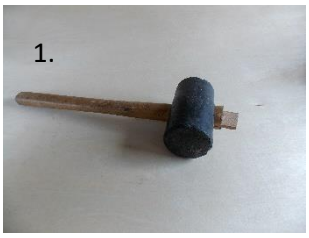
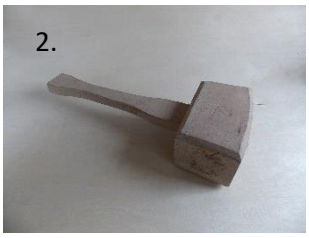
Mallets

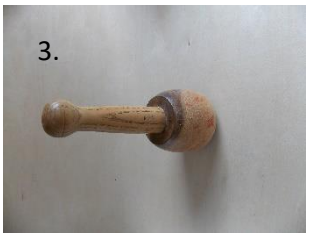
An introduction to the selection and choice of a mallet – by J Samworth

There are many types of mallets, varying by size, shape and construction material. Which one to choose is a very personal matter, there is no right answer. Try different mallets to find one that is comfortable for you to use, perhaps borrow one first.

Mallets can be made from wood, metal, plastic, rubber, leather even stone. They each have a purpose. Because carvers' chisel handles are normally made from wood, I recommend a wooden mallet. The repetitive impact of mallet on chisel will cause damage either to the chisel's handle or the mallet. By using wood on wood the damage is minimalised.







Mallet 1. Rubber mallet, best use for working sheet metal.

Mallet 2. Square beech wood mallet, used by carpenters. Works fine for carvers too. This one is quite light in weight, I prefer a heavier mallet.

Mallet 3. Round box wood mallet with ash handle. The ash handle has a little give or spring in the wood which absorbs the vibration better. Hickory is also a good choice for the handle. The box wood head is a hard and dense wood. Ideal for long life and giving some weight to the mallet without being cumbersomely big. This is my preferred mallet. Beech wood heads are common, more economical to purchase and perfectly good for the job.

Mallet 4. Round apple wood mallet with ash handle. Apple wood is traditionally used by carvers for mallets, being purported to be the 'ideal' weighted wood for a carver's mallet. This example is quite small, too light for me, but preferred choice of its owner. It was made especially for the owner by a friendly wood turner.

Square vs Round mallet heads: Many mallet users have been convince about the practicalities of using the round head mallet, because it can be picked up and used without worrying about where the head's face is. It can be use, so it is claimed, in any direction. This is a common myth, although if the use of the mallet is very light this may not matter.

If you look carefully at the mallet on the left, you can see the grain pattern forming a ring. This is indicative of the grain running parallel to the rings as indicated in green. The 'side' grain is weak by comparison with the densely packed 'end' grain. Repeated striking on the side grain will shorten the life of the mallet. The mallet should be used so that the end grain is used to strike the chisel. This will extend the working life of the mallet.

To facilitate speed of carving, many carvers cut and smooth off a small notch in the handle under the thumb's grip. Then they can pick up the mallet and locate their thumb over the patch and know that the mallet is in the correct alignment to strike on the end grain every time. This can be done by feel alone.

The reason for choosing a round mallet is that if the mallet slips off the chisel head and strikes the person is cause less damage than a square one. Still try and avoid this anyway.

When acquiring a mallet, check the grain direction. There ought to be clear grain running through the mallet head. Watch out for round mallets turned from a round log, where the grain rings are concentric to the handle and no grain runs across the head. These have no end grain striking face and will be weak all round.

Today, manufacturers apply a shiny finish to their mallets, makes them appear more appealing. However the finish also make the surface slippy, increasing the risk of the mallet striking the hand and reducing the amount of force transferred from the mallet to the chisel. I would recommend sanding off this factory finish back to bare wood to increase the friction between the mallet and chisel. You only need to sand back the striking face(s) of the mallet, not the whole tool, and while you are sanding, sand the head of the chisels' handles too.

Mallets are best used for detail, delicate work rather than rough, 'chopping' work. The correct technique is a gentle rocking motion to strike the chisel.

Use a light grip between thumb and forefinger and rock the wrist back. Flick the wrist forward to strike the chisel. This light tap technique allows significant control and delicate work. The light work means that this technique can be kept up for long period without undue fatigue, noise or damage to tools.

This final picture of a mallet which has seen better days, illustrates what happens if mallets are used for too heavy work and the strikes are taken on the side grain. The grain direction is clear on the mallets head, and the repeated striking on the side grain has caused the grain's strength to fail and the layers have begun to delaminate.