



Summer
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Flat Plane Carving: A Journey from Tradition to Whimsy

Featuring the work of John Allen

In the spring of 1995, carver John Allen signed up for a workshop that would change the trajectory of his artistic life. The instructor? None other than Harley Refsal, the legendary carver and teacher who helped resurrect the Scandinavian tradition of Flat Plane carving. In that week-long session, John encountered not just a new carving style, but an entire way of thinking about form, story, and character in wood.

Flat Plane carving is a distinctly Scandinavian folk art tradition that uses strong, deliberate knife cuts to build a figure with clear planes, often leaving tool marks visible. Instead of sanding or smoothing, carvers emphasize these facets, letting each cut contribute to the figure's personality. The style is direct, expressive, and intentionally minimal.

Harley Refsal (1944–2022), widely credited with popularizing this tradition outside of Scandinavia, taught countless students across North America. Through his books, classes, and his role in the Caricature Carvers of America (CCA), Harley inspired a generation of artists to pick up a carving knife and tell stories—one facet at a time.

For John Allen, the appeal of Flat Plane carving was immediate. “It was refreshing,” he recalls. “After years of sanding and shaping, this style encouraged me to be bolder, to trust the knife.” What began as a class project soon became a personal passion, and



Harley Refsal 1944 to 2024

Harley Refsal: The Face of Modern Flat Plane Carving

1944–2024

Harley Refsal (1944–2024) was a beloved American carver, teacher, and historian who almost singlehandedly revived the Scandinavian art of Flat Plane carving in North America. A native of Minnesota and deeply connected to his Norwegian heritage, Harley first encountered the minimalist beauty of Flat Plane carving during his studies in Norway. What began as an academic and cultural curiosity blossomed into a lifelong passion that inspired thousands of carvers around the world.

Flat Plane carving is characterized by clean, angled cuts made with a single knife, leaving crisp facets rather than smooth, sanded surfaces. It's a style that embraces simplicity, character, and storytelling — all things Harley taught with quiet confidence

over the years, John developed a cast of recurring characters, many of them grounded in Scandinavian folklore and daily life.

Meet the Characters

Among John's charming figures are *Nisse Mor* and *Nisse Far*, a brother-and-sister pair rooted in Norse mythology. Nisse are household spirits — mischievous but well-meaning — who, according to legend, protect the homestead if treated kindly. John's *Nisse Mor* wears a bright yellow blouse and a striped apron that recalls old Norwegian Christmas colors. Her cheerful blue eyes and red cheeks radiate warmth and mischief.

Nisse Far, with his long green tunic and exaggerated red hat, sports a flowing beard carved with wide knife cuts to suggest texture and depth. Both figures have an impish tilt to their posture, adding to their character. Their flat planes and stylized features reflect the classic Scandinavian approach, while their coloring shows John's love for bold folk palettes.



Another recurring figure in John's repertoire is *Oscar*, a slender Norwegian man dressed in a traditional sweater. One of John's signature touches is the waistband of *Oscar*'s sweater, which features *kolrosing*, a Scandinavian embellishment technique that incises fine lines into the wood and fills them with pigment. "It's a nod to another Nordic tradition," says John. "Kolrosing adds detail without breaking the clean lines of Flat Plane."



Oscar, like many of John's characters, has a quiet dignity to him. His posture is relaxed, but his gaze seems to hold stories from the old country. As John explains, "He reminds me of the men I met while traveling in Norway — simple folks with deep roots and dry wit."

and good humor. Rather than removing every knife mark, the goal is to let the tool strokes tell part of the figure's story.

Harley taught at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, and authored several books including *Whittling Little Folk* and *Scandinavian Figure Carving*. He was also a founding member and guiding light of the Caricature Carvers of America, an elite group of woodcarvers dedicated to advancing the craft of expressive, character-based carvings.

In 1996, Harley was awarded the St. Olav's Medal by King Harald V of Norway for his work preserving Norwegian folk art and culture. He remained a devoted teacher, mentor, and demonstrator until shortly before his passing in 2022.

