Pyrographic Gallery

by Sue Walters

Sue Walters is a self-taught, internationally renowned, and award-winning pyrographic artist. After a career in horticulture, Sue began her pyrographic journey after receiving a burner as a present. She soon started designing and burning souvenirs for the Australian tourist industry—and found that the demand surpassed her supply! Her focus then shifted to extensively experimenting with various types of pyrographic techniques, eventually specializing in the areas of high realism, wildlife, and miniature burning.

Since then, her pyrography has garnered many awards at pyrographic and woodworking competitions in Australia and Canada including several Best in Show awards.

Sue’s passion for pursuing all that pyrography has to offer continues to this day, and she remains dedicated to passing on her knowledge to other aspiring burners.

A fifth-generation Aussie, Sue still calls Australia home. For more of Sue’s work, visit her website at www.suewalters.com.

Elephant Eye, monochrome pyrography on birch plywood.

These finished works by Sue Walters show how the texturing techniques in the following article work to create amazing realism in wildlife subjects.

Platypus Diving, monochrome pyrography on silky oak.

Turtle Rising, monochrome pyrography on relief carved silky oak.
Choosing the right tip makes all the difference when texturing a woodburning

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There are literally hundreds of woodburner tips (or nibs) out there. But most of them have a very specific purpose such as burning in feather quills, fish scales, or other specific details.

For general pyrography, three basic types will give you the opportunity to perform a huge variety of burning. These types are the skew, writer, and shader.

The skew nib has a straight edge and is best for burning or cutting crisp, neat lines. The wire in the writer nib is bent to a point. It is used for lettering, curving lines, and filling in. The shader nib is flat and is designed to ‘iron’ the surface, leaving a soft, wide scorch mark. The spoon shader is shaped like the regular shader, except the flat iron part is bent. The spoon shader is used for soft, gradient tonal work, but isn’t good for shading large areas.

Using these tips, it’s easy to add a variety of textures to your wildlife burnings and, it’s easy to simulate different animal coats—be it a short-haired coat, a smooth coat or a fluffy coat.

Pyrography Troubleshooting

Here are some common pyrography problems and how to solve them! Each example shows a skew tip on top, writing tip in the middle, and a shader on the bottom.

Lines uneven in thickness or color = varying nib speeds. It is essential that you move your nib across the wood at a constant speed.

Dirty lines, inconsistent burning = dirty nibs. Make it a practice to always keep your nibs clean of carbon build up.

Untidy and blobby lines, scorch marks on edges = nib heat set too high. Turn down your heat, and practice until you can tell how hot to set the heat based on the speed you are moving.

Blobs or hot spots at the start of a line = not moving your tip as you place it on the work piece. Start moving as you bring the nib into contact the wood, or blow gently on the nib to take some of the heat away just before touching the wood.

Checkering of burn lines when burning over grain = change in grain hardness at the lines. Sometimes grain changes hardness at the grain lines, so either slow down as you cross the grain lines or go back over and re-burn the light areas. This happens more often with a shader or writer; a skew cuts right through the grain like the bow of a ship cuts through waves in the sea.

Work is scratchy and nib is hard to move = ill-prepared burning surface. Burning on rough timber prevents both smooth nib movement and clean burning. Again, the skew works better since it cuts below the rough surface. To prevent this, sand the entire surface with very fine sandpaper before burning.
The Fluffy Coat
Fur that comes out at you can look very complex to burn, but it is actually very easy. The easiest way to burn this kind of fur is by pointillism (stippling). This is just creating a picture using a series of dots or short lines (think of a comic book).

**STEP 1**
Draw in light pencil lines to indicate the shape of the koala. Then use the writing nib to cover the whole area—koala and background, with a series of evenly spaced dots.

**STEP 2**
Gradually build another layer of dots overtop of the first layer—except in the brightest areas. You may need to turn up your burner's heat to burn overtop of the first layer.

**STEP 3**
Add another layer of dots over the areas that need to be darker. This gradual build up of layers gives the coat a real sense of depth.

**STEP 4**
Use another layer of dots to define the arm and background. Then add a final layer of dots on the background and the koala's coat. If any layers seem to stand out from their surrounding areas, blur the edges by adding a few more dots to those areas.

*Koala, monochrome pyrography on basswood.*
The Short-Haired Coat
This technique, which uses only a skew nib, gives a very sharp, distinct-looking, short-haired coat.

STEP 1
To burn a short-haired coat, use the skew nib to outline the body and leg with a series of short stroke. For a more natural appearance, it is better to stagger the lines and gather some clumps into little Vs. When the pattern is made, it's imperative that you use a pencil to map the direction of the fur onto the wood. You can also burn in a few indicator marks with a skew.

STEP 2
Burn in the first layer of short fur. Use the skew to draw in random, overlapping, staggering lines. The length of the line depends on the length of the animal's coat. Don't try to fill in the whole coat all at once. You can always add more hair later, if you don't think it is thick enough.

STEP 3
Add some curves and shadows to the animal by burning additional darker hairs. Try not to burn these hairs in a row; instead, burn random, staggered lines among the existing hairs. Blend the two areas together by dragging some dark strokes out into the existing coat.

STEP 4
Once the shadows are dark enough, you can then darken any other parts of the coat by burning additional lines in these areas. Space these darker lines out so they blend easily with the surrounding coat—we don't want the dramatic darkness of a shaded area.

STEP 5
Use a blade to scrape away any areas you think need to be defined or are too dark for an extra touch of realism.

Further Reading
Pyrography Workbook (available May 2005)
By Sue Walters
Sue Walters, internationally renowned Australian pyrographer, teaches you everything you need to know to create stunning pyrography artwork through three step-by-step projects.
$19.95 plus $3.50 S&H (parcel post)

Available from:
Fox Chapel Publishing
1970 Broad St., East Petersburg, PA 17520
Phone: 800-457-9112 Fax: 888-369-2885
www.FoxChapelPublishing.com
Or check your local supply store.
The Smooth Coat

Just because you know an animal has hair, such as a horse, it doesn’t mean that you need to draw in all the hair. From a distance, some animals look like they have a coat that is as smooth as an apple.

**STEP 1**

Use a skew to outline the crisp, sharp edge of the horse. Outlining is only used to define physical things—not to change the color. For instance, the leg or outside rump of the horses is edged, but no change of coat color or shading is edged.

**STEP 2**

Map out any distinctive color changes using a pencil, and go over the entire coat lightly with a shading nib. For a realistic look, be sure to curve your tone lines to match the shape of the horse’s body.

**STEP 3**

Add another layer of burning on top of the first layer; being sure to maintain the shape of the animal. Use the tip of your shader to fill in and blend any patchy areas.

**STEP 4**

Burn any areas that are very dark in on top of the first two layers. Add another layer of darkness on top of these areas, and blend away any hard edges. You may need to turn up the heat on your burner to burn on top of these areas.

**STEP 5**

Use the shader to fill in any mid-tones, leaving only the highlights on the coat unburned.

About the Author

Sue Walters uses a variety of materials for her pyrographic art—including paper, tagua nuts and wood. In addition to traditional monochrome (one color) pyrography, where the artist uses the different burned tones to create the image, Sue adds a variety of colors to her work. She is the author of the new Pyrography Workbook. She also writes the “Pyro Newsletter,” a monthly e-mail newsletter full of pyrographic updates, tips, and techniques. Contact Sue at: P.O. Box 1131, Upwey, Victoria, Australia, 3158, 61-03-9754-8207, www.SueWalters.com.