

How to Prevent Damaging or Breaking Wood Carving Tools

Wood carving tools can be damaged or broken. This is very rarely, if ever, the fault of the tool itself. Inexperience or carving habits acquired from using poor quality or dull tools are the cause. We want to help you avoid these disappointments in the future.

About McClain's Wood Carving Tools

The tools we sell are handmade in Japan by master craftsmen famous for making the very finest carving tools available. The blades are hand forged from two types of steel. The tip or cutting edge is very hard, high-carbon steel capable of holding a sharp edge for a long time. However high-carbon steel is brittle, so it is laminated to softer, lower carbon steel which flexes and supports the hard steel. If you look very closely at the bevel, you can usually see a faint line where the two layers of steel have been forged together.

This double-layer construction creates blades that are strong; easy to sharpen compared to western tools, which are generally made from a single piece of hardened steel; and that hold an exceptionally sharp edge for a long time. At the same time, the blades are thin enough to feel more responsive as you are carving. Try carving with a thick, western-made steel chisel or u-gouge and you will feel the difference immediately.

The drawback with thinner blades is that they can be chipped or broken if they are not used properly. The smallest sizes are especially vulnerable to breaking because there just isn't a lot of metal there.

How Tools are Damaged

The most common reasons are:

- trying to make too deep a cut in one stroke.
- rocking the tool from side to side to push it through the wood.
- flicking up the tip of the blade at the end of a stroke.
- pressing down on the blade with your free hand, especially when the handle is left long
- using the wrong size blade for the job.
- carving with fast, hard, aggressive motions.
- carving with a dull blade.

Preventing Damage

You can avoid problems by:

- keeping the edge of the tool sharp. Hone it often while you are carving and sharpen it when it gets dull. You can return tools to McClain's for professional sharpening in Japan (see below).
- feeling for the correct angle before beginning to take a cut. The angle of the tool should never be greater than the angle of the bevel on the cutting edge of the tool, about 30°.
- making shallow cuts, especially when you first start using a tool. If you need to make a deep cut, work your way down with several strokes and remove the wood gradually with two or three cuts.
- carving smoothly without rocking the tool.
- using the right size blade for the job. The blade should never be buried more than one third of its height into the wood.
- backing the tool out and taking a more shallow cut if the blade jams and stops moving forward easily.
- cutting down the handle on Namisei and Josei tools so they fit your hand correctly.
- easing up and taking your time so you have control. If you want to make very bold, aggressive strokes, use a western tool.

Keep in mind that the craftsmen cannot fix blades that are broken off at the handle, but blades that are chipped will be repaired when the tool is sharpened. You can find information about this service in our catalog or on our web site at <https://imclains.com/profservices.html>.

We hope these tips help you enjoy using your Japanese tools for many years to come.



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