His legacy lives on through his students, his books, and his simple yet powerful philosophy: "A few cuts, well-placed, can tell a whole story."

Flat Plane Carving: A Scandinavian Tradition with a Modern Twist

Flat Plane Carving is a style of wood carving that originated in Scandinavia, characterized by its bold, flat cuts and stylized, almost geometric forms. It emphasizes clear, visible knife strokes rather than smoothing or sanding the surface. Instead of striving for detailed realism, Flat Plane Carving captures the spirit and personality of a subject with minimal but decisive cuts.

One of the most influential figures in preserving and promoting this style is Harley Refsal, a Norwegian-American carver and educator. Through his teaching and writing, Harley helped reintroduce Flat Plane Carving to a modern audience, breathing new life into a tradition that dates back centuries. Today, it continues to thrive, not only in Norway but across North America, especially among those who appreciate the clean, honest beauty of a

And then there's *Slim*, a tall, lanky fellow who always seems to be paired in contrast with a stubbier character—think *Mutt and Jeff*, the classic comic strip duo. Slim's exaggerated height and angular limbs make him a great example of how Flat Plane carvers use proportion and form to convey humor and personality. John often experiments with Slim's wardrobe: suspenders, vests, sometimes even a carved pipe tucked in the corner of his mouth.



Finally, no Scandinavian set would be complete without *Father Christmas*, or *Julenisse*, the Norwegian version of Santa Claus. John's version sports a long red hat and a green coat, with just enough beard to hide a twinkle in his eye. His stance is gentle but alert—ready to deliver joy, or play a trick, depending on how you behaved that year.

More Than a Style

Flat Plane carving is more than a technique—it's a cultural tradition, a storytelling method, and a joyful way to express humor, heritage, and humanity. For John Allen, it continues to be all of those things. "I never set out to carve for the sake of perfection," he says. "What I chase is character. If the piece makes someone smile—or reminds them of someone they knew—I've done my job."



You can see examples of John's work at upcoming guild events or in the attached photo spread, including Nisse Mor and Nisse Far. Each one is a tribute to the spirit of Flat Plane carving and to the legacy of Harley Refsal, whose teaching lives on in every facet.



This was fun: Ed

knife-finished carving.

In modern times, Flat Plane Carving is most often associated with whimsical caricature figures — simple in design but rich in character. It's a favorite style for those who enjoy bringing a block of wood to life with just a few strategic cuts.

Examples of Flat Plane Carving Figures

To better understand the charm and variety possible within Flat Plane Carving, let's take a look at some classic examples that many carvers have enjoyed creating:

Oscar –

Oscar is the quintessential Norwegian everyman. He's carved wearing a thick, textured sweater, his hands tucked into his pockets, with a knowing smile under a wool cap. The flat cuts emphasize the folds and bulk of his sweater, making him look ready for a long winter evening in a Scandinavian village.

Nisse Far and Nisse Mor –

Nisse Far and Nisse Mor are a Norse brother and sister pair, inspired by the mischievous "nisse" spirits of Scandinavian folklore. These figures are often carved with pointy red hats, simple tunics, and big boots. Their features are playful, with exaggerated noses and cheeks, perfectly suited to the Flat Plane style's clean, expressive cuts.

Slim –

Slim is a tall, narrow figure — a slender Norwegian whose posture and form are defined by sharp knife strokes. His long limbs and lanky stance are a fun departure from the more rounded, compact figures, showing how Flat Plane Carving can adapt to different body types while still retaining the simplicity of the style.

Norse Father Christmas –

Finally, a Norse Father Christmas captures the traditional figure of Scandinavian holiday celebrations. With a long beard, simple robe, and a sack slung over his back, this figure often blends the imagery of the Christian St. Nicholas with the older Norse gift-bringers. The carving style highlights the flowing beard and heavy folds of his clothing using crisp, flat facets instead of fine detailing.

