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WHAT IS PYROGRAPHY?

BY LISA MILDON (<https://coffeehousewriters.com/author/lisa-mildon/>) | JULY 13, 2020 | 96 | 0

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Pyrography is an ancient art form using fire to burn in images into wood, leather, and bone. Even though this form of art was developed long ago, it was only in the 1900s that the term pyrography was first used. Pyrography is a Greek word that translates as “writing with fire.” Most people may recognize it by its more popular name of woodburning. Whichever name you call it, it’s an interesting medium to create beautiful works of art.

While some state that the form was developed by using charcoals from a fire to draw pictures, it wasn’t until later that artists would stick metal in a fire to heat up then use this hot poker, so to speak, and burn images into leather, bone, or wood. This method was used until Medieval times when the use of portable stoves revolutionized the art form.

However, it wasn’t until the early 1900s that the poker method was upgraded to something very similar to what we use now. An architect named Alfred Smart used benzene fumes to heat a hollow pencil to create a more portable version of a woodburner. This new method allowed pyrographers to make different shading and strokes in the wood, further broadening the artistic expression. With the advent of electricity, woodburner design improved even more.

“ *The wood smoke fills me with familiar feelings like an old friend...* ”

So, why write about an old art form? I began my pyrographic journey many years ago. One summer, my mother knew she needed to keep me occupied and tried to stave off boredom. Each summer vacation, we’d look at different arts and crafts and other hobbies to keep me stimulated and happy once the temperatures outside climbed to unhealthy levels. One particular summer, while in Walmart, I stumbled upon an odd tool in the crafting department. It was a woodburning pen.

I took to this new hobby with fervent passion. In my new kit came a basic woodburner, some transfer paper, and a few basic patterns to burn. I woodburned clowns, some raccoons, and even Holly Hobbie, a popular character in the 70s.

Tools Needed

My first woodburner was very basic. It didn’t have any interchangeable tips or adjustable temperature. It burned an even 800 degrees. With such hot temps, I wouldn’t recommend this hobby for the very young. While you can still get this simple tool, companies like Walnut Hollow (<https://www.walnutthollow.com/store/tools-and-accessories/hot-tools/creative-woodburner-value-tool/>) have burners with some basic tips to add some flexibility to your tool. Below are some suggestions for the needed supplies to get you going on your first pyrography project:

- Woodburner
- Graphite transfer paper (<https://www.walnutthollow.com/store/tools-and-accessories/hot-tool-accessories/items/graphite-transfer-paper/1095/>)
- Cellophane tape (Scotch tape)
- Pen or pencil
- Pattern
- Light-colored blank wood, such as basswood, birch, or pine
- Sandpaper
- Lint-free cloth

How to Get Started

1. Sand your surface. While this sounds like a boring task, to have a clean and crisp design, it’s important to sand your surface to a smooth finish.
2. Wipe down your surface with a lint-free cloth to remove any leftover dust.
3. Place your graphite paper with the graphite against the surface.
4. Place your pattern in position on top of the graphite transfer paper.
5. Tape the pattern in place.
6. Now, trace your pattern onto the wood with a pen or pencil. You can add as little or as many details as you want. This tracing is merely a guide for your woodburner.
7. Now, remove both the pattern and transfer paper.
8. Select the tip you want to burn with and plug in.
9. Once your pen gets up to temperature, begin burning over your tracing. (Time will vary depending on the model of burner.)

CAUTION: Your woodburner will get VERY hot. Make sure you place it in a safe, fireproof place. If your pen came with one, use a stand while it is heating (or cooling) to protect any surfaces.

As with any woodworking project, you can choose a variety of products to seal your project. In later articles, we’ll explore the art of pyrography in detail from the tools to finishes. This article is an introductory guide to wet your whistle. Future articles will go in-depth on this ancient art technique.

Some 30+ years later, I still enjoy pyrography, but don’t have as much time as I used to. My childish scratchings into wood have morphed into more sophisticated images. It has become a meditation time for me. As I burn in a new image, I enjoy the stillness that my lifelong hobby has brought me. I patiently burn in each stroke, knowing that as I take my time, my art will be all the more eye-catching. The wood smoke fills me with familiar feelings like an old friend has stopped by for a long-awaited visit.

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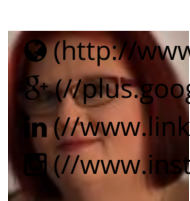
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Lisa is a coffee geeky girl who is a weaver of words and killer story creator. She has extensive editing/writing experience in non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and technical writing. In 2018, she graduated Summa Cum Laude at SNHU in Creative Writing and English. Lisa loves PC gaming, science fiction, and is obsessed with traveling. A self-professed Whovian, she aspires to write for the TV series. With her husband, they have 3 rescues, 2 adorable Rat Terriers, and 1 fat cat.

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