book, "Head Proportion Made Simple" (Sold at fine carving shops and some art supply stores everywhere--or email me off list with your address).
2. **Practice.** Free throw shooters practice, guitar players practice, opera singers practice; carvers seldom do. Have trouble with eyes? Carve a million eyes in the corners of scrap wood. Make them the size you generally carve in your faces. Work on slanting the tool into the wood you want to remove so that the eyelids don't chip out. Practice knowing exactly where the tip of the knife--or the cutting edge of the tool is at all times. Become an expert at tool control (and, of course, sharpening).
3. **Work from the general to the specific.** New carvers are preoccupied with detail. They are often impatient with the blocking out process that precedes the detail. Study the masses of the face--where are the "corners," where one plane meets another? Work the eyes out of two equal eye masses, the nose out of a pyramidal nose mass, the mouth and chin out of a dental mass.

4. **Carve both eyes at the same time.** Do not finish one eye and try to copy it on the other side of the face. First make sure the masses are the same. Then make the same cuts for both upper eye lids. Then make the cuts for both lower eye lids, etc. Having practiced the million eyes, you will have knife control so now you can concentrate on getting the shapes you want, rather than worrying about chipping out the wood!
5. **Keep your dividers handy** so that you can apply the comparative measurements you taught yourself (and learned from my book) to the carving at hand. Work from a specific photograph. Don't copy it slavishly but look at it to first get the measurements, then to do the blocking and then the detail. Again, work from nature (photos) rather than other people's carvings. You will develop your own style that way, and will not be perpetuating the "errors" or "interpretations" of other artists.
6. **Consult carving books** but look to them as offering alternative techniques that you can choose to apply to your carvings or not. Try Pete LeClair's way of making eyes, but also try John Burke's, Ivan Whillock's, or any other carver, not to copy their style but to use their experience to develop alternative techniques. Maybe you will like Burke's way of making the nose wings, but prefer LeClair's manner of blocking out the ears and reject all of the impostor Whillock's techniques out of hand.
7. **If you want to do caricatures**, check out a few cartoon drawing books to see how cartoonists vary standard proportions to get the effects they want; experiment a bit yourself. Try making the nose longer, shorter, the eyes far apart, close together, etc. Keep a collection of head blocks that you have practiced on and use them for guidance on a carving you are doing for real.
8. **Trust yourself and be yourself.** Don't assume that to be "good" your carving has to be a clone of one of the well-known carvers. Let your own style develop through experimentation and practice and most of all, by having fun with the medium.