



17th-century relief carving

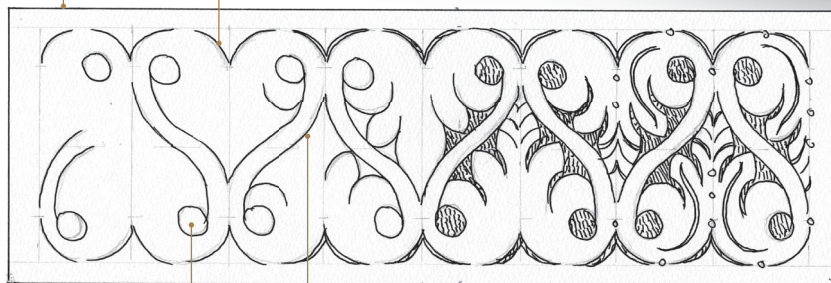
BY PETER FOLLANSBEE

I specialize in 17th-century English and New England furniture, much of which is carved, like my box (see pp. 46–55). In this Master Class, I'll show you how to carve that box's two patterns, S-scrolls on the front and lunettes on the sides. The examples included here I learned from studying surviving oak furniture from Devon, England; and Ipswich, Mass. These are common motifs, and from layout to the execution they contain lessons that help with many other patterns.



1. Scribe margins.

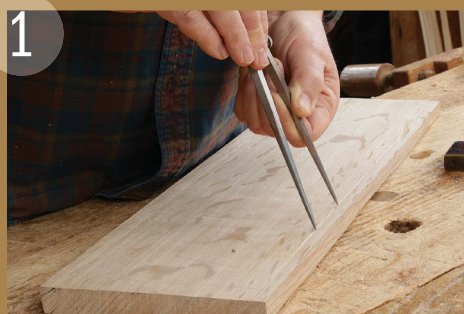
2. Incise rounded corners.



3. Form circles.

4. Carve S-shapes.

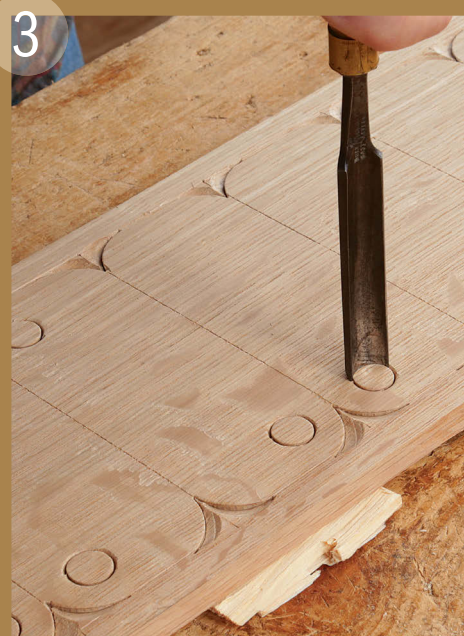
S-scrolls



Step off the spacing. Once you've scribed the perimeter margins, use a pair of dividers to lay out the spacing for each S. Then square those divider points across the board with an awl. You'll be left with a series of rectangles.



Gouge outlines each scroll's corners. Strike a wide #7 or so gouge vertically at the intersection of each horizontal and vertical layout line, rounding off the corners of each rectangle (top). Next, tilt the same gouge back 45° to pop out the chip behind each incision.



Two circles for each rectangle. Using a narrower and more deeply curved gouge, incise a series of small circles in opposite corners of the rectangles. Leave space between these circles and the arcs at the corners.



The tools: gouges and a V-tool

Before I get to the patterns, it's helpful to discuss the carving tools. I recommend practicing with them before diving right into the patterns. This style of carving is quite approachable, but beginners still benefit from a few test cuts in scrap.

Gouges for controlled cuts—Much of this style of carving, these two patterns included, is formed by making incised cuts with gouges. These are simple: Strike the gouge vertically into the wood and then remove the chip behind it with the same gouge tipped to about 45°. The shape of the gouge thereby defines the shape of the chip. Easy, repeatable, and effective.

By organizing these gouge cuts in different ways, you can quickly and reliably duplicate motifs and elements. For example, by systematically staggering and flipping the cuts, you can create the mirrored leaf carving around the S-scrolls, as well as some of the leaf's veins. They also help when carving curves, like at the corners of the S-curves and leaves under the lunettes.

With these gouge cuts, you're both drawing the pattern and incising it at the same time. There's no layout to speak of; it's all struck. So you get one shot at it, but it's completely manageable.

