

My Story



Jenni Johnson

Ever since the first stay-at-home order in 2020, I've kept this little thought right where I can see it:

Now is the time for developing talents!

As I thought about that, I knew that it would be much better to be productive than to stress about the pandemic. So I decided to channel my inner artist and do something creative!

One day, on Pinterest, I saw some items called Garden Totems. Most of them were colorful, painted posts – cute, but not really my thing. The words “garden totem” fired my imagination, though, and I immediately knew what I wanted to do. I would design tall totem poles with animals and nature scenes, and some kind of bird with wings at the top. That was my dream, anyway.



I have at least three way-back ancestral lines that are Native American, and I've always been fascinated with totem poles, but I didn't want mine to have grim or scary faces. I would try to make them beautiful and symbolic in some way. This was a pretty big leap into creativity for me because I'd never done that much actual drawing, but I grew up in a very art-centered home and that must have given me the confidence to try.

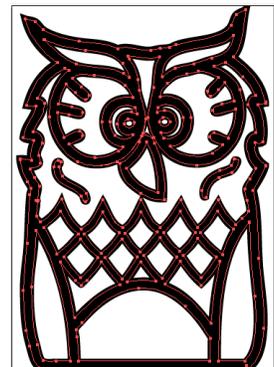


In case you're wondering how I was going to craft these big totem poles, I did have a secret weapon. Years ago my husband built a great big Computer Network Controlled (CNC) router with xyz axis. In the past, I designed lots of things that he would route. Now he was in the middle of a CNC redesign, so I had plenty of time to ramp up before any production would begin.

First on my list was improving my skills with Adobe Illustrator. I used it at work for many years, but never anything beyond the basics – and

that didn't include much actual drawing at all. It's a difficult and complicated program, but this was something I'd been wanting to do for a long time, so I forged ahead. I went through lots of tutorials, practiced, watched tons of videos, and finally started to become at least somewhat proficient.

While all of this was happening, my husband also bought me a laser engraver. That took a while to learn, too, but eventually I was able to turn my first simple drawings into laser engravings, on acrylic panels and Baltic birch wood.



It was a glorious day when the CNC was up and running again. I gave my husband the first totem design (“Elements”) and he routed it on a carefully selected 2’ x 6’ piece of Douglas fir. (Picking through stacks of wood at Home Depot to find suitable totem boards is another story! Definitely not his favorite thing.)

We were very excited with the first totem, even though the design needed some tweaks. It’s hard to picture exactly what a design is going to look like before it’s carved/routed, even though the VCarve software I use gives a pretty good preview. Each totem went through a strenuous trial period before I was satisfied.

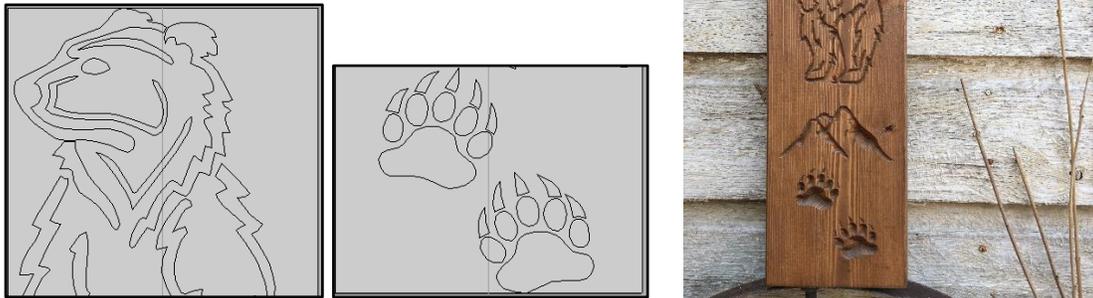
After I had several totems carved and finished, my grown-up kids each got to choose one and we delivered them to Salt Lake City. They really liked their totems, which meant a lot to me because they are fairly picky. ☺ Bucket list accomplished!

This has been a fantastic adventure, which has come full circle with the opening of the Halo Acres website and soon-to-be Etsy store. Not only have I discovered how much I really enjoy creating art, I’ve been very surprised at what I’ve been able to do.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

I create drawings in two different formats – one for the CNC router, that uses a V-carve bit, and one with single-line drawings for the laser engraver. Soon I will move into more designs for laser etching.

Drawings for the CNC have double lines. The distance between the two lines determines the depth of the carving. Also, any fully enclosed areas are completely carved out at a pre-set depth. Art has to be specifically designed for v-carving, as shown in the examples below.



Designs for the laser engraver often require single-line drawings. You may be familiar with the stroke and fill characteristics of most graphic lines. If you magnify these lines you can see that they are actually double lines. The laser engraver will engrave both lines, which isn’t always what you want. I wish it was easy to convert normal graphics to single-line drawings, but it isn’t. You can, however, create single-line drawings using software like Adobe Illustrator, but that means you have to actually draw with it. Ha ha! I’m so much better at that now than when I started.

With text, you often use want the double lines. The laser can either engrave the whole outline of the font, or it can make a nice etching between the lines.

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There are some single-line fonts available, but I end up doing a lot of freehand drawing, or tracing, for small jobs when I want single-line text.