

# Carve a Rosette With Mary May

*One of the most-traveled SAPFM demonstrators shares her steps to successfully carve a rosette for a Philadelphia highboy. With details like these, it's almost like having Mary sit down beside you in your own workshop.*

Recently, I received a commission to carve details for four Philadelphia-style chest-on-chest reproduction pieces. The carvings are roughly based on the top pediment design of a late-18th-century Philadelphia highboy. I say *roughly* because I have not had an opportunity to see an original highboy. Everything I carved was based on photographs of original highboys, photos of reproductions, drawings that I have borrowed from furnituremakers, and plenty of artistic interpretation.

I spent hours scrutinizing minute details of blurry photographs with a magnifier in hopes of understanding the subtle shapes and details in this highly ornate piece of furniture.

Because I previously carved a Philadelphia highboy, I had some idea of what I was getting into with this new project. The design for the current commission is slightly different in style, but many elements are similar.



*By Mary May*



It would take many pages to describe all the steps in carving the fine details of a highboy, but for this article I focus on a step-by-step process of how I carved the rosette in mahogany.

The rosette is a fun and challenging carving, whether you build an entire highboy, or just carve the rosette as an individual project. There are some difficult elements in this carving because as you continue carving around the rosette, the grain changes constantly. I recommend making small, gentle cuts that test the grain direction. If

you feel the grain fighting you, turn the tool around and try going in the opposite direction. It may be a good idea to carve your first rosette in basswood before working with the more challenging (and expensive) mahogany.

To help guide you through the process, set the template and a photo of the finished piece in front of you for reference.

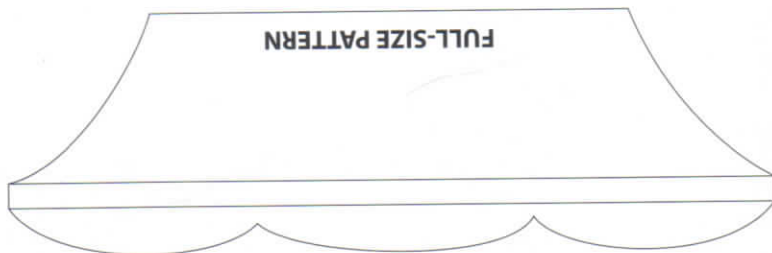
**Carving tools:** This project requires the following: 3mm and 6mm V-tools (60 degree); #3×12mm, #4×14mm, #5×8mm, and #7×6mm gouges; #1×14mm flat chisel (optional).

**Supplies:** Transfer paper, pencil, mallet, protective gloves, double-faced tape, 6×6" or larger backer board (plywood works fine), denatured alcohol.

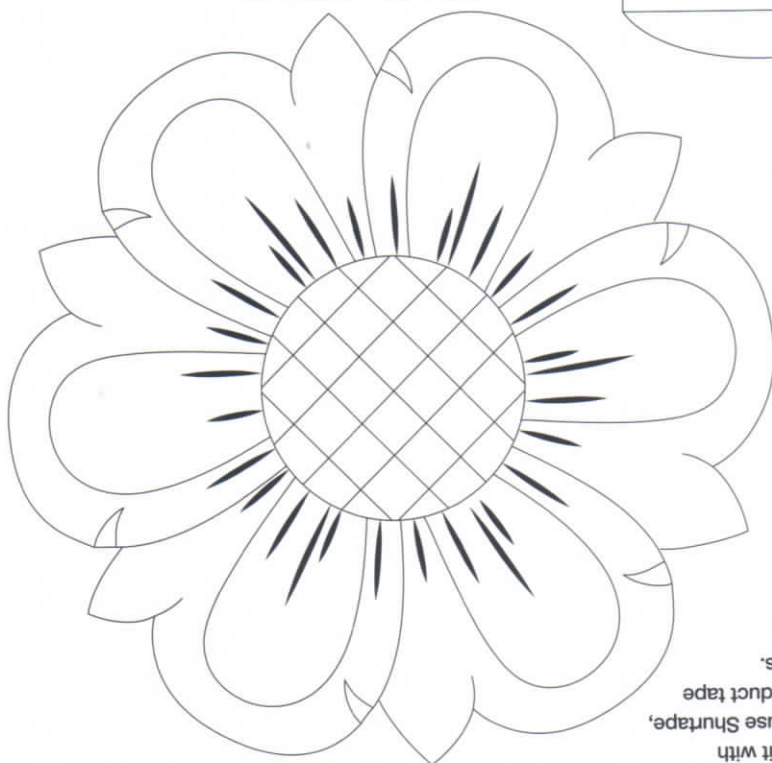
**Carving stock:** 1½×4×4" tight- and straight-grained mahogany.

**How-to video:** Need more help with your carving? You'll find Mary's helpful video carving lessons ([marymaycarving.com/carvingschool](http://marymaycarving.com/carvingschool)) for this rosette and other highboy details—acanthus leaf, center shell, cartouche, and finial (SAPFM's monthly subscription).





FULL-SIZE PATTERN



To hold the rosette securely to a backer board, attach it with double-faced tape. I use Shurtape, a product found with duct tape in many home centers. To ensure the tape holds tightly, clamp the stock to the tape.

