

# Carving a Stone

## Creating a realistic rock from wood

By Kenny Vermillion  
Photography by Carl Saathoff

I can't tell you how many beautiful carvings I've seen, except the artist used real rocks in the habitat.

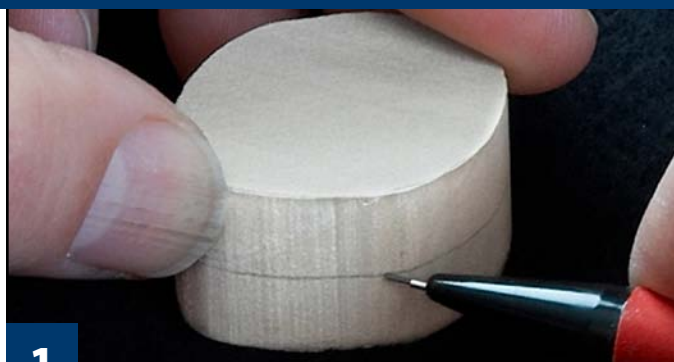
Little things mean a lot whether your pieces are judged or displayed. Your work is a direct reflection of you, and you want your best qualities front and center. Everything you create is a potential heirloom. If you can carve animals or a birds, you can carve stones.

When I examine even a small rock, I'm inspired by the form and texture, and compelled to create my version of it. Refer to a real stone to make a pattern, and draw only the outline of the top view. It is not practical to draw all of the contours and textures.

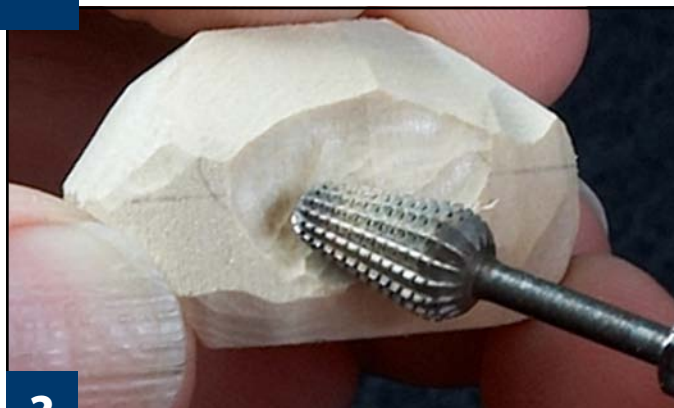
Hold the blank in your hand while you carve. Normal breathing causes the hands to move independently and uncontrollably. Hold the power carver the same as a pencil, and extend a finger from one hand to touch the other. Now when one hand moves, the other moves with it, enabling coordinated control.

I do all of my work under a 60-watt adjustable-arm lamp. Keep the light low and well in front to cast a shadow from the back. This defines contours and depth, as opposed to flooding the carving with light and eliminating shadows.

## STONE: ROUGHING OUT THE CARVING



**1 Cut the blank.** Make sure the grain of the tupelo wood blank is oriented from end to end. Draw a line  $\frac{3}{5}$  of the way down from the top with a mechanical pencil. This line separates the top from the bottom. Hold the eraser end of the pencil on the table while holding the point against the blank. To draw an even line, do not move the pencil; rotate the blank against the pencil.



**2 Rough out the general contours of the top portion of the stone.** Use a pear-shaped stump cutter. Use the pencil line as a guide. If there is an undesirable element, such as a knot, feel free to be creative and make an alteration. Loosening up in this regard is the first step to establishing your own unique style.



**3 Contour the bottom of the stone.** Use the same carving bit. Each side of the real stone is different. Stones are not symmetrical; some areas are convex and some may be concave. When contouring the lower portion of the stone, leave approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the bottom flat so it will not roll.



**5 Smooth the surface of the stone.** Lightly run a round-nose cylinder-shaped ceramic carving stone over it. Remove the tool marks left by the diamond bit. Because the carving stone doesn't dig into the wood the same way the more aggressive burs do, it can be pulled against the rotation of the tool.



**7 Add slightly smaller holes to the rock.** Use the point of a compass to stab randomly into the wood. Vary the depth of stabs for variety, but don't go deeper than  $\frac{3}{32}$ " (2.5mm). Wiggling back and forth or in circles after stabbing also adds an interesting texture. Some of these holes will be clustered and some will be inside the craters made in the Step 6.

## STONE: REFINING THE PIECE



**4 Smooth the deep furrows.** Lightly stroke over the contours with a flame-shaped diamond bit to create a smooth transition from one area to the next. Stones have eroded and worn for eons, so they usually don't have sharp edges. It's OK to enhance or eliminate areas of the shape.

## STONE: ADDING THE DETAILS



**6 Add small craters to the rock.** Stones can be very porous. This is the first of three steps to replicate this texture. Use a small, round diamond bit, with the rotary tool set at a higher speed, to randomly carve little craters. Some of these craters may be clustered together.



**8 Add the smallest holes.** Push the points of a set of dividers into the wood using the technique explained in Step 7. These smaller holes are more numerous than the others. If using both points simultaneously, be careful that the holes don't appear too methodical; turn the stone and stab in at various angles or just use one point at times.

# Setting up a Painting Station

Start by gathering the materials you need. I use gesso as an opaque primer coat because it has “tooth” that allows the thin washes of acrylic paint to adhere. I use Liquitex tube acrylic paints because they are more concentrated, have better adhesive qualities (stick better), and are translucent. The concentration of the paint allows you to apply thin washes without the paint breaking down and becoming chalky. The adhesive quality allows you to apply thinner washes, and the translucence allows you to correct the colors with subsequent washes of paint. When you apply the translucent paint over gesso, it helps create highlights.

