

Artistic Woodburning Tutorial

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Getting Started

To get started, you need an inexpensive woodburning tool. I'm using this basic [tool](#) from Walnut Hollow.

Most books about woodburning focus on tracing stock images ... typically animals, nature scenes and floral backgrounds. I prefer to draw original designs. Still, any reference material should explain the basics of using the tool. My favorite reference book came from the library. "The Art of Woodburning" by Betty Auth. She uses only three basic tips and keeps things pretty simple.

The pen gets hot! It comes with a stand, which you tape to a stable surface. The stand, taped to a ceramic tile, which is taped to your work surface is a safe set-up option. Ideally, the hot part never touches your hand, but I wear a synthetic leather work glove as a layer of protection. I also wear a cloth mask in case there are fumes.

Using the Tool

I almost exclusively use the flow tip and the mini-flow tip. This would be similar to a medium-tip ballpoint pen and a fine-tip ballpoint pen. Practice on a scrap of wood. Experiment with different heat levels. The Walnut Hollow tool color codes different heat zones. I do almost everything at the lowest end of the hottest zone.

Try to keep the pen moving, and don't press too hard. Let the heat do the work. If you let the tool sit on the same spot of wood too long, it will make a pock mark. They say it's the sign of an amateur, but it can actually look kind of cool, and it's difficult to avoid on pallet scraps, which can be bumpy. Sometimes you can change the design or darken specific sections to disguise your mistakes. On pristine wood, it's easier to glide the pen over the surface without creating pock marks.

Your First Project

I mostly use pallet scraps. Any wood will work, and they all burn differently. My husband breaks up the pallets and saws them into pieces. For additional information, Google how to break up a pallet.

First, I sand the wood. I do it outside and wear an apron, rubber gloves, a dust mask and [goggles](#) that go over my glasses. I like rubber gloves better than cloth gloves because it's easier to wash the dust off. I prefer a rustic look, so I don't focus on perfection. I sand all over with 100 grit and then again with 150. I lightly scrub it with a wire brush, hose it off and then let it sit in the sun to dry.

I have a workbench out in the garage. I'm overly cautious, but I never leave the garage if the pen is plugged in. It's too easy to forget about it, and although a fire is unlikely, I don't want to take that risk.

My workbench has room for all my stuff. I cover my basic work area with a piece of parchment paper. It helps keep the area clean, and it's handy for sketching out designs or testing colors. I also keep a test piece of wood nearby to experiment with the tool or test temperature. I use a small piece of 800 grit sandpaper to lightly rub off carbon buildup while the tip is hot.

Creating Designs

I can't seem to draw realistic representations of anything, so I focus on doodles and abstract designs. There are lots of ways to begin:

- Examine the grain and shape of the wood and see if any designs seem more natural than others.
- Google Zentangle images for inspiration.
- Use a pencil to draw your designs on the wood and trace the pencil marks with your woodburning tool.
- Freestyle – just start burning shapes as they come to you.
- Gather household items such as jar lids or cookie cutters and use a pencil to trace around the shape. Then trace the pencil marks with your woodburning tool.

Burn lines will usually cover pencil lines, but if any of the pencil marks remain, you can simply erase them. I like these [erasers](#). If straight lines are too difficult, wiggle the pen as you move it to make a slightly jagged line. It looks great!

Front, Back and Sides

One of my first pieces was a narrow strip about 48 inches long – a scrap from a teak patio bench that burned in a fire. I did front, back and all sides of that piece and just have it leaning against a wall. It might look good outside hanging from a shepherd's hook.

My smaller pieces are about 24 inches wide, more like a painting or sign you would hang. I decorate the front and sides but leave the back blank.

It can be tricky to do narrow or irregular sides. Be careful to keep the pen steady around the edges – it can slip. I like to use the mini-flow pen to make tiny dots.

Adding Color

If you're going to add color, it's easier if all your doodles have closed borders. Then you just color within the borders. I also use color outside of borders and sometimes on the sides. Play around with what suits you best.

I had inexpensive [Studio Series](#) colored pencils leftover from my brief foray into adult coloring books. They work fine, although more advanced woodburning aficionados use oil pencils, which are more vibrant. [Faber-Castell](#) are gorgeous but way more expensive. I use both types of pencils for different effects.

When coloring, try light pressure to get subtle shading and firmer pressure for deeper colors. I also use the woodburning tool to fill in some of the doodles with shades of brown. And you can make a shape almost black by repeatedly rolling the tip over the same spot.

Sealing Your Work

Once you're satisfied with the work, it's time to seal it. I use [Liquitex Professional Spray Varnish](#) in gloss. Some people like matte or satin, but I prefer the subtle sheen of the gloss. Following the instructions, spray one side, let it dry a couple of hours and then spray the other side. Wait 24 hours and then spray again. I put two coats on most pieces. If I think there's a possibility of the art being displayed outside, I'll use three coats.

I'm still experimenting with hanging systems, but [sawtooth hangers](#) seem to work fine for most wood.

In Conclusion

Burning wood scraps is a relatively inexpensive and fun way to explore your artistic nature. With experience comes confidence to try new things. Most woodburning books have patterns you can transfer and trace. If you have artistic skills, you might want to branch out from abstract doodles and try other artistic representations ... animals, nature scenes, etc. Calligraphy and lettering are also options.

It's also exciting to think about other embellishments or even other ways to distress the wood. I'm eager to experiment with acrylic paints, stains and glazes.