Not a whiz at the lathe? After using rudimentary turning skills, begin carving the basic profile (Photos 1b and 1c). For these steps, use #7x14mm and #5x14mm carving gouges.



If you are comfortable with your lathe skills, turn the rosette to match the rosette profile. Student David Piazzo got a clean, accurate start to his carving by spending a few minutes at the lathe.



Referring to the template, draw the edge of each of the petals (six on this project).





"I recommend making small, gentle cuts that test the grain direction. If you feel the grain fighting you, turn the tool around and try going in the opposite direction."

— Mary May



With a 6mm V-chisel, carve a channel  $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep next to the lines drawn. I recommend making V-cuts to protect fragile parts of the carving from breaking. If I were to make a vertical, defining cut (see Step 5) without making a V-cut first, I would be cutting straight into the flat surface of the wood and potentially breaking parts of the petal. By making a V-cut first, I remove the bulk of the wood along that line. Then, when I make that vertical cut on the line (next step) the wood gives towards the V-chisel cut and saves the edge of the petal from breaking.



With a #4x14mm gouge, make a vertical cut directly on the line drawn, which defines the edge of each petal. Make this cut slightly deeper than the V-cut in Step 4.



Continuing to use the #4x14mm gouge, remove stock from this section of the petal down to the depth of the cut made in Step 5, giving the appearance that this petal goes underneath the petal next to it. Remember that grain changes directions as you cut each of these petals.



Draw a line on each of the petals that will identify the inside edge of the hollow that is around the edge of each of the petals.



With a #7x6mm gouge, carve a hollow shape that goes around the outer edge of each petal. Make sure the shape goes right along the outside edge to create a high, sharp edge. Make this cut about  $\frac{1}{8}$ " deep.



Using a #4x14mm gouge turned bevel side up and a #3x6mm gouge turned bevel side down round over the center part of each petal. Remove all flat parts of the petal.





of the petal.

Draw in the small notches on the other side



Additional views of the same cuts.

Photos 10c and 10d (above) provide two ad-

sharp corner.

as it comes into the petal, ending in a clean,

wider at the outside of the petal and narrower

corner. The shape of this notch should be

These two cuts should meet at a sharp inside

the second cut (Photo 10b) at a slight angle.

lobe into the main part of the petal. Make

vertical cut (Photo 10a) extends the small

petal. This cut consists of two cuts. A straight

along the large secondary lobe on each

With a #5x8mm gouge, make a notch cut



With a #5x8mm gouge, clean up the secondary lobe of the petal, making an obvious scooped shape with a high ridge where it joins with the rest of the petal.



Make this cut.

gouge, but I used only about half the tool to

about half the size. I recommend a #5x8mm

Make a similar notch cut as in Step 10, but



With a 3mm V-chisel, make V-cuts directly on the cross-hatch lines. Start from the highest point and go downhill in each direction. A V-chisel with a sharp corner is ideal for this cut.



of the rosette.

Draw lines for the center cross-hatching design



are aimed at the direct center of the rosette.

al a wrinkled appearance. Make sure your cuts

about the center of the petal. This gives the pet-

toward the center of the rosette, starting at

With a 3mm V-chisel, make random cuts down







Another way to make these cuts is with a #3 flat chisel. Make two cuts at a slight angle to create a sharp V-shape.



When you are finished with the carving, brush denatured alcohol along the edge to release the double-faced tape. Because solvents can be toxic, use appropriate safety gloves and proper ventilation during this step.



With a flat chisel or sharp putty knife, lift the carving off the backer board. Some of the double-faced tape may stick to the carving. Brush on more denatured alcohol to release the remaining tape.



To finish detailing the back side, clamp the rosette gently with a cloth or pad to protect the carving. With a 6mm V-chisel, make a cut at the inside corners and down the back side.



Using a gouge with a slight curve (I used a #3x12mm), remove any stock where the original saw cuts are still visible. The V-cut in Step 19 clears the way to make this cut easier. The outer edge of the rosette should come to a nice point, with no original sawed edge showing.

### What about sanding?

To minimize the need of sanding, try to make all the cuts as cleanly as possible.

Sanding the surface removes the burnished appearance from sharp tools. If you believe the surface would look better sanded, remove tool facets with 320-grit sandpaper, being careful not to lose any of the sharp definition in the carving.

Avoid carving the piece after sanding; grit from the sandpaper could become embedded into the wood and quickly dull your chisels. ♦

## A carver with few carvings

I'm a bit like the cobbler without any shoes: I make a lot of carvings for others but rarely get to keep anything carved for myself.

About eight years ago, I had an opportunity to carve the details for two Philadelphia Highboy reproductions. Furnituremaker Danny Hinson of Charleston, South Carolina, built the two highboys and asked me to make the carvings for both. We had a perfect arrangement: Danny kept one highboy, and I kept the other. I thought that was a great deal, because that's the only way I actually got to have a carved piece of furniture in my home.

We had some difficulty finding a place in our home for the highboy because the cartouche reached 8'2", and most of our home's ceilings are lower than 8'. Imagine a real-estate agent trying to sell our house: "Well, they had to sell because their highboy didn't fit."

Fortunately, it didn't have to come down to that, as our bedroom has a vaulted ceiling and the highboy just fit with about one-half inch to spare.

