

A Note From A Wood Tinker

As a new woodcarver the basswood beginner has used a Colwood burner to make quills and barbs on wooden feathers. This pyrographic pupil has even ventured to make a plaque. Maple leaf and seed designs were all diligently copied from Mother Nature with tracings transferred by graphite paper, then burned, and which, as yet, remain unpainted. Sigh, another unfinished project.... At present, the tyro tinkers with techniques pyrographic in a woodburning class. So with a burning desire to pen a plethora of puns, the Wood Tinker turns to firing up a bit in this month's "Note", on pyrography.

Pyrography, writing with fire... that's what I thought we did as kids 'round a campfire. You know. Poke the fire with a stick until the stick itself catches; its end aflame. Then wave the stick wildly like an Errol Flynn rapier until the flame dies to a glowing ember dancing through the night sky, leaving orange trails, streaks, Zorro zigzags, and figure 8s in the darkness. I wonder how many long ago generations of people saw this scene repeated and mutated? Then the stick became a metal poker with a glowing end, and that poker, a branding iron. How soon before the poker's red hot end was put to use drawing on wood to make the first "poker work?" These fired iron poker works are still being made, but technology has advanced.

In 1974 Bernard Havertz and Jean-Claude Varlet published a book entitled "Pyrography The Art of Woodburning." This book summarizes the then state of the pyrographic art. Varlet & company mention the use of a LeFranc pyrographic machine where "the craftsman can choose from fifteen types of tips and can dial his own heat." These LeFranc pens all had solid point tips. This type of variable heat, solid point, "soldering iron"-type woodburner technology dates back into the earlier part of the 20th century. Yet at the same time changes in the art were flickering to life.

In 1973, the small Peter Child shop began manufacturing a "hot wire" machine developed by Roy Child in England. A hot wire device had been patented as long ago as 1916, but it was decades before it came into common use. In 1979 Colwood became, they claim, "the first major manufacturer to produce the fine nichrome wire woodburning tool..." More companies quickly entered the hot wire pyrographic machine market as artists and craftsmen embraced this new technology and the modern era of pyrography blazed into popularity. Detail Master began selling machines in 1983. Razertip began Canadian production in 1984. Nibburner and Optima began in 1985.

Soon artists, too, began publishing "how to" books for the new equipment. In 1993, pyrography promoter Robert Boyer, who bought Detail Master, published a 421 page hardcover book, "The Amazing Art of Pyrography," singing the praises of pyrography as an art form and a Detail Master hot wire woodburner as the tool of choice. Sue Waters published her first pyrography book in 1994, "Basic Woodburning with Sue Waters"; other author-artists included Al Chapman and Stephen Poole in 1995; Cheryl Dow in 1996; Nedra Denison in 2003; Lora Irish in 2006 and many more in the past decade.

Today, most pyrographers use either the poker's direct descendant, an inexpensive soldering iron type woodburner, or a modern , variable temperature "pen" having a wire tip "nib" which is capable of fine detail work. Artists and craftsmen are using the modern, nichrome wire nib, rheostat controlled woodburners to make almost photographic woodburned images. Nature carvers use them to add realism to fur, fins, and feathers.

With that as background, the Tinker takes a flaming foray into the cauldron of print. Seeking a decalog of pyrography, here are mini-reviews of 10 books about using modern woodburners to "write with fire." First, some quick observations and generalizations about these authors and books.

- 5 of the 10 authors in these books used Razortip woodburners, the remaining 5 used Colwood, Optima, Peter Child, and Detail Master (which is no longer made).
- Most authors recommend 3 nibs: a shader, a writer and a skew (round heeled knife).
- Many authors publish multiple books; each having a similar "basics" section coupled with differing sets of examples or patterns.
- There is a great deal of overlap between the authors' recommended starter kits.
- Each book has its own unique strength differentiating it from the others.
- All books are approximately 8 1/2 x 11 inch in format; one is hardcover.
- 5 of the 10 books are published by Fox Chapel Publishing (see them for more pyro books).
- The perfect pyrography book has yet to be written. These are artists side lining as authors.

