LEVELS IN RELIEF WOOD CARVING

Step-by-step instructions for establishing the rough out levels for any wood carving pattern.

Lora S. Irish
What are you carving?

Where many relief carvers approach a project by carving individual elements, one at a time, fully developing each before moving on to the next I prefer to first establish groups of elements into distinct levels. Those groupings of elements can be carved to a predetermined depth in the blank then shaping and detailing established. This gives me lots of control over both the depth and the perspective of the scene.

Since most patterns do not come with the level lines or areas already established let’s look at how you can discover the levels within any design.

I start by telling myself exactly what I see in the patterns.

For this pattern I see a lighthouse on a sandy knoll. In front of the lighthouse are three pieces of snow fencing to keep the sand from shifting.

There is also a path that leads over the edge of the knoll to the lighthouse and a gnarled scrub pine. Some grass and a fourth piece of snow fence lie behind the lighthouse.

In the middle of the scene I see a sailboat in a wide cove. Behind the sailboat is a small harbor scene of houses, trees and a wharf. Behind the harbor is the horizon line for the ocean and a small jetty of trees sets upon this line. Several puffy clouds rest upon the horizon line.
What is the focus of the pattern?

Every pattern tells a small visual story, whether it is a cameo, single item design or a full landscape as our seascape sample. The item that the visual story is about becomes the focus point of the carve.

Since the lighthouse was the first element that I noticed it will become the focus of the carving and the level that it lies in will receive the thickest section of wood.
What elements of the pattern are around the focus point?

Having found the focus element I want to find any other element that appears to fall along the same plane. The lighthouse is behind the three snow fences yet in front of the water’s edge. There is a small section of snow fence on the right side that also is behind the foreground fencing. This section of fence and the grassy area in which it sets will become part of the lighthouse level.
What lies in front of the focus point element?

Next I look for any elements that lie in front of my focus point. For this scene it is the path, three larger snow fence sections, a gnarled scrub pine and the sandy knoll area. I will group these elements to become my foreground level or highest level.

As a general rule most focus point elements fall near the center level of the scene with elements both in front and behind the item.
Is there another important item in the pattern?

The next element that catches my eye is the sailboat. This boat is behind the lighthouse in the center area of the water.

Many patterns include several focus elements. In our seascape the lighthouse is needed to signal the shoreline for the incoming boats.
What elements fall in the same visual plane as the secondary focus point?

Since I want the sail boat to sit on top of the ocean, not become part of the ocean, I need to divide or separate the boat and the background water. I can do that by drawing a line on the water where the boat’s hull touches the ocean. Now the sail boat and all of the ocean in front of the boat can become a new level.
Where is the deepest point in the pattern?

Often I will move to the very back of the scene at this point to discover where the sky area lies. In a scene or landscape this can include any far off mountains, distant tree lines, clouds and the sun. For this scene the sky area contains the sky and clouds. All of the sky area lies above the ocean horizon line. There is a small jetty of land with pines that also lies above the horizon line so I will include that bit of land into my sky area.

Everything that is left becomes my background level which for this seascape includes the small harbor town and wharf. If I am working on a thin piece of stock, 1” or less in thickness, I will stop here. At this point I have four distinct levels and a sky area. As a rule of thumb I carve in the upper half of the wood surface, leaving one half of the stock to structurally stabilize my carving from excessive cupping or warping. So for a 1” thickness a four level pattern allows 1/8” per level with the sky area etched into the surface of the back half of the stock.
Are there elements between the mid-ground and the background?

Thicker wood can take more levels. So let’s do a little more level work. I have an area of water that lies behind the sailboat but in front of the harbor scene. This is a great area for a new level, separating the ocean water from the land.
How many levels do I need?

There is also a section of ocean behind the harbor scene. By drawing a line where the bottoms of the wharf posts disappear into the water I can create a separation line for the background water. The ocean has been separated into three sections - one for the sailboat, one in front of the harbor and one behind.

I can place the harbor buildings in either the level behind the boat or in the level behind the wharf, depending on how thick my wood is and how deep I want to carve.

I now have six levels, all determined by simply asking myself what element catches my eye and then what elements lie in front or behind that element.

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Where do the free floating elements fall?

For this scene there is one more consideration, that’s what do I do with the sea gulls. The sea gulls seem to float in air without a visual point for their location I have two sea gulls near the sail boat that are larger than the third sea gull over the harbor town. I have decided to group the large gulls with the sail boat and push the small gull into the next ocean level. I could have easily decided to attach the larger sea gulls to the lighthouse level and the small one to the boat.

If I am working on 2” stock I would allow one half the thickness to remain un-carved leaving 1” of the surface for the scene. I, personally, would divide that 1” into 1/8” slices. Then I would allow an extra 1/8” in the lighthouse level and in the sail boat level giving me a touch more wood for the most important elements.

So my levels would read:
1/8” foreground with the grass and snow fence
¼” foreground with the lighthouse
¼” middle ground with the sail boat
1/8” middle ground ocean behind the sail boat
1/8’ background harbor scene area

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