

Heavenly Pews

Cindy Chinn combines carving, glass, and light to create angelic art

By Kathleen Ryan

Cindy Chinn has people turning their heads and whispering in church. This multimedia artist combines woodcarving, stained-glass mosaics, and dramatic backlighting to transform worn-out wooden church pews into stunning works of art that portray biblical messages. “I like the challenge of finding what’s hiding in the wood and pushing the limits to get the most detail,” said Cindy. “Doing religious carvings on the pews felt like the right thing to do—like it’s what the wood wanted.”

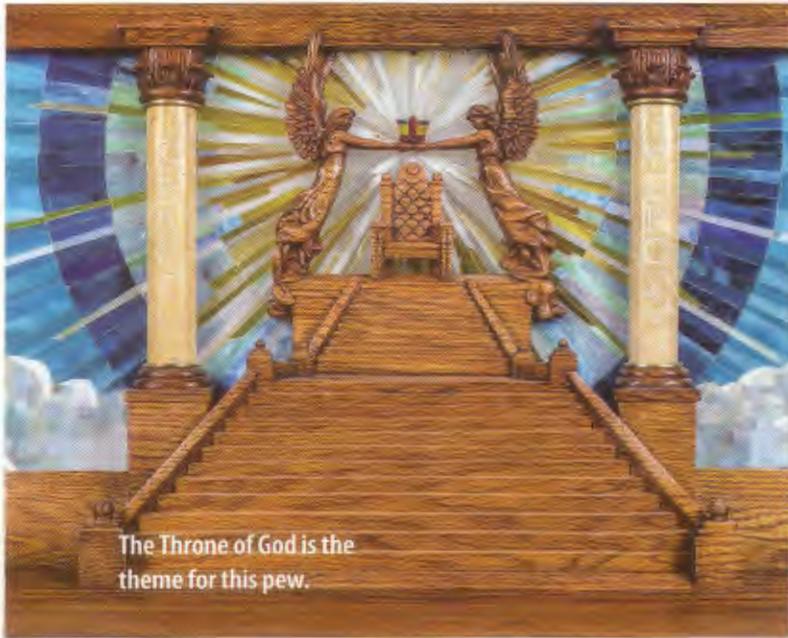
Internationally known for her fine-art murals and acrylic canvas commissions, Cindy has worked as a professional artist most of her life and has been involved in everything from animation to slot

machine design. “I love to tackle new projects and explore different techniques. I transition daily from one project to the next,” she said. She lives and works in Chester, Neb., in an old school building that she and her business partner purchased and renovated. Cindy built an apartment for herself in the school basement and set up multiple studios throughout the building to accommodate her various media: wood, glass, metal, ceramics, textiles, photography, computer/vinyl cutting, and painting. “I am reminded every day how lucky I am to have the creative freedom to do as I choose,” she said.

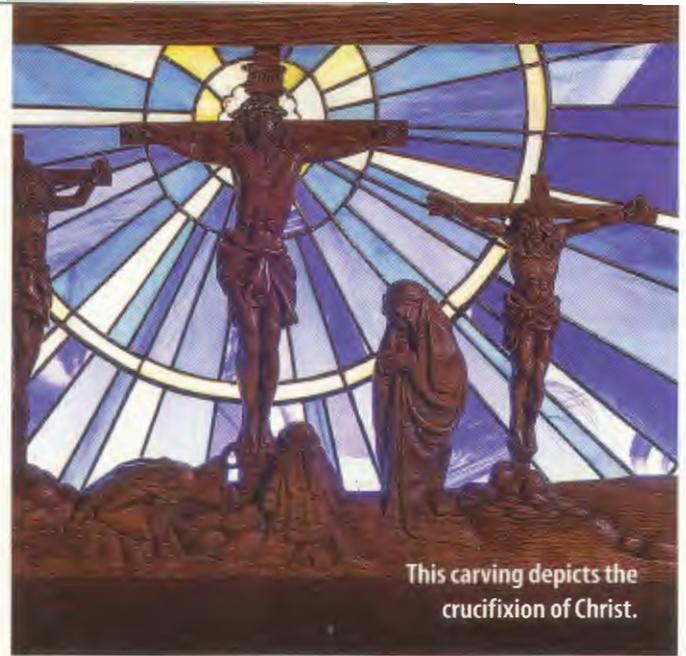
She began carving after purchasing several church pews at an auction. “They were weather-beaten, water damaged, and laying on the ground in pieces—a pretty pathetic sight. But for some reason they just caught my eye,” she recalled. “I realized they were probably still in good enough condition to do something with, so I bought them.” The pews sat untouched for several years. “During the winter of 2013, I passed by them and thought, I really should carve those. So I got out some

Cindy carves in her Chester, Neb., woodworking studio.