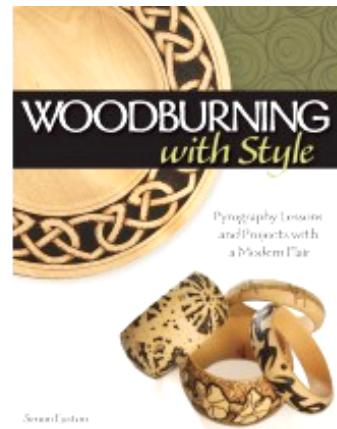
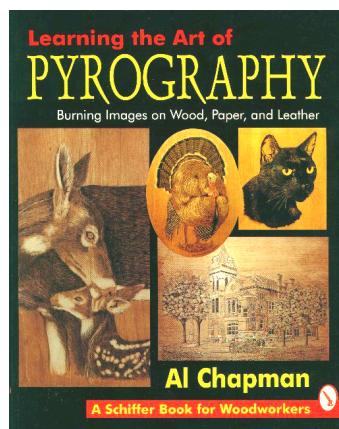
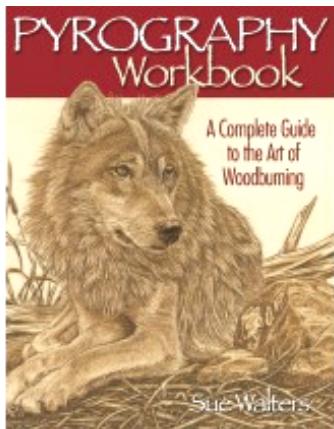
Without further ado, here are this basswood beginner's top ten books on woodburning. The first 6 are especially suitable for beginners and in my order of preference with the best first.

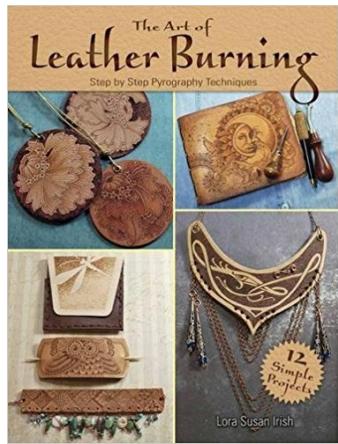
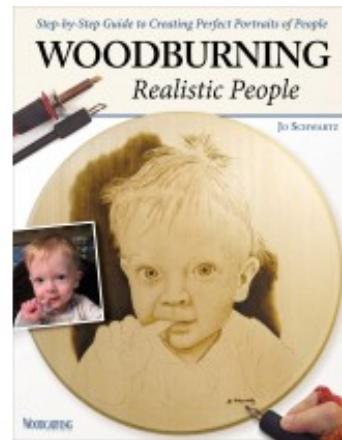
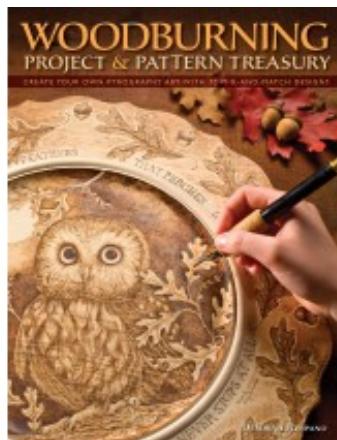
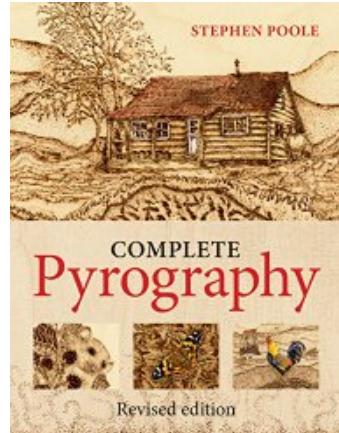
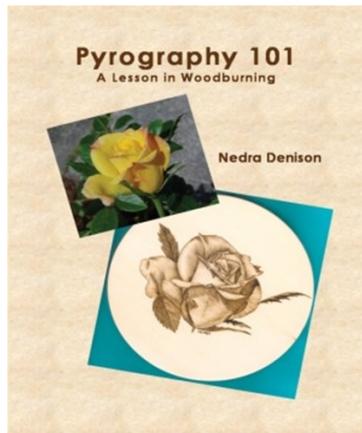
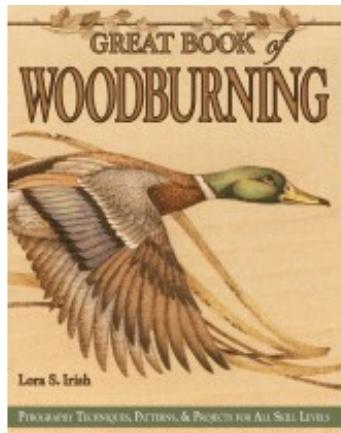
The final two books are specific to portraits and leather burning; use them with a basic reference.

