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# Eagle Carvings

## A carver's view of our heritage

by Allan S. Woodle

This is the year to carve eagles. If you are a professional carver you can expect a much greater demand for your creations than you would in a "normal" year, as the eagle is a bicentennial symbol second only to the flag (discounting the ad-agency bicentennial trademark, the one with the interwoven lines like a doormat). On the other hand, if you are a beginner in the field of eagle carving, you are certain to find eagles illustrated everywhere, material for a rich harvest of design ideas to swell your eagle swipe file.

In any carving project that involves symbols it is interesting as well as helpful to know something of the history of those symbols and their meaning. This is particularly true of the eagle which has so rich a heritage. At the time of the American Revolution, the eagle was the symbol of royalty in many parts of Europe. Immigrants from France, Austria, Russia and Prussia must surely have brought with them the concept of the eagle as the power of government. It is perhaps for this reason that the eagle was adopted as the central figure in the great seal, and perhaps, too, because the new republic was aligning

itself symbolically with the European continent against the British lion.

The adoption of the eagle did not happen automatically with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Ten days after this act, the Congress appointed a committee consisting of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson to select a seal for the new United States. How such big guns of the revolution found time to give any thought at all to this project is hard to understand, but they apparently did, and it must be stated that the country would have been better served had they devoted themselves to affairs of State. These were their suggestions:

Franklin: Moses lifting his wand and dividing the water of the Red Sea to swallow Pharaoh and his chariot.

Jefferson: The children of Israel in the wilderness with Hengist and Horsa, Saxon chiefs, on the reverse side.

Adams: Hercules being urged by Virtue (a maiden) to ascend the mountains while the figure of Sloth reclines on the ground.

Lucky for us none of these was adopted. Imagine carving one of them! A safe conclusion is that being a good

*Walnut eagle by the great carver John Bellamy has wing span of 48 inches. It's on display at the Mystic Seaport in Connecticut.*

statesman does not qualify one as a designer, and, of course, vice versa.

William Barton, a prominent Philadelphia citizen, is credited as the first to submit a design featuring an eagle (an imperial one—that is, a stylized, fierce one with the primary feathers widely separated) holding a flag of the United States in its left talon and a sword in its right with a laurel wreath suspended from the point. Below is a maiden representing Virtue holding a dove in her right hand and resting her left hand on a shield adorned with stars and stripes. A soldier stands beside the shield.

The Congress turned this design over to Charles Thompson of Philadelphia, a classical scholar, patriot and public servant, for its refinement, and it is to him we are indebted for the creation of the final design. He eliminated the maiden and the soldier; specified that the eagle be the American bald one; put thirteen arrows in the left talon for the thirteen colonies that won the war together, and an olive branch, the universal symbol of peace, in the other; hung a streamer from the eagle's beak with the words *E Pluribus Unum*



*Eagle by or after Rush is in Mariners Museum, Newport News. At right, The Great Seal.*



thereon; and placed a crest above the eagle with thirteen stars.

His design was adopted by Congress in 1783 and except for minor changes is the same today. It is a static, formal design as befits an official seal, but it had a tremendous influence on the proliferation of eagle designs that followed, many of them anything but formal. Important symbolic features—the olive branch, the arrows, the wide-spread wings—appear again and again.

A significant thing about this design is that the people of the revolution liked it. They copied it (with modifications, of course) in every conceivable way. They drew it, quilted it, cast it in metal and carved it in wood. When Washington made a triumphant tour of the states in 1789, people everywhere pasted sketches of eagles on their windows and lit them from behind with candles. A charming picture: Washington riding through darkened streets touched by the flickering yellow pictures of eagles in homes along the way. Can you conceive Pharaoh being swallowed by the Red Sea enjoying such popularity?

The bald-headed eagle was just right for the times. This suggests that perhaps it took our country's founders six years to get around to adopting what the people wanted in the first place. In fact, there is some evidence that the eagle was thought of as representing the United States some years before it was adopted; there is a wall painting in Connecticut of an eagle with the motto "Federal Union" holding arrows and an olive branch, done during the 1770's.

Thus the great seal was more than a seal used to illuminate official documents. It became a popular inspiration for designers that grew mightily during the days of sailing ships in the 19th century, faded during

the early part of the 20th century and now shows signs of a modest revival as part of the burgeoning interest in crafts.