Flat Plane Carving invites carvers to think differently — to suggest detail rather than carve it meticulously, to let the wood and knife strokes tell the story. It's a wonderful reminder that sometimes, less truly is more. Whether you're an experienced carver or a beginner, Flat Plane Carving offers a rewarding and accessible way to create charming, character-filled pieces with just a block of wood and a sharp knife.



The Art and Power of Chainsaw Sculpture

Chainsaw carving combines the raw force of power tools with the finesse of fine woodworking, transforming logs into expressive art. What once seemed like a novelty has become a respected folk art form, celebrated in competitions, festivals, and sculpture parks around the world—and right here in west-central Wisconsin.

Sculptors typically start with a single log—often pine, cottonwood, or cedar—and sketch a basic outline directly onto the wood. With a mix of carving chainsaws (which have narrower noses for control) and detail tools like grinders and rotary carvers, they block out large shapes, refine contours, and add textures. The result might be a towering bear, a soaring eagle, or something entirely whimsical—a gnome, a wizard, or even a row of jack-o'-lanterns.

Guild member **Dennis Johnson**, a skilled woodcarver with more than 25 years of experience, has recently embraced chainsaw carving as a new dimension to his artistry. Known for his hand-carved animals, caricatures, and nature scenes, Dennis says chainsaw work brings a different kind of challenge—and joy.

“It’s more physical, and it moves faster,” he shared at a recent Guild meeting. “But the same principles apply—good design, clean lines, and storytelling through wood.”

At that same meeting, Dennis brought in several of his early chainsaw pieces, earning admiration from fellow members. The display included **three pumpkins**—some with woodpecker cavities—and a striking **pine tree sculpture**, all made from locally sourced **white pine**. The tree was especially notable: Dennis had lightly **burned** the carving to enhance the texture, then applied **paint** to highlight the details. The contrast between charred bark and bright green needles made the piece pop.

Chainsaw Carving at a Glance

What is it?

Chainsaw carving is the art of transforming logs into sculptures using chainsaws and detailing tools. Popular subjects include bears, eagles, gnomes, and fantasy figures.

Tools of the Trade:

Carving chainsaws (small-bar, fine-tooth)

Grinders, sanders, and rotary tools for detail

Safety gear: chaps, helmet, gloves, ear/eye protection

Best Wood Types:

Softwoods like **basswood**, **pine**, **cottonwood**, and **cedar**—ideally green (fresh-cut) for ease of carving.

How It’s Done:

Plan & sketch

Rough out with chainsaw

Shape with finer tools

Add detail

Sand & seal

This hands-on approach, blending rustic technique with visual storytelling, is part of what makes chainsaw carving so compelling. Many carvers enjoy the immediate results: a sculpture can go from log to finished in a matter of hours. Others appreciate the theatrical element—especially when carving at public events.

One such event, the **US Open Chainsaw Sculpture Championship**, has been held mostly annually in Eau Claire’s **Carson Park** since 2009. It draws top talent from across the country and beyond. Attendees can watch as artists bring logs to life right before their eyes—then bid on the finished works in a public auction. Unfortunately, this event has been discontinued for the immediate future.

With veteran carvers like Dennis now exploring the form, chainsaw carving continues to grow within the West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild. It’s fast, loud, and messy—but it’s also incredibly expressive, and, as Dennis proves, a natural next step for carvers looking to stretch their skills.



West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild Launches New Social Media Campaign to Inspire and Invite

The West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild is stepping into the digital age with a brand-new social media campaign designed to promote the art of carving, welcome new members, and showcase the social benefits of belonging to a carving guild. By harnessing the reach and accessibility of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, the Guild hopes to not only spotlight our members’ talents but also connect with a broader audience interested in woodcarving as both a hobby and an art form.

At the heart of this campaign are short, engaging videos aimed at introducing viewers to the world of woodcarving. These clips will serve as stepping stones to more detailed content available on the Guild’s website, which includes information about membership, upcoming events, and learning opportunities. Whether you’re a beginner curious about carving or a seasoned carver looking to connect with a supportive community, these videos will offer something of value.

