

An In-Depth Look at Soft-Block Carving and Resources

Introduction

Soft-block carving has been around for decades. It is similar to linoleum carving, except that it is done on block that are made out of vinyl or polymer. Many soft-block carvers got started carving erasers, and some carvers still refer to the art as “eraser carving.” I first got into soft-block carving because of my interest in the hobby of Letterboxing. After I carved several stamps to hide in letterboxes, I was hooked.

The neat thing about soft-block carving is that you can take your carving kit anywhere (except maybe airplanes nowadays). I carve while waiting in my dentist’s office and while watching TV—just about any time and anywhere! I keep a small carving kit stashed in my car, and another in a canvas bag, so I’m ready with a project just in case I need to pass the time productively.

Soft-block carving is an art that can be done by just about anyone, young and old alike. Children can be taught carving from about age six, and can easily use the carving tools safely under supervision. At age 11, my son Teddy carved the entire Greek alphabet (49 characters) for a school project, and he did a terrific job.

Soft-block carvers have different styles. I am what is called a “clean carver,” meaning that I tend to carve my images very precisely and cleanly. Many carvers leave “eraser trails,” which give their printed images movement and personality. After a few carving sessions, you’ll find your own style.

I hope that you give soft-block carving a try, and that you enjoy it as much as I do.

Supplies

Following is a list of the supplies you need to begin soft-block carving:

- Picture to carve
- Supplies for your transfer method of choice (see below)
- Carving block
- Carving tools
- Craft knife
- Scrap paper
- Light-colored dye ink pad
- Patience

Image Sources

The best images to carve are clearly delineated between black and white. A beginning carver should start with a bold image, such as a silhouette. Following are suggestions for sources:

- Dover Pictorial Archives books (available at bookstores and online—see *Web Resources* below)
- Coloring books
- Black and white clipart
- Your own artwork
- Photographs

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Carving Tools

Following are various carving tools:

- Speedball linoleum cutters – There are two handle styles for these cutters: inexpensive wood, and plastic. I recommend the plastic because the end cap comes off and you can't cut gouges in there. I suggest that you buy two handles so you don't have to switch gouges mid-carve. There are six gouges for these cutters, I use gouges 1 and 5 exclusively. You can buy Speedball lino cutters at Michael's Craft Stores, some other craft stores, most art supply stores, and in the craft department of some discount department stores. They're also readily available online (see *Web Resources* below).
- Micro woodcarving tools – Available from fine woodworking stores and online
- Calligraphy pen handles fixed with Speedball lino gouges – Some people prefer the feel of holding a calligraphy pen. Insert the gouge into the handle just as you would a pen nib.

Soft Block

Note: New brands of soft block are coming on the market all the time. Below are brands I have tried, and my comments. Not everyone feels about these blocks the way I do—try them all and find your preference.

Name	Source	Description	Comments
Mars Staedtler Mastercarve	Some rubber stamp stores and online*	This white block is about 3/4-inch thick and comes in a variety of sizes. It is "buttery" to cut.	This is the Cadillac of carving blocks. It is excellent for very detailed images, and can be carved on both sides.
Nasco Safety Kut	Online*	This light gray block is about 1/2-inch thick and comes in a variety of sizes.	An economical block, this is better for bold designs. It doesn't handle detailed images well.
Speedball Speedy Stamp	Some craft stores such as Michael's and online*	This is sometimes referred to as "the pink stuff." This is 1/4-inch thick and is easy to carve. It comes in a variety of sizes, and is the block that comes in kits with Speedball cutters.	This is a fairly easy-to-find economical block, and takes detailed carving well.
PZ-Kut	Online*	This vinyl block is about 1/4-inch thick, and last time I checked it came in only one size, about 5 x 10 inches.	This is my second-favorite block next to the Mastercarve.
Plumber's gasket	Large hardware stores such as Home Depot and Lowe's (ask a knowledgeable person in the plumbing department)	This dark red "block" is about 6 x 6 inches and is only 1/16-inch thick.	This is very challenging to carve, but I've used it several times. Award-winning artist Ed Giecek uses plumber's gasket for his soft-block carving.
Vinyl or polymer erasers	Discount stores, office supply stores, drug stores, etc.	Soft-block carving originated with people carving erasers. You can carve any vinyl or polymer eraser. Note: Avoid crumbly erasers.	The quality and size vary from eraser to eraser; you can even carve the eraser at the end of your pencil! This is a fun and economical way to waste time at work!

* See *Web Resources* below.

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Transfer Methods

Below are various methods to transfer your image to the block. I really like the acetone transfer best, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to find laser printers and toner-based copiers with toner that will transfer.

