Carving the Amazing Acanthus

Mary May

Fig. 1 Leaf of acanthus mollis

The beauty and elegance of the acanthus leaf has inspired artists, architects and craftsmen for centuries. The acanthus plant (fig. 1), also known by the common name of "Bear's Breeches" is native to the Mediterranean. It has thick, spiny leaves with serrated edges and produces large two to three foot long spikes of white or purple flowers. The word acanthus comes from the Greek word *ake* meaning a point or thorn and *anthos* meaning flower. The acanthus plant most resembles the dandelion, thistle and artichoke plants.

The acanthus is first seen in the decorative and architectural arts of ancient Greece around the 4th century BC. The most familiar historical use for the acanthus is on the capitals of Corinthian columns (fig 2). According to Vitruvius, the Corinthian capital was the brainchild of Callimachus, a Greek architect and sculptor who worked in the second half of the 5th century BC. In Book IV of his *The Ten Books of Architecture*, Vitruvius recounts the discovery made by Callimachus who, while passing the grave of a recently-enterred young woman, became intrigued by a basket of her worldly possessions which had been left on the grave by her nurse. A large square tile was placed over the basket to protect its contents from the weather, and in time, an acanthus plant grew around the basket, its leaves curling under the overhanging tile (fig. 3).[1] Thus the design of the Corinthian capital was born.

Fig. 2 Corinthian capital

At first, the designs based on the acanthus leaf were accurately portrayed and extremely life-like. As this motif grew popular, it became more stylized, and has evolved today into an imaginary leaf of many uses. The acanthus design can be seen in everything from embroidery to architectural designs to furniture details. Designs have evolved into a variety of styles over the years, but the general rules of design have remained the same.

Fig. 3 Engraving by Claude Perrault depicting the origin of the Corinthian capital.

Acanthus leaves in wooden carved furniture became common in the 18th century. Several examples of this versatile leaf in decorative carvings are shown in Figures 4, 5 and 6. Most early American furniture styles were based on European designs to which the American furniture makers made many changes and variations. This was due in large part to European-trained cabinetmakers settling in America and bringing many different styles and techniques to this new furniture. These craftsmen were able to achieve an amazingly high level of design during the Queen Anne and Chippendale periods. Since each carving was billed separately, details were often determined by economics, so the knees on cabriole legs were often left plain and uncarved.

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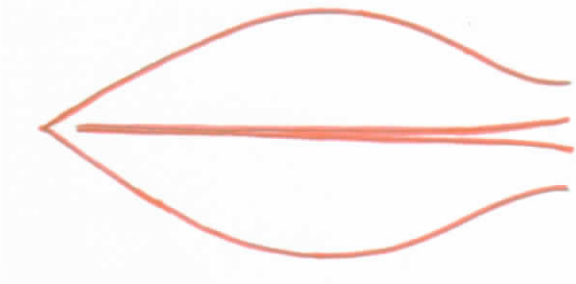
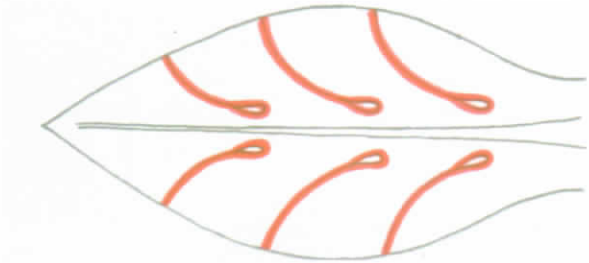
Figs. 4–6 The versatility of the acanthus as executed on a bedpost (L), a mantel appliqué, and a table pedestal.