1. ★Sue Waters, "Pyrography Workbook (A Complete Guide to the Art of Woodburning)," 137 pages (2005, Fox Chapel). The best all around book from a beginner's guide to intermediate and advanced projects (45 pages on the basics). **\$14** on ebay. See the detailed review below.
2. Al Chapman, "Learning the Art of Pyrography (Burning Images on Wood, Paper and Leather)," 64 pages (1995, Schiffer). Very good on getting a beginner to work quickly. Chapman has a focused practical approach to learn how to draw with a woodburner and acquire practice on key shading techniques. Lots of good photographs illustrating his techniques. This book does not rely on step by step projects just step by step techniques. **\$11** on ebay shipping included. See the detailed review below.
3. Simon Easton, "Woodburning With Style (Pyrography Lessons and Projects With a Modern Flair)," 207 pages (2010, Fox Chapel). Easton's approach is very different from the other top books, but may be a good fit for some folks. Easton introduces each technique with a simple mini-project. The other books typically review the basics first and then get into the practice exercises and/or projects. Easton also covers a wider variety of pyrographic themes than most books. He is the only one to have a section elaborating on portrait pyrography other than Schwartz' book which is dedicated to that subject. Available on ebay new for **\$13** shipping included. Simon Easton has a website www.woodtattoos.com
4. Lora Irish, "Great Book of Woodburning (Pyrographic Techniques, Patterns and Projects for All Skill Levels), 191 pages (2006, Fox Chapel). In many respects similar to Waters' book above with different example projects. Book is divided into 3 parts: Basics (19 pages), Practice Exercises (57 pages); and Project & Patterns. This book's strength is lots of practice exercises. It also has a good variety of projects and patterns. Available on ebay new for **\$15** shipping included. Irish has an excellent website www.lsirish.com.
5. Nedra Denison, "Pyrography 101: A Lesson in Woodburning," 70 pages (2004, Denison Enterprises). A conversational style (like she was your teacher talking to you). Not always the most logical presentation, Denison nonetheless presents the basics in a way that many may find appealing. Her book contains step by step examples of pyrography to decorate boxes (e.g. with Southwestern American Indian art & a rose pattern). Look for a used copy

on ebay or through her website. Denison has an excellent website:
www.sawdustconnection.com

6. Stephen Poole, "Complete Pyrography", 160 pages (1995, Guild of Master Craftsman Publications Ltd). Best book if you choose to use a European style "make your own nib" type woodburner such as that made by Peter Childs. Nice historical review in the introduction and throughout. Skip this book unless making your own nibs. **\$21** shipping included on ebay.
7. Robert Boyer, "The Amazing Art of Pyrography", 421 pages hardcover (1993, B.E.M.I. Publishing Co.) The unique perspective of an early major promoter of pyrography and equipment manufacturer. Boyer died in 2009. His Detail Master equipment is no longer made. Lot's of history; he discusses various champion carvers and pyrographers of the 1990s. There is a great deal of practical information interspersed amongst the anecdotes and personal musings. An interesting book with its eclectic expansive approach to pyrography as an art medium. It meanders from musing on cavemen to burning feather patterns to praising individual carvers to burning gourds all while promoting the Detail Master. Not the first book to get for learning pyrography. **\$28** shipping included used on ebay.
8. Deborah Pompano, "Woodburning Project & Pattern Treasury (Create Your Own Pyrography Art With 70 Mix and Match Designs), 175 pages (2011, Fox Chapel). Note the title well. Best aspects are Pompano's discussion of design composition (a real strength), and its many wonderful design elements and "plate" compositions each shown both as a pattern and after burning on wood. You could use this as an introduction to woodburning, but other books fill that role better. **\$22** shipping included on ebay.
9. Jo Schwartz, "Woodburning Realistic People (Step By Step Guide to Creating Perfect Portraits of People), 104 pages (2017, Fox Chapel). This book has a unique discussion on the use of computer programs to convert photographs into design templates. Good information on portrait techniques not found in other books (Easton covers portraits to a limited extent.) This is a good book to couple with one of the basic books, perhaps Easton, if woodburning portraits is your goal. Editing and organization need improvement. Available new for **\$13** including shipping on ebay. This book is in the club library.
10. Lora Irish, "The Art of Leather Burning (Step-by-Step Pyrography Techniques)," 122 pages, (2017, Dover Publications, Inc.). Leather burning coupled with leather working, Irish uses projects to teach techniques. This book is best used with one of the first six. Available new for **\$19**, shipping included, from ebay.





This month's Wood Tinker Note is a Giant edition. The pyro tyro cannot leave off here without giving a detailed report on the top ranked two books.

The #1 book - Sue Waters, "Pyrography Workbook (A Complete Guide to the Art of Woodburning) is an excellent introduction to pyrography, as well as a great reference and project book. (Sue Waters also has a website: www.suewaters.com).

In Waters' book, the first 7 chapters go over the basics in 45 pages (more than most). Let's unpack the Table of Contents.