If you are interested in continuing this tradition it is strongly recommended that you study the work of master carvers of the past. Their work is tremendously varied, some of it realistic, some stylized with a more contemporary appearance than many modern carvings.

Most museums have eagle carvings, and some have a great number of them. It is most helpful to take photographs of those that you like, or you can buy official museum photographs quite inexpensively—not through a museum gift shop, but from the curator's office. I have found the professionals and specialists employed by museums invariably eager to help anyone who is seriously interested in their exhibits. These photographs will be useful to refer to when you are working on a design. They are not a substitute for actually seeing a carving, but they help in remembering details and relationships that are easily forgotten, at least by this carver.

#### Master carvers of the past

There follows a brief description of a few carvers and their work that I have liked. They happen to be the outstanding carvers of their time, but that is because others liked their work too. In reading about these well-known carvers it is well to keep in mind that for every carving that is identified there are ten whose origins are unknown. And many of these unidentified creations are well worth studying. The names given here are only the tip of the iceberg.

An outstanding carver of the early years of the republic was Samuel McIntire (1757-1811). An architectural

designer and woodcarver, he produced numerous eagles and inspired others to do likewise, including Joseph True who in 1828 carved the striking eagle on the Custom House in Salem, Mass. A number of McIntire eagles, in my opinion, show the influence of the imperial style of eagle and in consequence do not deserve the criticism that they "look more like scrawny roosters caught out in a downpour than our national bird," as one writer put it. They do look rather scrawny, but so do imperial eagles. Certainly there is nothing scrawny about the striking design which used to hang over the doorway of the old Salem Custom House. I like the stance of this eagle, but the beak makes the bird look a trifle anguished rather than fierce. McIntire did not cut the inside of the beaks of his eagles to a sharp line. This may have made them stronger, but the poor birds look as if they have a mouth full of something or other.

William Rush (1756-1833) of Philadelphia was another fine carver of the Revolutionary period who did many eagle carvings, among them sternboards for sailing ships. At the time of the revolution ships were heavily decorated with carvings, but to my knowledge the eagle was not featured until the beginning of the 19th century.

Variations in eagle carvings derive mainly from the uses for which they were designed. Individual carvers varied the method of execution of their work, but they still had to fit their conceptions to the job at hand. The contrast between sternboards (aplustras if you want to be fancy) and wall decorations is an example of this. A wall decoration could be delicate because it would be viewed more closely than one mounted on the stern of a ship. To be effective, such a carving had to be bold



in both detail and decorative outline. A carving by or after Rush shows this. This carving is 94 inches wide so it is bold indeed. Rush had a way of carving feathers so that they looked soft and real without making them look fussy or overcarved.

Eagles were often used to adorn the flat-topped pilot houses of tugboats and sometimes of coastal passenger steamers and trawlers. Pilot house eagles are quite distinctive in appearance. They stand with beaks stretched forward, with bodies almost horizontal and with wings outstretched as if they were about to launch themselves into the wind. I know that if I had a tugboat I would want such an eagle on the roof.

Flagpole eagles are obviously smaller than pilot house eagles, but they often carry much the same pose with talons grasping the round ball at the top of the pole. Sometimes they are presented in a more vertical position but still with wings outspread. When you stop to think about it, an eagle way up on a flagpole with wings folded might be a crow or just about anything.

Eagles used as decorations in the interior of buildings and on furniture took many forms to suit the physical circumstances. The only similarity between them is that they were always small as compared to outdoor eagles.

As the 19th century progressed there was a greatly increased demand for eagle carvings. Ship captains liked them to adorn the sterns of their vessels and they also liked to hang them over the doorways of their houses.

No one carved more eagles or more beautiful ones during that time (or any other for that matter) than John Hale Bellamy (1836-1914). He lived most of his life in Kittery Point, Maine, in the house in which he was born, but for a time he had a shop in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This gave rise to the

phrase "Portsmouth eagle" in referring to his work. He is reported to have been a tremendously skilled and facile carver who turned out eagles by the dozens and gave many of them away to friends and neighbors.

Bellamy had style. He developed his own way of depicting details. He used squared-off beaks and deep eye sockets to make carvings "read" on the sterns of ships. When he turned to decorative eagles, he often made them almost abstract, playing with the form from one carving to another. Every carver of eagles can benefit from a study of the work of Bellamy and envy his life style too. He was facile with a pen as well as with his tools. He wrote poetry and articles of current interest and was a public figure of importance.