V-tool for more freedom—While the gouges will get you partway there, you'll need the V-tool for both patterns. Because it's steerable, you'll use it to outline both the free-flowing sweep of the S-scrolls and the curved arches of the lunettes.

This freedom can be daunting, and the tool does come with challenges. You need to learn how to steer it. One key is to take deep cuts; this sounds counterintuitive, but these are easier

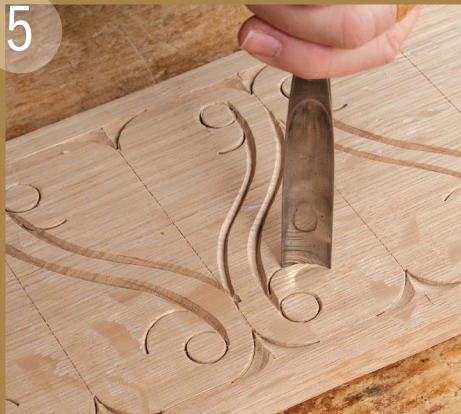
And I do recommend trying other designs. You shouldn't let the word *carving* intimidate you here. You don't need an artistic background to handle these. A V-tool, a handful of gouges, a round mallet, and a compass get the job done. Plus, any mistakes are likely to be hidden by the detailed, highly geometric patterns. The result is a relief carving that light and shadow play off of dramatically.



V-tool outlines each S. The V-tool lines travel from the circle to the rectangle's vertical margin, or from the margin to the circle. It's not circle-to-circle or margin-to-margin. Cut all the lines in one direction, then the mirror images heading the other way.

S-scrolls continued

5



Begin incising the leaves. With a wide, deeply curved gouge, strike the outline of the leaf around the circles. For the remaining leaves, which angle toward the V-tool trough, use a gouge with less sweep but similar width. The last cuts form the middle leaf. These cuts don't meet in the vertical centerline, but rather go into the V-tool line.

to control than shallow ones. Deeper cuts also create a wider, more pronounced line, revealing more light and shadow. So cut as deep as you can, within reason, while still maintaining control. This means heavier strikes with your mallet, too. I keep my stance wide to maintain balance during these hits. Take practice cuts of varying depths and widths to find which gives you the lines you want.

My V-tool is 6mm wide with an approximately 50° angle.

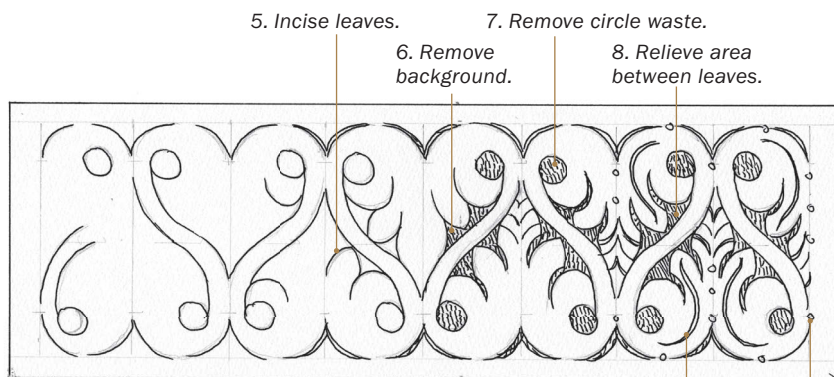
Lay out and carve the S-scrolls

After scribing your margins, use dividers to lay out the scrolls' spacing and scribe these divisions with a square and awl. You'll be left with a series of rectangles. From there, use a wide gouge with a moderate sweep to round the corners of each rectangle. This creates the rounded corners of each S.

6



Remove the background behind the leaves. Hand pressure with a shallow gouge is usually enough, but be careful. It's easier to slip with hand pressure than with mallet work. Hold the tool near the cutting edge while bracing your fingers on the board.



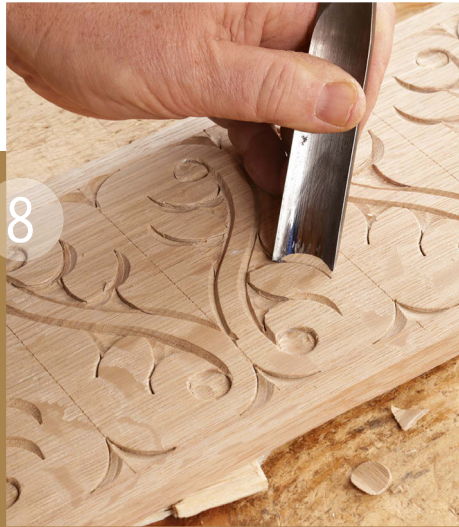
9. Add veins. 10. Punch circular accents.