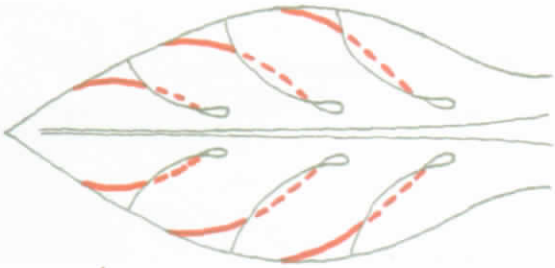
General Guidelines for Designing an Acanthus Leaf



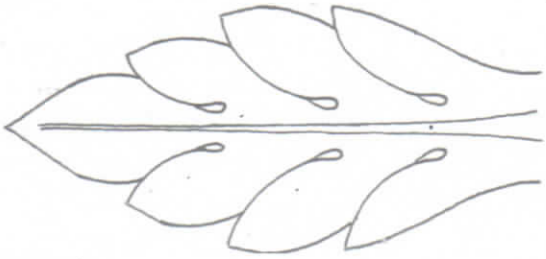
STEP 1: Start by drawing a basic leaf shape with



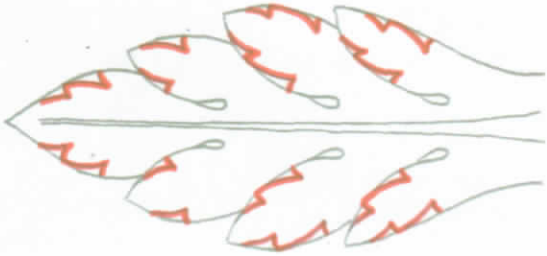
STEP 2: Draw "eyes" (tear-drop shapes that give the impression of a hole where the separate lobes of the leaf overlap). Next, extend lines from the "eyes" to show the upper edge of the overlapping lobes.



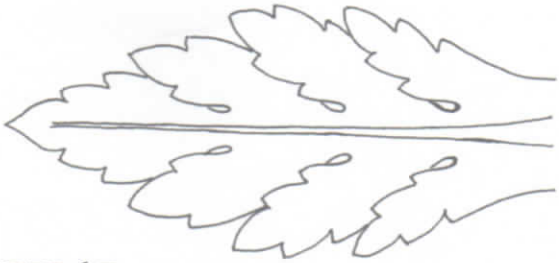
STEP 3: Next, define the lower edges of the separate lobes. I have also drawn dotted lines to show the unseen edge of the lobes. These dotted lines should flow from the eye to meet with the newly-drawn edge.



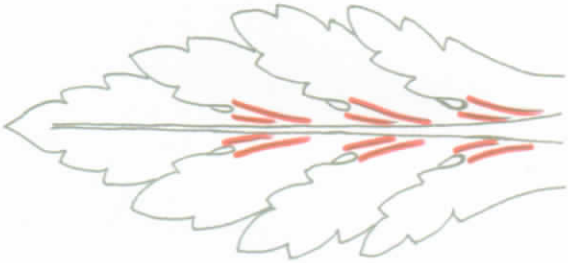
STEP 4: Erase any unnecessary lines to eliminate confusion.



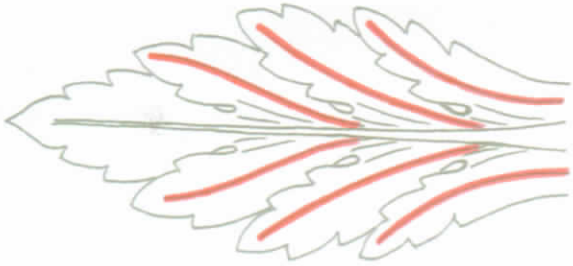
STEP 5: Draw the serrations on the individual lobes.



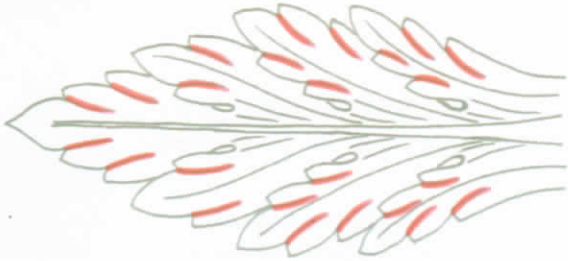
STEP 6: Erase any unnecessary lines.



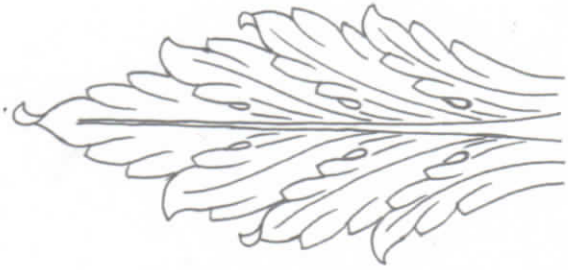
STEP 7: Draw the "pipe." The pipe is a raised area that extends from the eye and gently flows into the center vein. This pipe is common in most stylized acanthus leaves.



