

Special article by Marney K. Makridakis for www.home-decorating-made-easy.com.

Beyond Rubber: Unique Techniques for Making Your Own Stamps

There are many materials you can carve in order to make your own rubber stamps to use in décor projects.

Popular materials include erasers, foam, rubber, wood, potatoes, and sponges.

You can carve a design into an object (such as a chunk of rubber) or you can cut pieces out of an object (such as foam) and then arrange and attach them to a wood block to use as a stamp.

This section:

- Walks you through the process of making stamps with each of the six materials mentioned above

Making Stamps with Rubber: Available Rubber Materials

If you're interested in carving your own stamps, a really great way to start is to work with the [Speedy Stamp products](#) from Speedball (right).

You can buy a stamp carving set that has everything you need to make several stamps, including two carving tools (a #2 V-shaped blade and a #4 U-shaped blade) tracing paper, and a Speedy Stamp block.

The Speedy Stamp block is a very smooth rubber surface that is really easy to cut...even intricate designs come out quite lovely (right).



Speedy Stamp carving set from Speedball.



An intricate design carved in a Speedy Stamp block.

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Besides being very soft and easy to cut, the Speedy Stamp material picks up ink and toner in the same way that Silly Putty does, which makes transferring images a snap!

This stamp carving set is a great value and If you are new to carving stamps, we can't recommend this great product highly enough.

For a greater challenge, you can carve pieces cut from sheets of industrial rubber (available at Home Improvement stores). Or - for something more readily available - you can carve red rubber or white vinyl erasers (right).



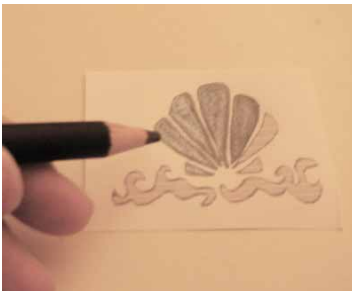
Vinyl erasers can be used as stamp blocks.

Transferring an Image to Speedy Stamp Block

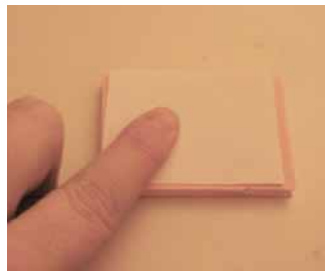
Whether you are carving a Speedy Stamp block, a rubber eraser, or from rubber sheets, the process is basically the same. The first step is to **transfer an image**. With the Speedy Stamp block, this is really easy, because the material picks up ink and toner.

Use a pencil to draw your design on paper, or trace it onto tracing paper (photo #1). Make the pencil lines clean and dark. To transfer the design, center the drawing or tracing face-down on the block and rub the back of the design with your fingertip or the back of your fingernails (photo #2). Be sure to rub all areas that have pencil markings. When you remove the paper, the drawing will be transferred to the block, and will be your guide for carving (photo #3).

1.



2.



3.



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Transferring an Image to Rubber Erasers

Most rubber and vinyl erasers pick up ink and toner in the same way that the Speedy Stamp block does, so the process is usually the same. If you are drawing directly on the eraser, a soft pencil (#2) will transfer better than harder leads. The image will most likely be much fainter than it will be on the Speedy Stamp block. This is no problem - all you need to do is just outline the design with an ink pen so it will be easier to see.

Transferring an Image to Industrial Rubber

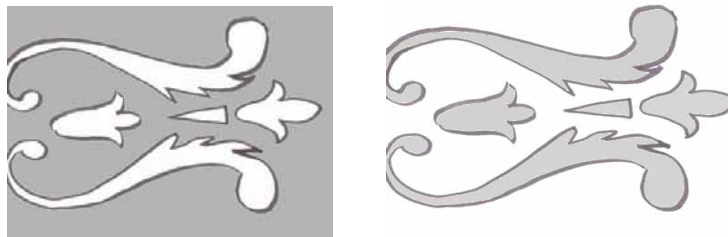
If you are transferring an image to a piece cut from sheets of industrial rubber, you will need to use **transfer paper** (also called **graphite paper** or **carbon paper**), which you can find at art and craft supply stores.

Place a sheet of transfer paper with the transfer side down on top of the rubber. Then, place the paper with your design on top of the transfer paper. Use a pointed object (a working or dried-out pen, stylus, or small round stick) to go over each line of the design. Each line you trace with the pointed object will be transferred to the face of the rubber.