The Throne of God is the theme for this pew.



This carving depicts the crucifixion of Christ.

Cindy restored, carved, and embellished each of the pews with stained glass.

old carpenter chisels and learned as I went. When I got to the point where I needed to get more detail, I bought a cheap set of small gouges. I didn't know the difference between gouges back then, but I sure do now!" she said with a laugh. Now Cindy employs various top-quality chisels and gouges. "I use these tools for 95 percent of my work and a Dremel for smaller details."

Cindy dismantles, sands, repairs, and refinishes each old pew with a water-based stain and layers of antique oil. Then, she searches the Scriptures for inspiration.

Once she determines a theme, she looks for 10 to 15 images that best express that idea and uploads them

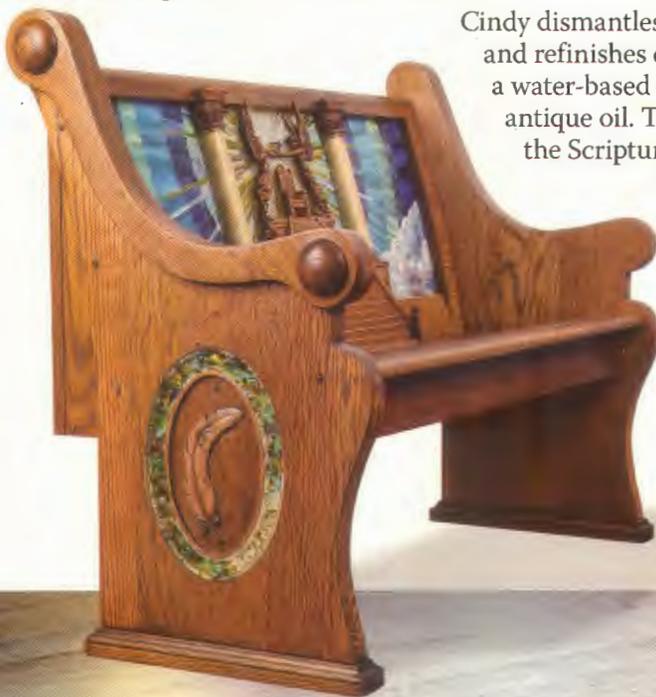
into Adobe Illustrator. She uses the images as reference points for creating the layout of her design. "Once I'm satisfied with the design, I print it and, using carbon paper, trace it onto the wood in sections."

After carving the wood, the artist adds the leaded glass or mosaic. "I really felt like leaded glass and church go hand in hand," she said. "The micro mosaics were made by using small pieces of glass to create a detailed scene, which was another first for me."

Once she completes the glass work, Cindy adds backlighting by constructing and installing oak boxes that match the pews. These boxes have hinged doors for easy access and accommodate a simple light fixture. She noted, "I put in vents for airflow and latches with a switch and a plug on the bottom for a cleaner look."

The result is a heavenly combination of carved wood, glass, and light that is truly inspirational and everything Cindy Chinn had hoped for. "Finding Jesus in the wood and seeing these old weathered pews gain new life and purpose is very satisfying for me."

See more of Cindy Chinn's work online at www.cindychinn.com.