STEP 8: Draw vein lines down the center of the individual lobes. These lines also flow into the center vein and should have a gentle curve to them.



STEP 9: Continue drawing detail lines. These should also all flow towards a center vein.



STEP 10: Now you can make your acanthus unique by re-shaping or twisting the various leaf tips.

Mary May

The evolution and development of the carving on the legs started with a simple scroll and convex shell on the knee, matching the shell and scroll on the crest rail of these early chairs (figs. 7 & 8). The acanthus leaf carving was first introduced as part of a cabriole leg around 1745. This design can be seen on ornately carved chairs, highboys, lowboys, beds and tables, and was commonly used until around 1790.

Fig. 7 Shell and volute carved Queen Anne leg. Courtesy of Dan Reahard.

CARVING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH: REPRODUCING THE ACANTHUS LEAF OF A CABRIOLE LEG

Many of the carvings I have completed have been based on designs taken from photographs where many of the details are unclear (fig. 9). Interpreting the subtle shapes, depths, and overall design can be quite challenging at times when you don't have access to a scaled drawing or have the original carving in front of you. This is why understanding the guidelines and techniques of drawing an acanthus leaf is an important first step. If you begin to understand the basic shapes and movements of this leaf, you will be better able to interpret what certain lines or shadows represent on the photograph.

Fig. 8 Shell and scroll carved creat of Dan Reahard's Queen Anne chair.

For this demonstration, Figure 9 represents a photograph that a client commissioned me to reproduce. This particular leg is a highly-detailed Philadelphia Chippendale cabriole leg dating around 1760 to 1770. While the photograph obscures much of the detail, it is the only source of information I have on the carving. I will use the *General Guidelines for Designing an Acanthus Leaf* on the previous page to demonstrate the process of interpreting the design, how to transfer the design to the wood, and how to carve the details based on a minimum of information.

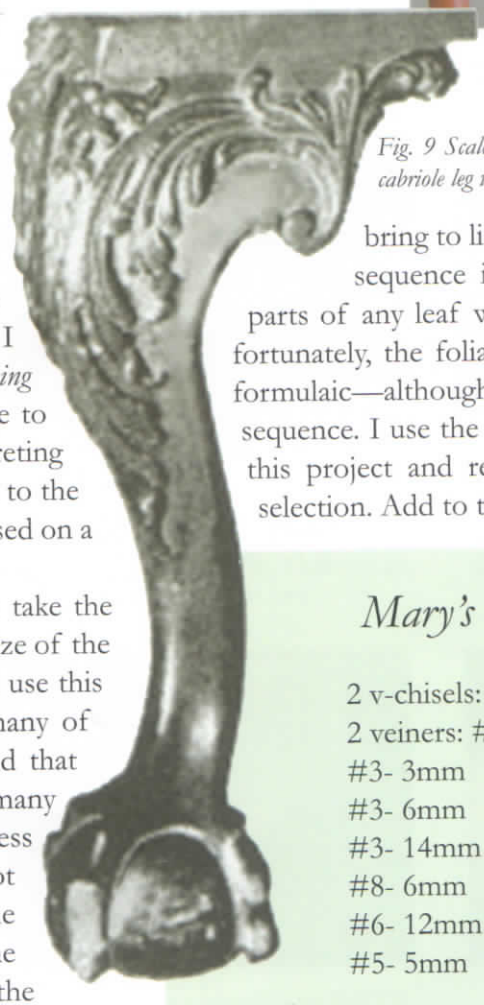
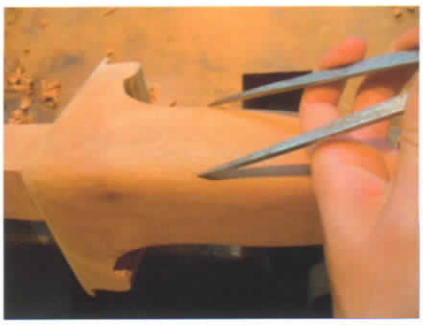


Fig. 9 Scaled photograph of a Philadelphia Chippendale cabriole leg with acanthus carving on the knee.