Each video will focus on one of several themes: the joys of learning to carve, how to improve your skills with the help of others, the satisfaction of creating something with your hands, and the camaraderie found within the Guild. While teaching and technique are key components, an equally important message is that carving doesn’t have to be a solitary pursuit—it’s better with friends, and our Guild is a welcoming place to find them.

The technical team behind the campaign includes Dick Purves and Rich Thelen, who are combining their creative efforts to produce a steady stream of visual content. Rich and Dick are capturing footage from carving events, club meetings, and workshops, as well as filming individual carvers at work. These moments are edited into concise videos that are informative, inviting, and easy to share.

Dick uses Adobe Premiere to handle video editing duties, adding titles, transitions, and voiceovers that guide viewers toward further exploration. Still photos taken during events and carving sessions are also being incorporated, ensuring that every frame reflects the craftsmanship and community spirit of our Guild. While Adobe Photoshop is the main editing tool at present, we've also experimented with Canva and Movavi—both user-friendly platforms that make quick editing and layout design accessible for future content creators within the club.

The campaign is designed to be sustainable and scalable. As more Guild members become comfortable with social media and video tools, we hope to include additional voices and perspectives. This effort isn't just about showcasing carving—it's about sharing stories, techniques, and the kind of fellowship that can only be found in a community like ours.

The timing of the launch couldn't be better. With interest in hands-on, traditional arts on the rise—especially among younger generations looking for alternatives to screen time—the Guild's new digital presence can help bridge the gap between curiosity and commitment. By offering a window into what it's like to be part of our club, these short videos may

help someone take that first step toward picking up a carving knife or attending a meeting.

In addition to the ongoing campaign, we are also planning a targeted promotional push for the Chippewa Valley Wood Carvers Show and Sale this fall. These event-specific videos will highlight what attendees can expect: live demonstrations, carving classes, beautiful pieces for sale, and a chance to meet the talented folks behind the tools. By cross-posting these videos on our platforms and encouraging members to share them, we hope to boost attendance and interest in both the event and the Guild itself.

As always, we welcome help from members who want to get involved. If you have video or photo editing experience, or even just a smartphone and a good eye, there's room for you on the team. We're also looking for members willing to be featured in short videos, whether you're demonstrating a technique, sharing a carving tip, or simply explaining what you love about carving and the club.

The world of social media moves quickly, but our message remains the same: woodcarving is a rewarding, lifelong craft, and the best way to learn and grow in it is with others.

Adventure Awaits: Jeanne Henning's Carved Tribute to the Aurora Borealis

When Jeanne Henning's son asked her for a special carving, it wasn't a typical request. He envisioned a **relief carving of mountains set inside a shadowbox**, illuminated from behind by shifting LED lights to suggest the glow of the Aurora Borealis. Jeanne embraced the challenge, and what emerged was not only a beautifully carved scene—but a story.

Jeanne began by sketching out a dramatic mountain range, carving it in layers to create visual depth within the wooden frame. The peaks were carved in bold relief from basswood, each ridge designed to catch the light and shadow. But the true magic came from behind: **programmable LED lights**, hidden within the shadowbox, cycle through a cool palette of colors—blues, greens, and purples—evoking the shimmering curtains of light seen in the far northern sky.



Great Multi-Media Effect

Her son calls the piece “**Adventure Awaits**”, a title inspired by the works of **Jack London** and the spirit of untamed wilderness in Alaska and the Yukon. For him, the shadowy peaks and auroral light echo the wild freedom and rugged beauty that London captured in *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Jeanne’s carving became more than art—it became a **window into imagination**, adventure, and nostalgia.

What makes this project especially unique is the **blending of traditional carving techniques with modern presentation**. Shadowboxes are not often used in woodcarving, and the addition of programmable lighting brings the work into a new dimension—literally and figuratively. The glowing effect behind the peaks doesn’t overpower the carving, but rather enhances its mood, giving the piece an almost cinematic quality.