Method	You Will Need	Method	Comments
Direct-to-block	Pencil, pen, or marker	Draw your image directly on the block, remembering to reverse text or numbers (that is, your image must be the mirror of what you want to print).	This is by far the easiest method, but remember to make a mirror image!
Tracing paper	Tracing paper or tissue paper, soft-lead pencil, burnisher (finger, bone folder, back of spoon, etc.)	Place the tracing paper over an image you want to carve, such as large text or a picture. With your pencil, trace around the edge of the picture. Turn the paper over, place on your block, and rub the back, concentrating on the traced areas.	This is a very easy and effective method.
Pencil on paper	Pencil, paper, burnisher	Draw your picture in pencil on paper, turn it over onto the block, and rub the back.	This is another easy method for which you don't need special supplies.
Carbon or graphite transfer paper	Carbon or graphite transfer paper, stylus or ballpoint pen, a picture you want to trace	Place the carbon or graphite paper on the block, place the picture you want to trace on top, and draw around the outline of the image, pressing hard enough to transfer it to the block (peek now and then).	With this method you must also remember to reverse your words and numbers.
Acetone transfer	Dry toner black-and-white image (from a laser printer or toner-based copier—test one copy before you commit to this method!), acetone-based nail polish remover, cotton balls or tissue	Place the image face down on the block. Saturate a cotton ball or wad of tissue with acetone and dab it on the back (do not rub). Gently lift a corner of the paper to make sure the image has completely transferred. If not, reapply the acetone. <i>Note: This is also the way to test the quality of the laser print or toner-based copy. If it doesn't transfer, you can't use this method.</i>	This is the method I prefer because the transferred image is very crisp.
Iron transfer	Dry toner black-and-white image (from a laser printer or toner-based copier—test one copy before you commit to this method!), craft iron or dry household iron.	Place the image face down on the block. Place the heated iron on top of the paper, making sure not to touch the block directly with the iron. Lift the iron and place on another part of the image. Repeat until the entire image has transferred. Gently lift a corner of the paper to make sure the image has completely transferred. If not, reapply the acetone. <i>Note: This is also the way to test the quality of the laser print or toner-based copy. If it doesn't transfer, you can't use this method.</i>	Make sure that your iron is not too hot or you will melt the block (and make a mess!). This method will also produce a crisp image.

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How To Carve

1. Decide whether you are going to carve away the white or the black. I almost always carve all of the white away, but this is determined by what you want your finished carving to look like.
2. Use your large (#5) gouge to do all of the “gross” carving on the image (if any). Hold your gouge at a 25° angle to the surface of the block (see the illustration of page 4). Remember, you don’t need to carve too deeply.
3. Use your small (#1) gouge to do all of the fine carving on the image.
4. Ink your carving and to a test print. Carve more if necessary, and do test prints periodically.
5. When you are done carving your image, use a craft knife to carve away excess block around the image.

You’re done! It’s that easy!

Printing

Thicker block smaller than about 4 x 4 inches can be used just as you would a rubber stamp. Thinner blocks usually require a mounting block, but you might have success without one. If your carved block is large, it is often easier to use the following printing method to get a clear, crisp print:

1. Lay your block face up on your work surface.
2. Ink the block well. (I sometimes use a brayer, especially for very large blocks.)
3. Carefully lay your paper on top of the ink block and press down lightly.
4. Being careful not to shift the paper, rub the back of the paper all over the surface of the block. You can use your fingers, the back of a spoon, or a baren, which is a tool specifically designed for this task.
5. Carefully lift up an edge of the paper to see if the printing was successful. You can replace the paper and apply more pressure in areas that need it.

Cleanup

Clean excess toner off your carved block with a light application of acetone. Clean ink off your carved block with cool water and mild soap—do not scrub with a brush because you may damage your carving lines.

Maintaining Your Carving Tools

Carving gouges need to be sharpened periodically. I sharpen my Speedball gouges even when they are brand new. To sharpen, you need 400-grit sandpaper (readily available in hardware stores). Lay a small piece on your work surface and make small circular motions on the sandpaper with your gouge at a 25° angle, as shown below.



To sharpen the inside edge of your gouge, fold a small piece of sandpaper and simply swipe it along the inside of your gouge several times.

To inhibit rust, periodically dip your gouges in fine machine oil (such as sewing machine oil) and wipe off the excess.

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Web Resources

Click on the links below for online sources for soft-block carving.

Letterboxing

- www.letterboxing.org

Dover Pictorial Archives

- www.doverpublications.com

Linoleum Cutters, Handles, and Gouges

- www.enasco.com/artsandcrafts/Printmaking/Block+Printing/Lino+Cutters+%26+Handles/
- www.dickblick.com/products/speedball-linoleum-cutters/

Micro woodcarving tools

- www.leevalley.com

Nasco Safety-Kut Soft Block (variety of sizes)

- www.enasco.com/artsandcrafts/Printmaking/Block+Printing/Nasco+Safety-Kut%26%238482%3B/

Speedball Speedy Carve (the “pink stuff”)

- www.enasco.com/artsandcrafts/Printmaking/Block+Printing/Speedball%26%23174%3B+Speedy+Carve%26%238482%3B/

Staedtler Mastercarve Carving Blocks (variety of sizes)

- www.dickblick.com/products/staedtler-mastercarve-artist-carving-blocks/

PZ-Kut Carving Material (and one-stop shopping for all your soft-block carving needs)

- www.stampeaz.com/

My own carving Web site

- www.ruthannzaroff.com/carving/

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Bonus Carving Images

Here are some images that are perfect for carving! Enjoy!

