

Ulchi-Style Bear Amulet

by Dick Baugh (2/25/07)

The Ulchi people of Siberia do all kinds of interesting wood carving. This little animal effigy is a typical example. It appeals to me because it illustrates how a few simple notches can transform a stick into an animal. The original was shown to me by Tom Bassler of Sedro-Wolley, Washington. I don't know anything about the myths, symbolism and folklore that accompany this figure and would welcome any enlightening comments.

I like to make them from a piece of a branch with contrasting bark remaining. Specific examples are birch, wild plum, willow and red dogwood. For best results at keeping the bark adhering to the wood, you should probably not cut the branches in the spring when the bark separates easily from the wood. The originals I have seen were made from solid alder and did not have any bark. The wood will be easiest to carve when it is still green.

Making the "foot" with a chain link is a bit of a show-off. You can always cheat and form the foot separately, cut out a small piece, join the two together and glue the small piece back. I'll never tell.

In the piece illustrated, I used a piece of steel from a street-sweeper brush as a combination wood-burner and micro-chisel to do the fine cutting necessary for separating the two halves of the chain link. The steel, the street-sweeper bristles are made from, has a relatively high carbon content. It is ideal for wood carving tools. File or grind it to the desired shape, heat it red hot and quench it in water to harden it. Lastly, draw some of the temper by heating it in a kitchen oven to about 350 degrees F for about ten minutes. This will make the steel less brittle. For more enlightenment, read "The Shade Tree Knife Mechanic" article here in the PrimitiveWays website.

This is a good learner project for beginning wood carvers. With the exception of the chain link and drilling the hole for the lanyard, all the cuts can be made with a large knife.