The first step in this process is to take the photograph and enlarge it to the full size of the actual leg to be carved. You can then use this as a general guideline for locating many of the details on the leaf. Keep in mind that when you enlarge the photograph, many of the specific lines will become less distinct and the overall shape may not be an exact fit. Understanding how the different parts of the leaf relate to one another will help you to decipher the shadows of the photographs you hope to bring to life in the workshop. The proper sequence in which to carve the various parts of any leaf will come from experience, but fortunately, the foliage of a cabriole leg follows a formulaic—although sometimes unpredictable—sequence. I use the following list of tools to carve this project and recommend it as a good basic selection. Add to them as needed.

Mary's Carving Tools

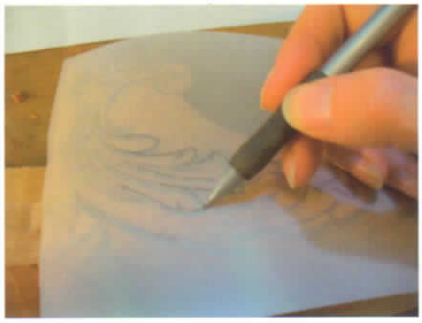
2 v-chisels: #41- 5mm, #41- 3mm
2 veiners: #11- 3mm, #11-1mm
#3- 3mm
#3- 6mm
#3- 14mm
#8- 6mm
#6- 12mm
#5- 5mm



STEP 1: Round the front corner with a chisel and rasp, then mark the centerline by measuring with calipers.

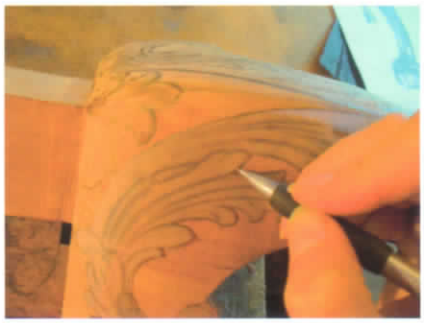
STEP 2: Photocopy and enlarge photo to match size of leg as close as possible. Cut out and trace edges.

STEP 3: Fill in details of leaf using "Guidelines for Designing an Acanthus Leaf".

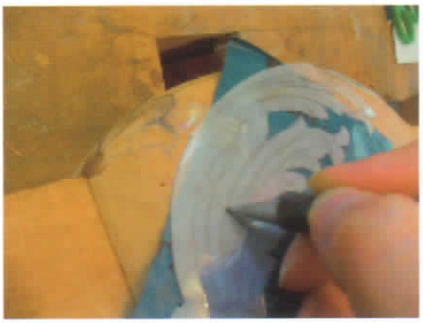


STEP 4: Use tracing paper or vellum to trace the design.

STEP 5: With gouges that match the profile of the leaf, cut out the design. This can also be done with scissors.



STEP 6: Turn the pattern over and trace around the edge of the design on the other side of leg.



STEP 7: To transfer the detail lines of the leaves, place carbon paper under tracing paper and finish drawing lines.

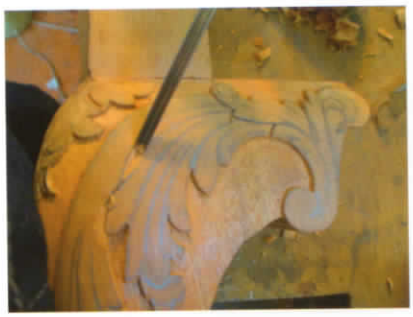
STEP 8: Begin by carving a 1/16" deep V around the outside edge of line with v-chisel (#41- 5 mm).

STEP 9: Select gouges that correspond to the leaf outline and make vertical stop cuts 1/16" deep to define the edge.

STEP 10: Lower the background using the following gouges: #3- 14mm, #3- 6 mm, and #3- 3mm.

STEP 11: Continue to lower the background areas. In some areas you may have to go across the grain as shown.

STEP 12: Use the #3, 3mm to clean up difficult to reach areas.



