

## Pyrography: Getting Started

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Date: Unknown

Pyrography is the art of burning images on wood, paper, or leather. In recent years, this art form has been applied to shells of gourds. Since this medium does not require a lot of artistic talent, it can be learned by anyone who has the desire, the proper tools, and an access to a supply of suitable gourds.

Recently, in teaching wood burning workshops, I have found that there are certain prior experiences that are needed for one to meet a measure of success. The student must have some experience with the basics of wood burning by investing in an inexpensive, fixed temperature, wood burning system. This type of tool operates at a "fixed" temperature and closely resembles a soldering iron. They range in various wattage, usually from 19 to 30 watts. The higher the wattage, the hotter they get. It might have different tips that are interchangeable. It is inexpensive and is sold at places like department stores and building supply stores. Prices range from approximately \$15 to \$30.

You will need a supply of dried gourds or gourd pieces on which to practice. The gourd's surface should be clean and all skin removed. Next, you need to learn what the hot wood burner does to a gourd's shell. Working with a fixed temperature burner, you soon learn that the hot tip creates much smoke and burnt spots or areas. As you experiment, you discover that varying the pressure of the hot tip as it is applied to the gourd's shell produces different results. In the process you learn that a "soft touch" will produce the kinds of results you are seeking. This "soft touch" is the skill or technique that you are trying to develop. Keeping the tips clean and free of burnt residue will yield best results. This can be by lightly brushing the hot tip across some fine sandpaper in a very quick motion.

Whatever brand of burning system that you buy, learn to use it. As soon as you get home after your purchase, start by reading all of the literature that came with it. You also need to buy a good handbook on wood burning projects to get ideas that the author(s) recommend. On your own, practice holding the pen/tool until you are comfortable with it before turning it on or plugging it in. Practice burning lines, alot of lines. Burn short lines, long lines, and curving or waving lines. Burn light lines and deep dark ones, but practice. The idea is that of learning what your burner will allow you to do with it.

With a #2 pencil, draw faces, figures, and/or different shapes and then practice burning them on scraps of gourd. Use your burner tip as you would a pencil or pen. On some of the faces or shapes, try shading them. Shading is achieved by holding the burner tip at an angle and lightly moving the tool over the gourd's surface. This produces a scorching effect. Your goal is to discolor the gourd's surface and not create a pitted or gouged surface. Use a stainless steel metal pot scrubber to buff or polish the burnt surface of the gourd. Next, run your fingers or hand over it. If the surface feels smooth and the color is somewhat dark, you are reaching success!

Another step to follow is that of observing wood burning demonstrations at a gourd show. As you watch, make sure to notice how the demonstrator uses his hands as well as the burning tool. At appropriate times, ask questions. Most demonstrators will be glad to give you some tips. Kindly remember that as a learner, you are seeking ideas that will help you to learn or improve your skills in gourd burning. Soon as you

return home, practice what was observed since it is fresh in your mind. Continue practicing as often as you can so that you can refine your growing skills.

When you have done all the activities presented so far, then consider buying a more expensive burning tool. This would be a model that has a variable heat control. There are many models available to fit your needs and/or pocketbook. Some are sold at gourd shows and some are offered at hobby and craft stores, building supply stores, and specialty stores. You could also ask someone who is already into wood burning for sources that you could contact to make a purchase. You might also try the Internet by surfing the websites of different gourd societies. Another approach is to ask for help from members of your local state Gourd Society.