The next step, incising circles at diagonally opposite corners of each rectangle, is a little trickier. These circles and the rectangle layout lines are the waypoints for your V-tool, so their placement is critical. I start on the right-most rectangle, striking circles in its top left and bottom right corners. The rectangle to the left gets a circle in its top right and bottom left. This alternating pattern continues across the grid. Think this through carefully. Once you hit the gouge, there's no eraser other than a plane. Leave some space between the circle and the outer rounded corner of the rectangle. The gouge I use for this is ½ in. wide with a slightly tighter sweep than the previous one.

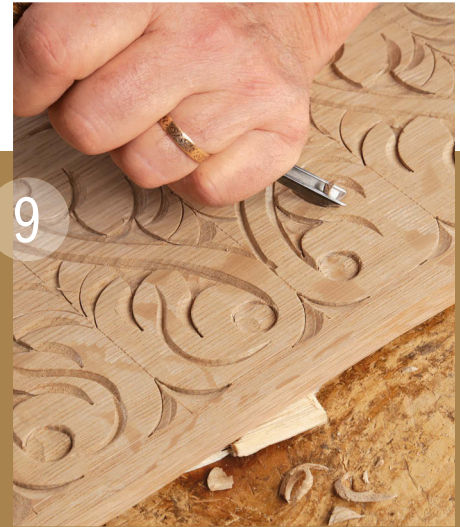
Now use the V-tool to outline the curves of the S, which go from corner to corner. The V-tool line connects the rectangle's margin to the circle, then the circle to the margin. It's not circle to circle and margin to margin. If you need to draw pattern



7
Pop out the circle. This is more fun than you'd think. Just tuck the corner of your shallow gouge in there and give it a whack. Then pivot this way and that with hand pressure to clean out the cut.



8
Add depth to the leaves. Now back to the larger gouge. Pop a chip out behind those initial incised cuts within the leaves. This is much like what you did behind each corner chip.



9
Gouge cuts and V-tool for veins. The middle leaves' veins are incised cuts. For the leaves directly beneath those, a V-tool handles the job.



10

Nail set for finishing details. To accent some more of the foreground, Follansbee uses a $\frac{5}{32}$ -in. nail set to punch circles around the pattern.

lines, use chalk; it's easy to remove. I often have students draw a mark at the midpoint of the rectangle too, where the S bends.

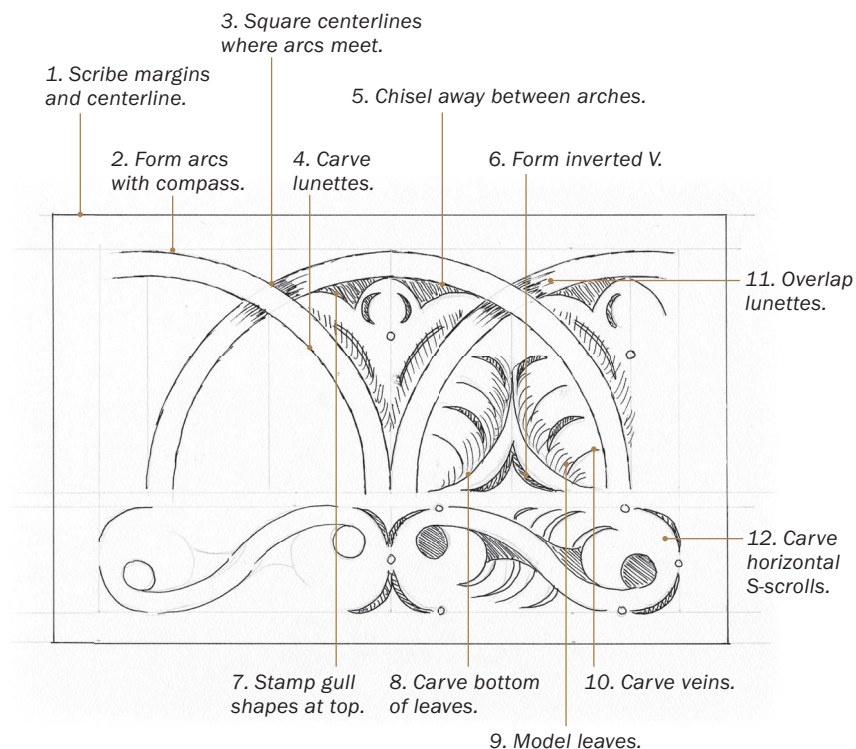
Leaves fill in the space between the S shapes. Begin with the leaf around the circles and work your way up to where the V-tool lines meet.