**Set up the basic necessities.** I use three cups of water when painting. The cup on the upper left is used for mixing with paint. This water must be kept clean. The other two cups are used to clean brushes. The one on the upper right is always for the first swishing of the brush and the one on the lower right is always for the final swishing. Use

the paper towel to wipe the brushes after swishing or cleaning. The eyedropper is used to transfer water from the appropriate cup to the palette. The knife and the spatula are used to measure and dispense paint. The short-bristled nylon brush is used for mixing paint. The pointed camel-hair brush is used for applying paint. The small jar contains Windex with ammonia. Ammonia is a solvent for acrylic paint, and Windex contains just the right amount. Occasional swishing of the brushes in Windex prolongs their life by cleaning the paint from the ferrules. When paint dries in the brush ferrule, the bristles splay and become brittle. Follow swishing in the Windex by swishing in both water cups, then dragging on the towel to complete the procedure. New paintbrushes have a water-solvent agent on them to hold their shape. Before using new brushes, this agent should be swished off in the water cups to insure they are soft and will accept a paint load. Swishing all brushes, new or used, before use



achieves the same thing, plus it wets the ferrule to slow the paint drying there. After swishing, hold the brush flat on the paper towel and turn it between the thumb and forefinger while lightly dragging it on the towel. This takes excess water off and reshapes the bristles.



**Set up your painting palette.** Tupperware egg trays make excellent palettes for painting with washes because the trays have deep wells. Acrylic paint dries quickly, so wet sponges placed over the wells preserve the paint while you are not using it. Sealing the palette (with sponge over the paint) inside the Tupperware container can keep the paint for many days. To clean the pallet after you finish painting, wipe out as much paint as you can with a paper towel. If the paint is dried in the well, peel it out like you'd peel the skin from a boiled egg. Next, spray Windex into the tray and scrub with a toothbrush. Do not use a dishwashing scrubber because the scrubber is abrasive enough to roughen the sides of the wells. Rinse the Windex off with water. I use a coffee can lid to hold the wet sponges when they are not in use.

## STONE: PAINTING THE CARVING



**9 Seal the wood.** Stick a straight pin into the bottom of the stone to give you a place to clamp it. Use 5-minute epoxy to attach cut-in-half popsicle sticks to the jaws of a clothespin and attach a notched dowel to the outside of the clothespin. Drill holes the same diameter as the dowels in a scrap 2x4 to support the clamps. Seal the entire stone with interior/exterior lacquer to keep the fibers from rising when you paint it with washes. Give it three coats and let it dry several minutes between coats. Let the lacquer set for at least 12 hours before painting.



**11 Paint the whole stone gray.** Mix a small amount of Payne's gray with water to the consistency of milk. Paint the entire stone just as you did in Step 10. Slight overlaps are OK but try to avoid them. Clean the brush and let this coat dry.



**10 Apply a coat of gesso.** Mix a couple drops of gesso with water to the consistency of milk. Use an old brush to mix the wash thoroughly to ensure that all the particles dissolve, and then apply the wash. Prevent overlap marks by being stingy with the paint and scrubbing over the entire surface of the rock. If, after drying, the stone appears evenly coated with no overlaps, one coat is enough. Clean the brush.



**12 Paint the whole stone with raw umber.** Mix a small amount of raw umber with water to the consistency of milk, and paint the entire stone. This coat will meld with the previous coat to create a slightly marbled effect.



13

**Add the shadows.** Return to the Payne's gray and stir well because the pigments are heavier than water and settle to the bottom. Paint the shadowed areas and the bottom portions. Placing the stone directly under a work light helps identify these areas.



14

**Add a coat of raw umber to the shadowed areas.** Return to the raw umber and paint the same areas as in Step 13. When painting with washes, most of the paint stays in the low areas and is wiped off of the higher highlight areas. Because it is thin, it doesn't fill the details, and because most of it is wiped off the high areas, highlights are automatic. However, the highlights may need to be touched up later.



15

**Apply the final coats of paint and finish.** Paint the entire stone with Payne's gray. Allow the paint to dry, and then paint the stone with raw umber. These two colors may be repeated as necessary to achieve the desired depth. Recoat the shadow areas if needed. For a more shiny finish, dilute gloss medium with water to the consistency of skim milk and apply subsequent coats as desired.

**TIP**

**ADDING MORE COLORS**

*I rarely mix more than three colors together because it increases the chances of the paint becoming muddy. To add additional color to the stone, stipple it on in a small area. If it doesn't look appealing, wipe it off with a wet brush before it is dry. Stone forms vary greatly and their textures range from porous to layered to smooth. To coordinate the appropriate texture and form, refer to a real stone.*

**materials & tools**

**MATERIALS:**

- Tupelo, 1" (25mm)-thick: 1" x 1" (25mm x 25mm) • White gesso
- Acrylic paint such as Liquitex tube: Payne's gray and raw umber
- Interior/exterior spray lacquer
- Gloss medium

**TOOLS:**

- Mechanical pencil
- Straight pin
- Compass with a large point
- Dividers with small points
- Rotary tool
- Carving bits, 3/32"-diameter shank: pear-shaped stump cutter, flame-shaped diamond bit, round-nose cylinder-shaped stone, small round diamond bit

*The author used these products for the project. Substitute your choice of brands, tools, and materials as desired.*



*Kenny Vermillion has been carving wildlife subjects professionally since 1983. His works have won hundreds of awards and are in private and museum collections throughout the U.S.A. and seven other countries. Kenny's expertise and mastery are recognized by other professionals. He is very respected for his high level of technical excellence and strict standard of quality.*