

# Carving a New Life for Old Furniture



*REJUVENATED:* Before and after photos show how relief carving adds value to this old chair.

## Traditional relief carving adds value to flea market finds

By Dennis Zongker

Many carvers lack the equipment necessary to produce custom-made furniture. But you can create heirloom-quality furniture by embellishing existing furniture with a traditional design.

Be on the lookout for old chairs, tables, and chests at estate sales and flea markets. You can easily increase the value of these items by enhancing them with a carving. Before you take chisel to wood, make sure you do not have an authentic antique. Look for names, dates, or other signs that could indicate the piece of furniture is an antique with real value.

Look for a piece that has plenty of wood thick enough to carve. Ideally, you want clean straight wood with plenty of space for your design.

Most furniture I run into is made from oak, walnut, cherry, birch, maple, or beech. Maple and beech are the hardest common woods. For most woods, I sharpen my tools to a 25° angle, but I use a 28° angle for maple and beech.

After you've located the right piece of furniture to carve, choose a design. This pattern, called "Nine-Point Shell with Flowers and Leaves," comes from *Classic Carving Patterns* by Lora S. Irish. Make a photocopy and draw two border lines around the pattern with a colored pencil. The first line should be 1/8" outside the pattern. Draw the second line 1/4" outside of the first line. Cut along the second line with scissors to reduce the pattern to a workable size.



2

**Outline the elements.** Match the curves on the pattern with various gouge sizes and sweeps. Align the gouge with the pattern line, hold the gouge perpendicular to the wood, and tap it with a mallet to make a 1/16"-deep stop cut. After outlining one area, hold the gouge at a 60° angle on first colored line, and cut up to the stop cut you just made.



Today's mass-produced furniture with factory-stamped designs (inset) falls short of replicating a rich hand-carved look (above).



1

**Transfer the pattern to the chair.** Draw a line through the center of the pattern and in the center of the area to be carved. Apply spray adhesive to the back of the pattern, align the centerlines, and press it in place. Place clamping blocks on the rails and clamp the chair to your workbench. I use small foam pads under the back rest and the seat rail.



3

**Rough in the shell.** Make a stop cut perpendicular to the chair along the rays and perimeter of the shell. Position the gouge 1/8" away from the stop cut, hold the gouge at a 60° angle, and cut up to the stop cut. Cut up to the stop cut from both sides to create a V-shaped groove along the rays. Pay attention to the curve of the individual rays.

## FURNITURE: CARVING THE SHELL AND SCROLLS



4

**Carve the bottom of the shell.** The area at the base of the shell will end up  $\frac{3}{8}$ " deep. Stop-cut along the scrolls at the bottom of the shell. Starting about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the way up the shell, carve up to the stop cuts with an 8mm #3 gouge and an 8mm #2 gouge. Don't worry about carving away the rays of the fan; the ray details will be carved again in step 5.



5

**Carve the inner shell.** Redraw the rays at the bottom of the shell. Recarve the V-grooves along the bottom of the rays using the techniques explained in step 3. The grooves along the rays should be  $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep at the bottom of the shell and  $\frac{3}{16}$ " deep at the top of the shell. Soften the edges of the cuts between the rays and around the perimeter of the shell.



6

**Round the shell.** Turn the gouges upside down to add a slight radius to the shell between each ray. Use an 8mm #3 gouge for the wide areas and a 3mm #3 gouge for the small areas. Add a concave radius to the top of the shell with an 8mm #3 gouge. This gives the shell more of a 3-D look and adds some interesting shadows to the carving when the chair is upright.



7

**Shape the scrolls.** Stop-cut around the radius of the scrolls. Start with the smallest radius in the center of the scrolls. Shape the scroll starting just next to the small circle in the middle, which is the highest point of the scroll. Taper the scroll down gradually until the end of the scroll is  $\frac{3}{32}$ " deep.



8

**Carve the details on the scroll.** Taper the outer corner of the scroll down. It should look like the spiral and the ball at the end of the spiral wrap over the rest of the scroll. Undercut the inside corner of the ball with a 4mm #7 gouge. Round the ball with the same gouge held upside down.



9

**Round over the scroll.** Hold an 8mm #2 gouge upside down to round the area where the left and right scrolls meet. Round the rest of the scroll, using an 8mm #3 gouge, a 5mm #5 gouge, and a 4mm #7 gouge, matching the size and sweep of the tool to the shape of the scroll.

## FURNITURE: CARVING THE FLOWERS



10

**Carve the flower buds and petals.** Stop-cut around the outline of the flowers with a 4mm #7 gouge. Cut up to the stop cuts around the perimeter of the flowers using the technique explained in step 2. Hold the gouge at a 45° angle as you carve up to the stop cut around the center flower bud.



11

**Carve the flower stems.** Stop cut around the stems and cut up to the stop cut using the techniques explained in step 2. Round over the stem with a 3mm #3 gouge held upside down. Work toward a smooth flowing stem.



12

**Rough out the leaves.** Outline the leaves using the techniques explained in step 2. Use your own judgment to add dips and bulges to the leaves. This makes the leaves look natural. Try to make each leaf a little different.