The next step is to remove the background with a shallow gouge about ½ in. wide. Do this behind the leaves, within the circles, and at the rounded corners. You don't want a dead-flat background. Facets show shadows better. Make clean cuts. Hand pressure is usually enough for this task, but be careful not to slip.

Finish with the detailing that fills in the blank spaces, namely the veins in the leaves and punched circles.

Use a compass to lay out intersecting lunettes

The box sides have a short run of intersecting lunettes, an art history term for these half-circles. This pattern



Lunettes



1 **Mark the margins and a vertical centerline.** Use a marking gauge to scribe the horizontal lines, and a square and awl for the vertical ones.



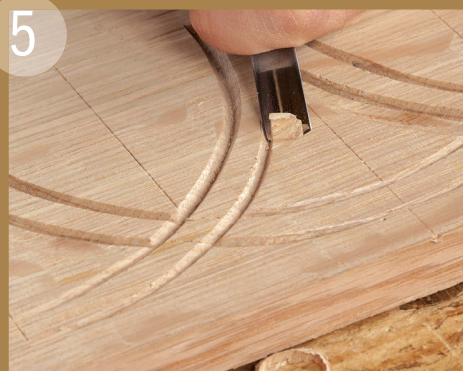
2 **Scribe lunettes.** The pivot point of the half-circles is on the centerline. Make the quarter-circles by pivoting on the half-circles' ends. Close the compass ¾ in. for the concentric circles.



3 **Square lines down from where the lunettes meet.** Doing it now instead of before you scribe the arcs lets you mark using the actual layout lines.



4 **V-tool carves the lunettes.** Follansbee cuts all the halves heading from 12-o'clock down to the margin, then turns and carves the others coming up from the bottom margin.



5 **Relieve around the middle of the lunettes.** Use a shallow gouge bevel up. With one corner of the tool in the V-tool line, tilt the edge so the other corner doesn't contact the board.



6 **Incise inverted Vs under the arches.** Connect the vertical layout line with the bottom margin. Use a wide, medium-sweep gouge.

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master class continued

involves a lot more V-tool work, but it's not freehand, like the S-scrolls. Instead, it's laid out with a compass.

No matter how many of these I'm cutting, I cut all the arcs heading in one direction, from the top down, then turn and carve the others coming up. It helps with flow. Since I'm a righty, it's always counterclockwise, too.

Cutting across the board is easier than cutting with it, where your tool can follow the grain. Be extra aware at the top of each lunette for this reason.

The rest of the detailing is predominantly gouge cuts, with some V-tool work to help outline the bottoms of the leaves within the intersecting lunettes. Familiar territory. You don't level the background, so to give the pattern more punch, use the gouge bevel down around the lunettes in the middle of the pattern and bevel up to model the bottoms of the leaves. □

Peter Follansbee specializes in 17th-century oak furniture from England and New England.

For more carving ideas, Follansbee sells full-size step-by-step drawings at his blog, <https://pfollansbee.wordpress.com/>



Lunettes continued



7 **Form abbreviated leaf shapes at the top.** Some people visualize these as gull shapes. Use the same gouge as in the last step. Then remove the chips behind the strikes.



8 **V-tool cuts the bottoms of middle leaves.** Mirror the curve of the incised gull shape below when making this curve. Stop these lines short of the lunette's crossing.



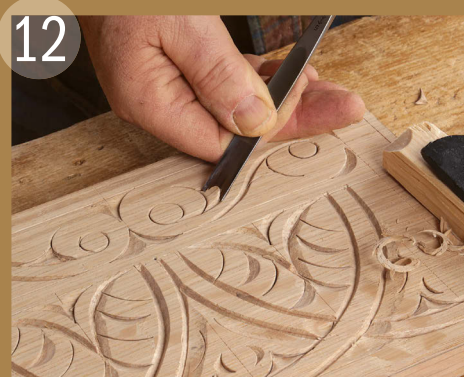
9 **Shallow gouge models the bottoms of leaves.** Use the tool with its bevel up and its handle near level. Pare away the edge of the almond-shaped leaves you just made.



10 **Cut veins in the leaves with a wide, moderately curved gouge.** These cuts should flow with the leaf. Strike four on each side before removing a chip behind every other one.



11 **Shallow gouge creates overlap.** Where two lunettes intersect, use a gouge with a mild sweep to remove chips on either side of the V-tool lines.



12 **Opposing S-scrolls at the bottom.** These scrolls are the same as the first pattern, just lying down instead of standing up. Make sure the left and right are mirror images.