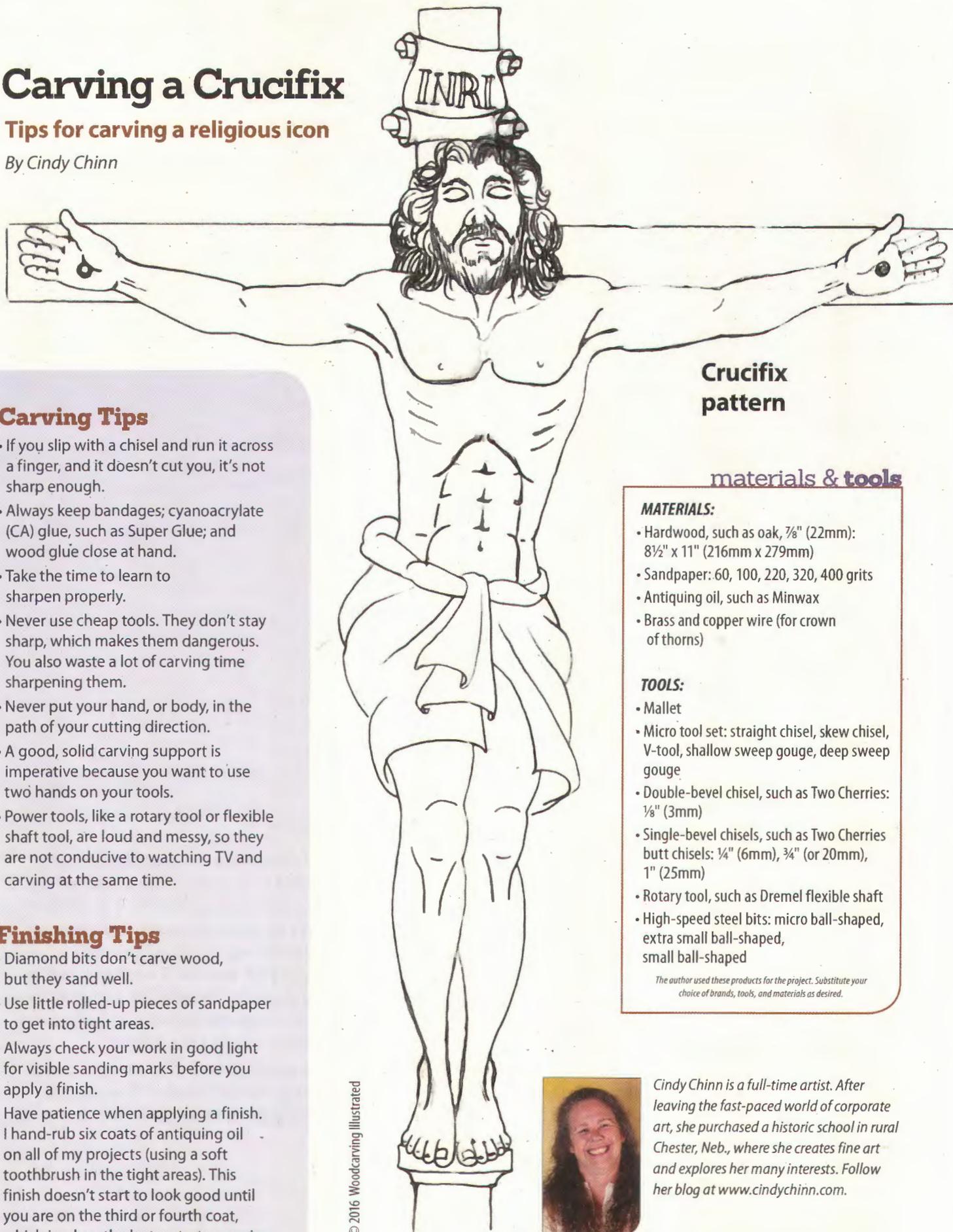


Cindy carves the seat of each reclaimed pew with passages of Scripture.

Carving a Crucifix

Tips for carving a religious icon

By Cindy Chinn



Crucifix pattern

Carving Tips

- If you slip with a chisel and run it across a finger, and it doesn't cut you, it's not sharp enough.
- Always keep bandages; cyanoacrylate (CA) glue, such as Super Glue; and wood glue close at hand.
- Take the time to learn to sharpen properly.
- Never use cheap tools. They don't stay sharp, which makes them dangerous. You also waste a lot of carving time sharpening them.
- Never put your hand, or body, in the path of your cutting direction.
- A good, solid carving support is imperative because you want to use two hands on your tools.
- Power tools, like a rotary tool or flexible shaft tool, are loud and messy, so they are not conducive to watching TV and carving at the same time.

Finishing Tips

- Diamond bits don't carve wood, but they sand well.
- Use little rolled-up pieces of sandpaper to get into tight areas.
- Always check your work in good light for visible sanding marks before you apply a finish.
- Have patience when applying a finish. I hand-rub six coats of antiquing oil on all of my projects (using a soft toothbrush in the tight areas). This finish doesn't start to look good until you are on the third or fourth coat, which is when the luster starts popping.

materials & tools

MATERIALS:

- Hardwood, such as oak, $\frac{7}{8}$ " (22mm): $8\frac{1}{2}$ " x 11" (216mm x 279mm)
- Sandpaper: 60, 100, 220, 320, 400 grits
- Antiquing oil, such as Minwax
- Brass and copper wire (for crown of thorns)

TOOLS:

- Mallet
- Micro tool set: straight chisel, skew chisel, V-tool, shallow sweep gouge, deep sweep gouge
- Double-bevel chisel, such as Two Cherrys: $\frac{1}{8}$ " (3mm)
- Single-bevel chisels, such as Two Cherrys butt chisels: $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6mm), $\frac{3}{4}$ " (or 20mm), 1" (25mm)
- Rotary tool, such as Dremel flexible shaft
- High-speed steel bits: micro ball-shaped, extra small ball-shaped, small ball-shaped

The author used these products for the project. Substitute your choice of brands, tools, and materials as desired.

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Cindy Chinn is a full-time artist. After leaving the fast-paced world of corporate art, she purchased a historic school in rural Chester, Neb., where she creates fine art and explores her many interests. Follow her blog at www.cindychinn.com.