

## Pyrography 101- Signing Your Piece

Pyrography, pokerwork or woodburning has a large variety of applications but probably the most useful for the average woodworker is its use for signing pieces with the artist's name, year of production and type of timber. Many choose to write this information on pieces with a black marker, which would be the practical and easier option, but having it pyrographed seems more attractive and desirable to the consumer.

First thing to be aware of when using a pyrography pen of any type to write is that it is not the same as a regular pen and therefore will not produce the same results when signing your name.



The pen's handle is usually heavily insulated to prevent burning and excess heat which can make it feel like you are holding a fat marking pen. Some people find it very uncomfortable when they first go to use a pyro pen but, with any new tool, an hour or two of practice will usually get one comfortable enough for the basics and signing a piece.

Also, unlike an ordinary pen, pyrography relies on heat and speed and not pressure to create a darker line. Some people like to sign their names

on pieces as they would sign a cheque. Anyone who has seen Richard Raffan sign his work at shows or events with a pyro machine would notice he turns the temperature up to maximum which gives him enough heat to move quickly while getting a decent burn. If, however, you want to print your name and details, a lower temperature and slower speed will give the best result. Again, a little bit of practice on scrap timber can mean the difference between a desired result and a disaster.

Often, signing a piece is the last thing one thinks about, if at all. This can mean that methods of finishing can be a problem for pyrography as some sealers can bubble or make a burn difficult. The easiest way around this issue is to leave the area unsealed and add sealer or finish after the pyrography. This isn't always possible but being aware of the issue and a little more care can produce a good burn. Essentially, when pyro-ing over any type of sealer, don't be surprised if you don't get a burn on the first stroke and, as is the



temptation, don't turn the temperature up to compensate. Cleaning the nib with a bit of fine sandpaper is wise, too, as it can get significant oil build up that can affect the burn.

Some people like to use a pencil to lightly draw in their text or to use a pencil line to position it. Be aware that, if you use a pencil, oils and sealers can stain the

sealer with graphite – particularly when trying to erase pencil lines with an eraser or sandpaper. In this case you are left to position your text by eye.

My pyrography techniques are mostly self taught and over many years of practice and I have found that a good process for pyrographing text is positioning the text with pencil, then doing a light positioning burn. This is followed by a light sand with fine sandpaper (400 grit minimum) to remove pencil lines and then returning to the text and using progressively darker finishing burns. I use a pacer pencil for all my pyrography as I can get a very fine line for small text in limited space. Sanding in between burns instead of using an eraser is often better as some pencil marks can be stubborn and it cleans up any other unwanted marks or light burns.

If, after you have finished your burning, you think the piece may not be dark enough in some areas, resist the temptation to just touch up one or two letters and instead, clean the nib and go over all the text again at the same temperature as your last burn. This will ensure all the burns are even and consistent.

This is just a quick guide to the basics of signing your piece. There are always the individual items particular features that can make the process more difficult but at least there are people around who have made all the mistakes before and can be called on for advice.

As the new Pyrography coordinator I advise that there will be several pyrography SIG meetings before the annual Working With Wood on 3-5 September. So, if you want a bit of extra help or want to learn more about the different ways pyrography can be incorporated into your work, then I invite you to come along to the next Pyrography SIG meeting n Sunday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of May from Midday at the SHED.

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