13

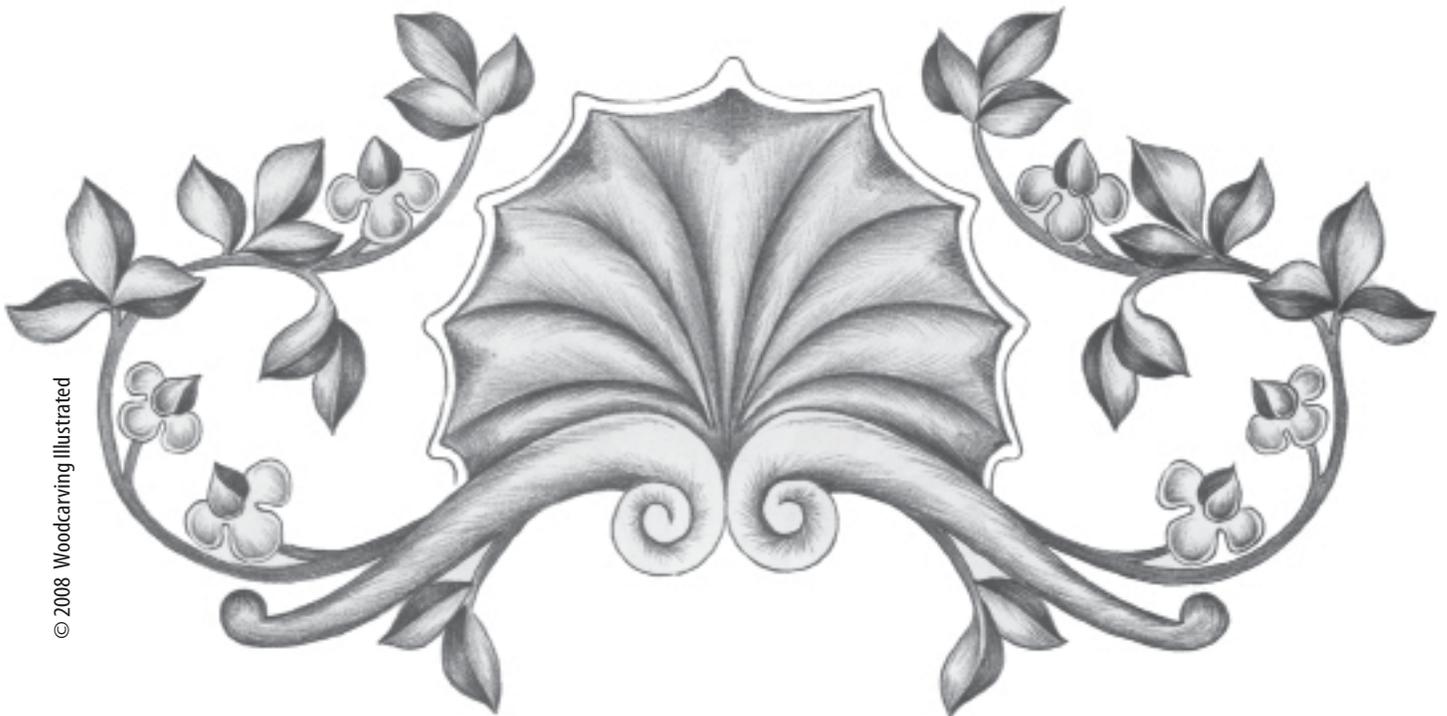
**Add the veins.** Draw in the leaf veins with a pencil. Follow the flow of the leaves; don't just draw a straight line. Follow along the lines with a 3mm 45° V-tool. Carve the veins 1/32" deep. Remove any remaining paper from the pattern. Use mineral spirits to remove any remaining adhesive.



14

**Apply a final finish.** Lightly sand the carving and clean up any fuzzies from tight corners with small wood files. Apply an oil finish such as Danish oil. If you are not refinishing the entire piece of furniture, match the finish of the newly carved section to the existing furniture as closely as possible.

# Nine-point shell with flowers and leaves pattern



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## materials & tools

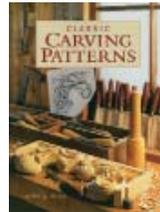
### MATERIALS:

- Furniture of choice
- Spray adhesive
- Oil finish of choice

### TOOLS:

Gouge profiles refer to the Pfiel list. Increase the number by one for a close approximate on the Sheffield List.

- 3mm #9 gouge
- 4mm #7 gouge
- 8mm #2 gouge
- #3 gouges: 3mm, 5mm, 8mm, and 12mm
- #5 gouges: 5mm and 12mm
- 3mm 45° V-tool
- Pencils (I use colored pencils to make the lines stand out)
- Small wood files (to remove fuzzies from tight corners)
- Brush and rags (to apply oil finish)



Pattern reprinted from *Classic Carving Patterns* with permission from Lora S. Irish. *Classic Carving Patterns* is available for \$19.95 (+ \$3.50 s&h) from Fox Chapel Publishing, 1970 Broad St., East Petersburg, Pa., 17520, [www.FoxChapelPublishing.com](http://www.FoxChapelPublishing.com), 800-457-9112. For additional patterns from Lora S. Irish, visit her Website at [www.carvingpatterns.com](http://www.carvingpatterns.com).

## Dennis Zongker's Custom-carved Furniture

Dennis Zongker and his brother, Dan, opened Zongkers Custom Furniture in 1986. The goal of the business was to bring back old-world craftsmanship in custom furniture. During the early years of the business, Dennis determined that adding carving to the custom furniture would set them apart from similar companies.

After carving a few projects to build his skills, Dennis started accepting

commission work. Carvings range from egg-and-dart molding to intricate scrolled feet and acanthus leaf carvings.

Dennis has completed custom carvings on 64 different pieces of furniture, including dining tables, bathroom vanities, beds, end tables, and game tables. For more of his work, visit [www.zongkers.com](http://www.zongkers.com).