The technical aspects also required careful planning. Jeanne had to think beyond carving—considering how to install lights, hide wires, and allow for ventilation, all while preserving the integrity of the wood and the illusion of a seamless display. She designed a concealed compartment behind the mountain panel to house the LED strip, powered by a USB-connected battery pack. A remote control allows the colors to change slowly or rapidly, depending on the mood.

The finished shadowbox is more than a carving—it’s an **interactive experience**. In a dim room, the colored lights glow softly through cutouts in the carved mountain peaks, just as the northern lights might peek through a ridge line in the Arctic dusk. Visitors stop, watch, and often ask: “*How did you do that?*” Jeanne’s creative solution demonstrates that **the future of carving doesn’t have to leave tradition behind—it can illuminate it**.

For Jeanne, the process was as rewarding as the finished piece. Whether hung on a wall or displayed on a mantle, *Adventure Awaits* reminds us of something timeless: that **a piece of wood, skillfully carved, can stir memories, inspire dreams, and call us toward the unknown wilds—just as Jack London did with his words, and Jeanne did with her hands**.



Fan Bird Carving Seminar Draws Full House!

On June 7th, the Chippewa Falls Senior Center buzzed with creative energy as 16 carvers gathered for a one-day seminar on the traditional art of fan bird carving. The event, hosted by the West Wisconsin Wood Carvers

Guild, featured Minneapolis-based master carver Jim Ayres as the instructor.

Participants carved an array of native

songbirds—bluebirds, cardinals, chickadees, and hummingbirds—from aromatic white cedar blanks. Each bird featured the distinctive fanned wing and tail feathers that define the craft. The result was a chorus of beautifully carved birds, each seemingly ready to take flight.

Jim Ayres provided both instruction and artistic finishing for the class. His calm, methodical teaching style helped attendees navigate the precise and delicate steps involved in releasing dozens of individual feathers from a single block of wood. Ayres also demonstrated painting techniques, guiding carvers to give their creations lifelike coloration and personality.

What set this class apart was the sheer amount of preparation behind the scenes. Mr. Ayres personally slit every set of wings and tails—no small feat given the intricacy involved. Each blank must be carefully prepared to ensure the fanning technique works without breaking the fragile feather sections. It's a time-consuming process that few undertake today. In total, more than \$700 worth of hand-prepared cedar blanks were purchased by Guild members to make the event possible.



The workshop sold out quickly, and by day's end, every carver went home with a completed fan bird. Some birds perched on display bases while others were designed to hang as ornaments or decorations. More importantly, each carver took home new skills and a deeper appreciation for the patience and precision required in this time-honored tradition.

The seminar was part of the Guild's ongoing effort to promote carving education and preserve specialized forms of the art.



What Is Fan Bird Carving?

Fan bird carving is a traditional form of folk art with roots in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. The technique involves splitting a single piece of wood—often white cedar—into dozens of thin “feathers” while keeping them attached at the base. These fanned sections form the wings and tail, which are then steamed and spread open into a symmetrical, bird-like shape.

Unlike many carving forms, fan bird carving relies more on precision cutting and careful spreading than shaping with knives or gouges. The final result is both delicate and eye-catching, often painted in bright, lifelike colors or left in natural wood tones. Fan birds can be hung, mounted, or gifted as ornaments symbolizing peace, good luck, or freedom.



Meet Jim Ayres

Jim Ayres of Minneapolis has been carving for more than three decades, with a special interest in fan birds and traditional folk carving. Known for his meticulous technique and generous instruction, Ayres travels throughout the Midwest to teach his craft.

Jim's approach combines old-world sensibilities with a teacher's patience. He hand-prepares all his blanks and emphasizes both accuracy and artistic flair. Over the years, his fan birds have been displayed in galleries, shows, and private collections. For Ayres, sharing the joy of carving is just as important as the final result—making him a beloved figure among carvers of all skill levels.