At the other end of the social spectrum from Bellamy was a carver from central Pennsylvania named Wilhelm Schimmel (1817-1890). His work is primitive but forceful and intriguing. He appeared in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, shortly after the Civil War and remained there until his death. He seemed to have been driven to carve. This is not particularly unusual because many of us are driven to some degree, but not in the circumstances of Schimmel.

He was without a home, worked sometimes as a farm laborer, was often in jail, but he was always carving. He carried a bag of wood and his simple tools with him; these probably consisted of a jackknife and a box of paints. He never got much for his work: food and lodging perhaps, and that given in charity. (And we complain because our cellar is damp and our carving bench a bit wobbly!) Schimmel's work has vigor, and it could easily give direction to a contemporary carver who is seeking a bold style of presentation. The Shelburne

Museum outside of Burlington, Vermont, has a room devoted to Schimmel carvings, and examples of his work are on display in museums all over the country.

Incidentally, the Shelburne Museum has a huge collection of eagles of all kinds. I would guess that there are over a hundred of them—the biggest collection I know. But a word of warning: if you want to take photographs you must go to the office for a permit. On my first visit I was not aware that picture-taking was not allowed, and peering into my viewfinder I was surprised to see what appeared to be an elderly symbol of Virtue with arms spread wide protecting the eagle I was aiming at. She was only slightly mollified when I came back with a permit. Such are the hazards of eagle-hunting.

### Trying to carve an eagle

If you decide to turn your hand to eagle carving the easiest way to start is with a low relief suitable as a wall decoration. Work up a drawing, or if you are not handy at this, start with an outline drawing such as that in the *Marine Carving Handbook* by Jay S. Hanna. Such a drawing will give you basic proportions which you can modify as you wish, changing the shape of the ribbon, the sweep of the wings and so forth. When this sketch is to your satisfaction, square it off and enlarge it on paper to suit the wood you are going to use. I suggest an overall width of about two feet, which is the width of the carving illustrated. Any smaller and the details get fussy. This carving was done on 1-1/8-inch basswood; a denser wood, pine or honduras mahogany would have been better. More easily available one-inch material could be used but the thicker wood gives better modeling.



*McIntire eagle (above) originally surmounted doorway of old Custom House in Salem, Mass. True eagle (far left) is over present Custom House. Schimmel eagle (near left) is at Metropolitan Museum in New York. It's approximately one foot wide.*

You may find this hard to credit, but you should start two carvings at the same time. Therefore, you should enlarge your drawing on paper rather than directly on the wood. With a paper "cartoon" it is easy to transfer the drawing to the wood with carbon paper. Both carvings should then be cut in outline on the band saw. After this is done, put one aside and make your mistakes on the other. When this first carving is complete, prop it up on the back of your bench and do a better job on the second one. When it is finished you will have learned more about carving eagles than if you had tried to carve six different birds.

Even after you have gained experience you will find that carving several pieces at a time is a good practice. If you have a good drawing there is no

sense in using it only once, and if the drawing isn't any good you shouldn't start at all.

Many carvers simply clamp their birds to the bench and hack away. I think it is worth the trouble to mount the bird on a board—a piece of 3/8-inch or 1/2-inch plywood is best—about three inches longer on each end than the carving. This is done by gluing them both together using white glue with a sheet of newspaper in between. This holds well enough while you are working, but when the front is finished and the carving is ready to be back cut it is an easy matter to free the bird with a flat chisel.

This backing board makes it easy to clamp the carving without either crushing or splitting it. After you have finished roughing out you will have some

thin sections that can easily break when the bird is unmounted if you get the least bit enthusiastic (and enthusiasm is hard to control when the old bird begins to take shape).

The carving shown has been painted with acrylic paints in an acrylic gel medium. The latter slows the drying a bit and creates an attractive surface. These paints are easy to use. They can even serve as a gesso for filling in little errors if mixed with modeling paste. All these materials are available in art supply stores.

A carved eagle looks most dramatic if it is gilded. Applying gold leaf is not difficult and is worth trying sometime, but for the first time around paint will do and will make it look mighty handsome when you have it hung over your fireplace.

*If you want to carve an eagle, here's a pattern the author worked up for this article. Squares for the original were about 1-3/8 inches to give a 24-inch eagle, but you can make them any size you want. But start two eagles—one for practice, one to finish.*