Carving Images in Rubber

When approaching the carving of your design, remember that every design has a positive area and a negative area. The positive area is the area that will remain "raised". It is the part of the design that will receive the ink and will transfer that ink to the surface. The negative area is the area that is cut away.

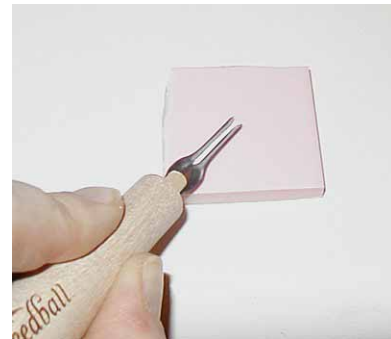
Take this design as an example. You could approach the carving of this stamp in two ways. In the example of the left, you would carve out the shaded areas so that the scroll design, itself, would be stamped on the surface. In the example on the right, you would carve out the scroll design, so that the background area would be stamped onto the surface, leaving the original surface to show through in the scroll design.



While there are many tools that you can use to carve, the two that are most handy are V-shaped and U-shaped carving tools. Before carving on the surface with your design, practice with a scrap of the material you will be using.

Let's walk through practicing using a V-shaped blade:

1. Hold the tool's handle so that the V is upright.
2. Carve by pushing the handle forward, away from yourself. You'll see the blade fill with small "strings" of the block as you carve.
3. Now work to perfect the angle with which you hold the tool. Aim to hold the carving tool at an angle, as parallel as possible to the design (right). This will allow you to make horizontal, shallow cuts.



Hold the carving tool as parallel as possible to the design, and carve by pushing the handle forward, away from your body.

Keep in mind that your goal is to "peel" the block, rather than "gouge" it. If you hold the tool at too steep an angle, you will probably end up digging deeper than you need to. *(Hint: If you don't see the upper edges of the blade above the rubber, you are digging too deep.)*

On the other hand, if you don't carve the block deep enough, your edges will be ragged. Spend a bit of time practicing the angle that gives you the best results. Practice carving in long, continuous lines as much as possible.

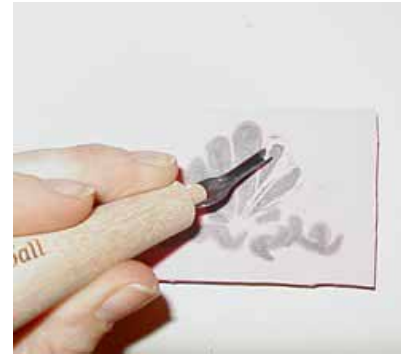
**Stamp
Suggest'n!**

If holding the handle horizontally is difficult, you can level your handle by simply pulling your arm toward your body until your wrist drops off your work surface, which automatically positions the handle and blade correctly.

Now let's move to your design...

1. Start by carving the perimeter of your design with the V-blade (right). Carve right up next to the marking on the surface. Use light pressure for carving thin lines and heavier pressure for carving thick lines.

2. After carving the perimeter, move on to other lines in the design. Whenever possible, carve away from your image. When following the curves of your design, *rotate the block itself, rather than rotating the carving tool.*



Carve the perimeter of your design with a V-blade.

Stamp Suggest'n! To make rotating the carving block easier, try placing a small piece of paper between the image and the work surface. Use your non-carving hand to turn the block as you following the curves of your design.

3. Use carving blades to your advantage. A V-blade makes a different cut than a U-blade. Select which one is most appropriate for the work you are doing.

For example, if you are carving a solid star image, place the V-blade at the inside corners and carve away from the center, out beyond each point in the star.

As a general rule, V-blades are great for carving the outline of designs, and the wider U-blades are handy for carving out larger areas within the design (right).



Stamp Suggest'n! To see your carving process better, you can ink the surface of the block with a brown or dark blue dye ink pad. This allows you to see the contrast between the surface left behind and the portions you have carved away, and you'll still be able to see your pencil or transfer design through the ink.

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4. After you have finished carving the stamp, you must determine if you want to mount it on wood. Small, simple stamps carved into Speedy Stamp blocks or erasers can be used on their own as stamps. More intricate stamps, or any stamps on sheet rubber, should be attached to wood blocks using a strong glue (such as a 5-minute epoxy glue). Place craft foam or another foam material between the rubber and the wood to act as a cushion (see our previous instructions for [mounting stamps](#).)

Carving Images in Other Materials

Sponges are wonderful material for stamping with a weathered, rustic look. Regular kitchen sponges in their hardened state are very easy to carve into (right). You can carve a design freehand, or use the image transferring methods we mentioned in the previous section.



