

Two wooden mushroom-shaped netsuke carvings are displayed on a grey felt mat. The mat is circular with a blue stitched border and is placed on a light-colored wooden surface. The mushroom on the left is smaller and has a smooth, rounded stem. The mushroom on the right is larger and has a more textured stem with vertical lines. Both mushrooms have a smooth, rounded cap.

# Carving Netsuke Mushrooms

Netsuke is a delightfully portable art form that requires no workshop, just a couple of super sharp tools, an open mind and a panel beater's sandbag.

During the Edo period in Japan pockets were banned (they could be used to conceal a weapon). If you needed to carry coins or tobacco you did so in a small purse hung from the sash of your kimono. The purse itself used a toggle as an anchor to secure the string after it had looped over the wide belt of the kimono.

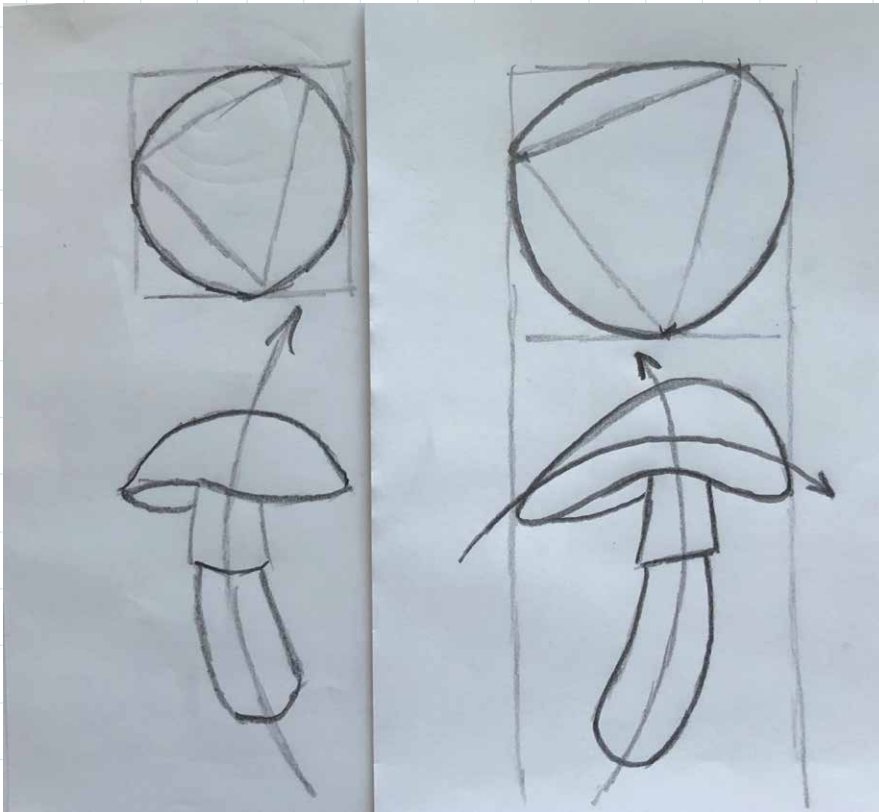
Netsuke evolved over time into a refined art form. Often whimsical beasts and comic characters were carved to

form these toggles. When Japan opened up to the West in 1868 netsuke became a popular collectable and the art form became known and admired by a wider audience.

Last month I attended a netsuke weekend workshop with Hape Kiddle and had a great time learning both some new skills and a new way of seeing.

Mushrooms are delightful organic shapes, they come in an amazing vari-

ety of shapes and colours and proved to be a fabulous muse for our first foray into the art of netsuke carving. Netsuke are dynamic carvings that carry a sense of motion and life of the subject. One way to capture this life is to sketch your netsuke around a curved axis. This will give your netsuke a sense of motion and move you away from a more static symmetrical carving.



## INFORMATION

### MATERIALS

- Huon pine is the material used for both mushrooms. You need a dense close-grained timber that easily yields to a blade.

