

Carving Amber



By Yoli Rose

Beginner-to-intermediate carving project.

There is something warm and delicious about amber, the fossil resin of ancient pine trees. A carved piece of amber catches and plays with light, and has a smooth, sensuous feel. It is soft (2-3 on the Mohs scale) and relatively easy to carve - you can use everyday tools and do it by hand, or use a flexible-shaft machine, as I will describe here. It helps to not get too attached to a piece because amber is brittle and can chip or break, and it cannot take heat.

Amber can be transparent, translucent, or opaque, and can be of various colors. I recommend purchasing it from a reputable dealer, but when in doubt of its authenticity, there are a few ways to test amber to be sure it is not plastic. First, in a spot you plan to carve away anyway, stick the material with a hot needle. Burning amber smells sweet and pinelike, not like plastic. Second, you can brush or soak it in methyl alcohol or ethyl acetate. Plastic will dissolve. (Caution: amber will dissolve in solvents like acetone or nail polish remover.) Finally, you can mix 4 teaspoons of salt into an 8-ounce glass of water. Real amber will float in it.

Editor's note: To learn more about carvings by Yoli and Eagle Rose, see "Art from Artifacts," page 26 in the August 1999 *Lapidary Journal*.

STEP 1.

Look carefully at your amber, checking for any cracks or areas you want to avoid or cut away. Initially, you may want to plan a design that is fairly simple.



Rough out the shape you want and take out spots you don't want, such as surface cracks. Start with rough sandpaper (maybe 80-grit) or sanding discs, or large, round burs. Remember to have the amber and both hands well braced on the workbench for control. This is important for every step throughout this project.

STEP 2.

If you want your carving to be a pendant, there are several ways to go about it. You can set the completed carving into a pendant with a bezel (be careful when bending the bezel over it, as amber is soft and brittle) or you can hang it with a wrapped wire or prong technique. However, if you want to drill through the piece and string it, I recommend you do it early on in the piece - before you've put too much time and energy into the carving - in case the amber shatters during drilling. Since most amber is transparent or semi-transparent, the hole you drill, and the cord that goes through it, may be visible in your piece.

STEP 3.

If you choose to drill, draw a straight line across the amber with pencil at the height you want the hole to be, keeping it high enough so the piece doesn't flip over when strung. Draw another straight line across the center of the top and sides of the amber. Check that it looks correct. Make an "X" on both sides where the lines bisect - this is where you will be drilling. With a small, round bur, make indentations at the "X" on both ends. Keep the bur slow enough so as not to burn the tool, but fast enough so it doesn't skip, just cuts. (This pertains to all steps.) With a small drill, drill from either end, slowly and steadily, but keep the drill rotating! Continue drilling in and pulling out and blowing off dust. Don't stop in the middle or the drill will get stuck. Pay attention to where the drill is, and where your lines are from all angles, until you meet in the middle. If it's a bit askew, use progressively larger drills until it is straight. For stringing, see STEP 6.



STEP 4.

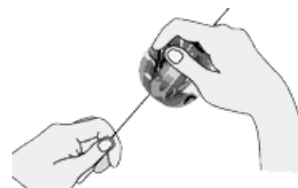
Carve your design with round burs. Pay attention to the direction the bur moves, so you can spin it away from any edges, to avoid chipping.

STEP 5.

Sand the amber with finer and finer sandpaper (higher grit numbers). Small pieces of sandpaper around bamboo skewers or toothpicks can get into hard to reach indentations. After you've used 600-grit or finer, finish by rubbing the piece with brass polish on a soft cloth.

STEP 6.

Before stringing a pendant, thrum the inside hole with a piece of string tied to one end of your workbench, and coated with oil (olive or other). Repeat using separate strings coated with (in this order) silicon carbide powder, a progressively finer silicon carbide, tripoli (not oil), and finally brass polish.



Yoli Rose and her husband, Eagle, are jewelry artisans based in Northern California.

©Interweave Press LLC. Not to be reprinted. All rights reserved.



publishers of *Lapidary Journal Jewelry Artist* magazine...join the online community at www.JewelryMakingDaily.com Visit the online store at

www.interweavestore.com/Beading-Gem-Jewelry.html for more great projects!