A stamp carved from a regular kitchen sponge creates a textured, rustic image.

Carving potatoes is another great way to achieve a rustic look. Cut a potato in half and then draw the design with a pencil or transfer the design using one of the techniques we mentioned earlier. The potato will take the ink or pencil quite well. Carve using V- and U-blades, according to the same instructions given for carving rubber.

A more advanced project is to carve into blocks of wood, which is an ancient fine art know as wood cutting (below left). The steps are exactly the same as transferring and carving a rubber block, but the carving requires much more precision. Still, if the process appeals to you, you might want to give it a try. Woodcuts reveal subtle, weathered images that would be perfect for the walls in an Arts and Crafts style or Early American style home (below right).

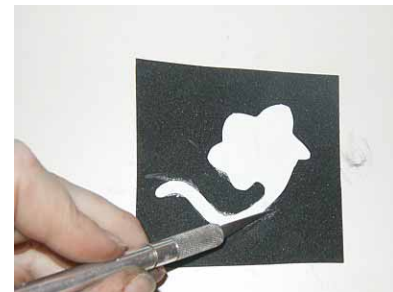


Making a Stamp with Foam

You can use regular craft foam (available at art and craft stores) to make stamps, but the process is slightly different from the other methods we have introduced. Foam is not deep enough to actually carve into to create a design. Instead, you cut the design out of foam and then attach the foam to a wood block. The foam piece(s) become the “raised” part of the stamp. This is a very quick way to get a stamp that makes a very solid impression.

1. Start with the desired image on a regular sheet of paper. It can be a design you draw yourself, one of the original designs at the end of this section, clip art from the computer, or artwork from any other source.

2. Use a small amount of spray adhesive to attach the design to a sheet of foam. Cut the design out with a pair of scissors or an X-acto knife (right). As you cut, arrange the cut pieces of foam in the appropriate fashion on your work space, so that you don't lose track of the design.



Cut the image out of foam with an X-acto knife.

3. You will need a block of wood to which you will attach the rubber pieces. Go to your local hardware or home improvement store and ask for scraps of wood. MDF (medium density fiberboard) is perfect for this purpose because it is strong, durable, easy to cut, and it does not warp. Place the pieces of foam on the block of wood in the appropriate arrangement and use a pencil to outline the shapes (right). This allows you to determine the exact arrangement before the final adhesion of the foam to the block.



Use a pencil to outline the foam pieces on the wood block, prior to permanently adhering them.

You also can use foam core for the backing of a stamp, cut to be slightly larger than your design. A foam core-backed stamp is harder to handle than a wood block, but if you don't have access to scraps of wood, it is a viable alternative.

Stamp Suggestion!

You may want to outline the shapes on the other side of the wood, as well. Lining up the foam shapes on both sides of the wood and outlining them to be perfect “mirror images” of one another is not essential, but it is quite helpful. You’ll be able to see the exact shape of the stamp facing you on the reverse side of the block as you position the stamp on your surface.

4. Apply contact cement to both the foam pieces and to the side of the block to which you will attach the foam pieces. Use a small piece of cardboard to spread the adhesive evenly over the block and larger foam pieces. *Do not use another kind of adhesive as it may either deteriorate the foam or not provide a strong enough bond.* Allow the adhesive to dry until it is tacky (about 30 minutes).
5. When the contact cement is dry and tacky, pick up each foam section and position it carefully on the block, using the outline as a guide. Use tweezers to pick up the small pieces. Allow the stamp to dry (about an hour) and then your stamp is ready to use.
6. Use the stamp with any rubber stamping ink or paint.

Sources for Designs

The sky is the limit, when it comes to finding sources for designs. Type “clip art” and the desired design in a search engine to print out clip art that you can transfer to your stamp-making material of choice. You can adjust the size so that the image is the perfect size for your decorating needs. Look at wallpaper and wrapping paper samples for images you can cut out and/or modify for your needs. Trace real leaves on tracing paper to design a stamp directly from nature.

We’ve provided 12 original designs on the following pages. For each design, we offer two alternatives for carving. Determine which portion of the design you want to be the “raised” part of the stamp, and select the design where that portion is shaded. Use the shaded areas as a guide to help you know which portion to carve.

You can change the magnification to print these designs out at different sizes. Consider using one motif in several different sizes in a room. Using the same design unifies the look of the room, while the variances in shape add interest.