### TOOLS REQUIRED

- A boxed set of 5 Power Grip netsuke carving chisels
- A Mora 120 knife
- A fine paring chisel
- Kevlar carving gloves
- Panel beater's sandbag
- 80, 180, 240 and 400 grit abrasive pads
- Orange oil

### Additional tools

- A 0.5mm wood block embossing chisel

Nature is not symmetrical. In order to breathe life into any carving you need to draw a sweeping axis that in itself has life and motion before you draw the object you want to carve. Carving mushrooms is an excellent introduction to netsuke carving. The stalk gives you a handle to hold on to as you carve, while the top gives you plenty of scope to develop the slicing technique that is at the heart of successful carving. Once you have settled on a design it is time to sketch it onto the faces of your stock.





**1** Netsuke carving chisels are incredibly sharp. It is wise to wear Kevlar carving gloves. The first step is to settle your stock on the leather sandbag and slice away the sharp edges at the base of the stalk. This makes the stock easier to hold.

**2** Before you settle into carving the actual shape it is important to get used to the carving tools that you will be using. As you can see I use my thumb as a pivot so that I can control the slicing motion of the Mora knife.

**3** Slice the base of the volva neatly all the way around the stalk.

**4** Gently chamfer the stalk until you have a rough round.

**5** Use the large carving gouge to form the undulating shape of the cap. The grain will change direction as you chisel the cap base. Take your time and make small cuts so that you control the gouge at all times.

## HANDY HINTS

1. Don't overfill your panel beater's sandbag. The bags are purchased empty and come with a couple of rivets to close them. You want the bag to act as a cushion when you are carving, it needs to conform to the shape you are carving.
2. Slowly carve towards a line. Take lots of small slices so that you are always in charge of the chisel.
3. Strop your chisels often. Don't let them become dull. As soon as a chisel or knife hesitates in a cut it is time to lap it back to a keen edge.
4. Do not rush the carving. Take your time and enjoy the journey.
5. Let the design evolve as you carve.
6. Rough out the shape before you start to refine it.

**6** The Power Grip netsuke carving chisels are made from laminated steel and are presented super sharp straight out of the box. It is important to return them to the box in order to protect the cutting edges. Similarly, the Mora knife and the fine paring chisel are supplied with sheaths. They too need to have their keen edges protected from accidental collisions with other tools.

**7** With the base shape of the cap roughly solved peel away the edges of the mushroom cap. Slowly slice away the stock until you arrive at the profile line drawn on the top of the stock. This will remove the profiles from the faces of the stock and make it necessary to consult the sketch in order to carve the correct dome shape of the cap.

**8** With the mushroom now roughly carved to shape, refine the curves with the long-bladed paring chisel. The stalk and volva are pared to a more refined round. Take care to look carefully at the changing direction of the grain. It is easy to chip large sections away if you approach this task with too much haste. A choking hold on the paring chisel gives you much more control of the blade.

**9** With the stem now roughed to size it is time to focus on the underside of the cap. Firmly place the mushroom on the sandbag and then use the large gouge to slice radial cuts until the undulating shape has been refined.

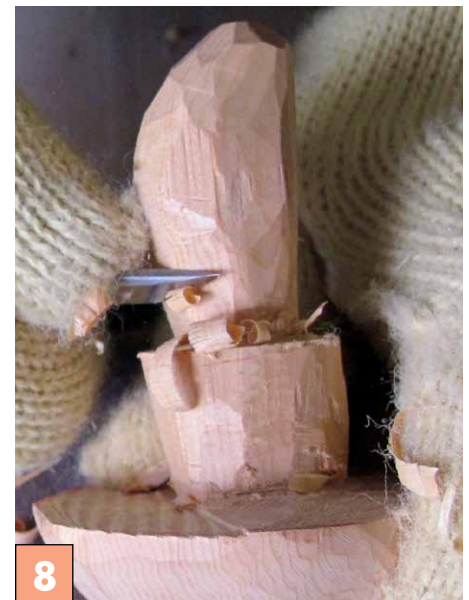
**10** The gouge marks are then removed with the delicate application of the flat chisel. The curved cutting edge of the flat chisel allows it to be used to shear the peaks left behind by the gouge and produce a flat surface. The undulating curves are addressed with the same chisel. In order to smooth a curved surface the flat chisel is turned upside down. In this format the curved cutting edge of the chisel can be used with great effect to smooth out the rippled surface left behind by the gouge.



