

The Traditional Way to Hold the Knife

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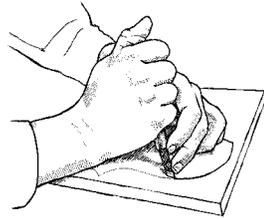
The way that carvers hold the knife went through a major change over the course of the past few generations. In the old days - I'm speaking of the time when designers designed, carvers carved, and printers printed - the carving was done with the knife always pointed to the 'outside' of the body. This might be difficult to explain, but I'll try. (This explanation is for a right-hander using a right-handed blade.)

The knife was gripped in the fist, blade downwards, thumb on top of the short handle. Flat side of the blade was on the left, bevel on the right. The hand was then tilted so that the thumb moved over to the left, and the point of the blade to the right ... tilted far enough so that the point of the blade could be seen

outside the hand, *not* inside. The carver then leaned over his hand, inserted the blade into the wood

so that the flat side was against the line to be kept, and then began the cut, drawing the blade towards himself. He could thus *clearly* see the cutting edge of the blade as it moved along the line, and the waste wood was the part that became compressed, not the reserved wood. This was how all the old ukiyo-e etc. was cut ... and it shows!

Now ... enter the 'sosaku hanga-ka' ('creative printmakers') the men who did it all themselves, designing, carving and printing. These guys just grabbed the knife and stuck it into the wood. Because they weren't trained, they did that the 'natural' way - the same way I would wager every one of you is doing it - with the hand tilted the *other* way, the point of the blade to the *left*, right down in front of your nose. And



as a consequence, the bevel of the blade now presses against the wood that will be retained, damaging it.

Please excuse me this next statement - you know where I'm coming from - but this method is wrong, wrong, wrong. Do all the current woodblock practitioners/teachers care? Not a whit. Does it make any difference in their work? Probably not a bit. Do they even *know* about the old method I have just told you about? Almost certainly not.

I will stand by my statement that the flat side of the blade *must* be against the reserved lines when cutting fine lines in hard wood! For these cases, the traditional system is not only the best way, but the only way.

But don't take my word for it ... get out your knife and *try* this! You will find it extremely difficult to control at first, and probably won't even believe that people could carve that way, but hang in there for a seven-year apprenticeship, and then, without a doubt, you will come over to my side! (Then there will be two of us!)

One last note from David: If somebody wants to carve the 'modern' way (point to the center) and not mess up the wood, they can use a knife of the 'opposite' handedness. I am left-handed, but when I carve 'inside' I use a right-handed knife. End of problem.

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