After an Introduction and Gallery of Sue Waters' excellent pyrographic art, Chapter 1 covers Equipment, Work Area and Safety. Solid point and wire nib woodburners are described with pros and cons noted. European-style and North American-style wire nib burners are compared. Walters' recommends a pyrography set up kit with commonly used items such as fan, eraser, sandpaper, etc..

Chapter 2 covers preparation of the wood surface. Sanding smooth is critical to facilitate control of the pen's movement. Waters also describes how to transfer patterns to a wood surface by using three different methods: graphite paper, heat, or mineral oil.

Chapter 3 reviews various woods suitability for woodburning and suggests other popular materials such as paper, gourds, tagua nuts, bark, ivory, bone, etc.

Chapter 4 has an overview of various types of pyrography: negative space, solar, relief, torch, calligraphy, miniature, and poker work. If you are burning to burn, skip this chapter and read it later.

Chapter 5 discloses Nib Use & Care including how to start and stop nib contact with the work surface without creating "blobs." A handy nib chart is presented. How to fix mistakes is explored as are creating light and dark marks, and how to make your own nibs from nichrome wire.

Chapter 6 examines three basic nibs and their uses: the skew, the writer, and the shader.

Chapter 7 is focused upon Texturing. Waters shows and suggests creating a practice sample board of different textures and how they are achieved. Do this and you will learn much.

These first 7 chapters provide the basics of pyrography and suggest practice ideas. These chapters have applicability across the spectrum of pyrographic art.

The next three chapters 8-10 (39 pages) present step by step instructions for three projects, all involving realistic natural animals. These 3 chapters of the workbook present a beginner project - Ducks and Bulrushes; an intermediate project - Golden Eagle; and an advanced project - Wolf.

Chapter 11 describes techniques which permit drawing realistic animal coats including short hair, smooth coat, fluffy fur, and leathery skin.

Chapter 12 covers use of color with pyrography, pigments, sealing, coloring around pyrography and coloring over pyrography.

Chapter 13 is a very helpful troubleshooting guide with illustrations of problems and their solutions.

Chapter 14 concludes the book with a pattern collection of the following animals: chickadee, fawn, owl, panda, polar bear, raccoon, squirrel, tiger, wolf, and zebra.

Sue Waters' book is clearly written and has ample illustrations. It covers the basics as well or better than most pyrographic author-artists and presents attractive natural animal projects for a student to practice and improve their work using a progression of techniques with increasing complexity. A beginner will find this book highly useful and will likely refer back to it as they develop their art. It is also a very good book for people interested in depicting animals.

My #2 book could be your #1. Chapman, "Learning the Art of Pyrography (Burning Images on Wood, Paper and Leather)" is many pages shorter than Waters' book. This is not a projects and pattern book, but rather a "how to" on the woodburning process and techniques.

In his 64 page book Chapman focuses on getting a student burning. His goal is mastering control of the pen and some basic key shading techniques drawn from pen and pencil art. Chapman's writing is brief and to the point. If you like his "fewer words" approach, and don't want a detailed step by step project, you may prefer Chapman to Waters.

The Introduction and Chapter 1 on Tools are inconsequential (mainly words of encouragement), but do show three key nib types: skew, shader and writer (they're not explicitly named.)

Chapter 2 covers safety and maintenance, wood types, and problems using pine. Chapman is the only author to address the problem of mill marks, but other authors also emphasize the need for sanding before beginning to burn.

The strength of Chapman's book is Chapter 3. Using many, many drawings and photographs showing hand-pen positions, this book conveys its "how to move the pen" to make marks with exceptional clarity. In 10 pages with 40 illustrations and photographs, six exercises are given: (1) straight lines; (2) curves; (3) circles; (4) cross-hatching; (5) flat edge burning; and (6) stippling. These are the key techniques of making pyrographic art and they are presented succinctly and clearly.

Chapter 4 describes "Creating Your Own Patterns" using graphite paper and also discusses a technique where he burns directly through a copy of a pattern onto wood.

Chapter 5 is termed "Advanced Techniques" and describes: (1) Burning to a Line; (2) Hair & Fur; (3) Feathers; (4) 3 dimensional work; (5) black & white subjects; (6) trees & landscapes; (7) bricks; and (8) helpful hints.

Chapter 6 "Finishing Touches" covers sealing finishes, stains and use of scraping to create highlights as well as adding color.

Chapter 7 suggests project ideas for burning objects, leather, paper, and gourds. The "Conclusion" presents a two page gallery of woodburned art.

There you have it; two very good books to get a beginner going in pyrography. Waters is more detailed and Chapman more succinct; both methods work well. Books on ebay- new with shipping: Waters for \$14; Chapman for \$11. Waters' Pyrography Workbook is in the Chippers Club library.



Colwood burner and 3 pens from top to bottom: writer, shader; and skew (round heeled knife).