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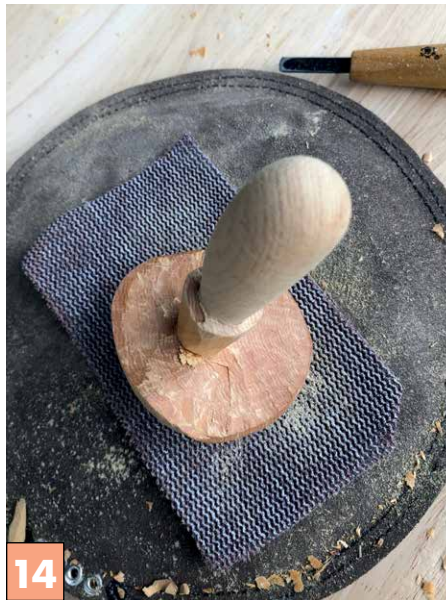
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**11** The flat chisel is then used to trim off the sharp edge where the cap meets the underside of the mushroom cap. The same chisel can be used to smooth facets on the cap and prepare the surface for sanding.

**12** With the mushroom refined to its final shape it is time to take stock and ponder if the shape is right. The shape should be similar to the original sketch. If not, now is the time to be bold and return to the Mora knife for some serious roughing out. When the shape is right return to the fine paring chisel and pare away the facets to create as smooth a curve as possible.

**13** Mushrooms are delightfully round shapes. The stalk needs to be rounded first. A sanding pad makes fast work of removing the bulk of the facets on the stalk. Start with 80 grit abrasives for the rough sanding and then move up the grades from 180, 240 and finally 400 grade.

**14** With the stalk sanded smooth it is time to focus on the top of the cap. Dimpling the sandbag and using it as a sanding platform is one approach that works well. In this format the stalk of the mushroom makes an excellent handle while you address the cap of the mushroom.

**15** A mushroom first appears above ground as a bud. This bud then grows into a button supported by a stem. When the moment is right the button expands rapidly and forms the umbrella-like cap of the mushroom. The expansion reveals the volva and the tear marks left behind as the canopy broke free of the stalk. In order to make the volva of the off-centre mushroom look natural, draw both the tear lines and taper that complement the distances from the stalk to the edge of the mushroom.

**16** With the volva shape decided upon you can now carve away with the gouge until you have the bulk of the shape roughly sized.

**17** The volva on a mushroom looks like a torn curtain. The V-shaped chisel is used to both create the undercut for the curtain as well as the tear lines on the volva.

**18** Before you draw the gills on the underside of the mushroom you need to run the pencil around the edge of the cap to produce a margin line. To draw the gills, first divide the underside of the cap into quadrants. These quadrants should then be divided and divided again until you have an appropriate number of equally-spaced gill lines.

**19** Nest the mushroom firmly on the sandbag and then carefully slice along the gill lines with the V carving chisel. The chisel will make fast work of the gills when they are in line with the grain. The challenge is to carve the same depth line across the grain. This is best achieved by taking gentle but firm cuts in one sweep from the outer edge to the shaft. Building up depth with several passes will produce the best results.

**20** When you are happy with the number and depth of the gill lines an eraser is used to remove the pencil marks. The gills should be left sharp and not sanded smooth. After a final clean-up, sand with 400-grade paper and finish with a squirt of orange oil to bring out the colour of the Huon pine and seal the final surface.

**21** Netsuke is an addictive craft that opens your eyes to the curves found in nature. Netsuke is also a portable craft that allows you to take your workshop just about anywhere and relax into a world of creativity. For more information on tools and courses turn to page 73. **W**