STEP 13: Cut the "eyes" by making a 45° cut with a #11- 3 mm veiner. Use a #11- 1mm veiner for the two smaller eyes closer to the leaftip.

STEP 14: Identify all overlapping areas. With gouges that fit the curve of the leaf, make vertical stop cuts about 1/32" deep along edges.

STEP 15: Make a relief cut to the depth of stop cut (1/32") to give the appearance of overlapping leaves.

STEP 16: Continue to lower areas where part of one leaf overlaps another.

STEP 17: With a #11- 3mm veiner, cut 2 grooves to create the "pipe"; a long convex section flowing from the eye toward the stem.

STEP 18: Continue making the pipes and the other 2 smaller eyes further down the leaf.

STEP 19: With the #3- 6mm, round over the pipe by turning the gouge up-side down and softening any sharp edges.

STEP 20: With the #3- 6mm, round over the inside edge as shown. This is actually the split center vein.

STEP 21: With a #8- 6mm, make a vertical stop cut to define the edge of the turning leaf.

STEP 22: With #3- 6mm, make a relief cut to give the appearance that the leaf flows under the up-turned tip.

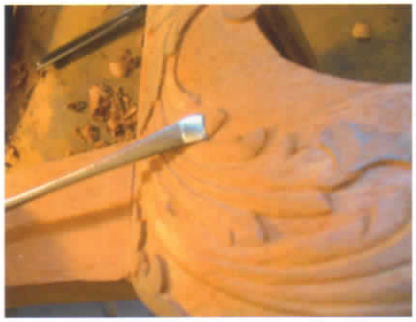
STEP 23: Continue this step with the other twisting leaves.

STEP 24: With a #41- 5mm v-chisel, carve lines to separate major sections of the leaf.

STEP 25: Invert a #3- 6mm to round over various leaf sections.

STEP 26: Continue rounding over edges of leaf sections. Here I am using a #5- 5mm.

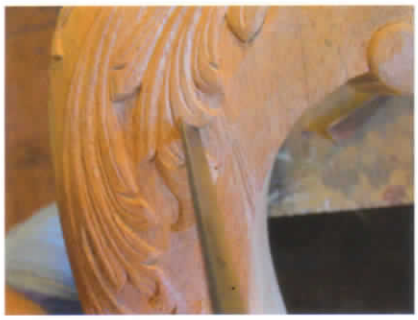
STEP 27: Here is another example of rounding over leaf edges. Make sure your previous v-cuts remain well-defined.



STEP 28: Round over the tips of leaves. Most of these cuts (step 25-28) can be done with the gouge turned upside down.

STEP 29: With a #8- 6mm, hollow the tip of the leaf that is twisting.

STEP 30: With a #5- 5mm, make a small notch that separates the smaller leaf serrations.



STEP 31: With a #5- 5mm, continue to separate the serrations of each leaf. Do this in all similar areas.

STEP 32: With a v-chisel, carve the center vein.

STEP 33: Make a vertical stop cut at the tip of the twisting leaf using a #3- 6mm to emphasize the rolling edge.

STEP 34: Shape the leaf tip by hollowing with a #8- 6mm, and lowering the area as shown above using a #3- 6mm.

STEP 35: With a small v-chisel (#41- 3mm) carve texture lines on each leaf and leaf tip. You can also use a #11- 1mm veiner for these lines.

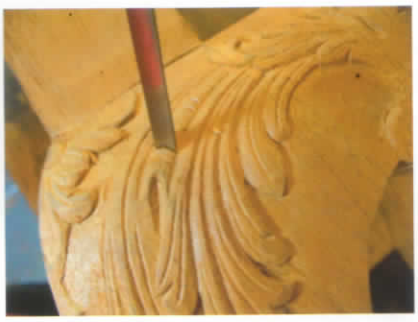
STEP 36: With a #3- 6mm, soften the edges of the rosette as in steps 25-28. With a #41- 3mm v-chisel, carve vein lines. A #11- 1mm veiner can also be used.

STEP 37: With a #11- 3mm veiner, carve the eye of the knee block foliage.

STEP 38: Round over edges and tips with a #3- 6mm (see steps 25—28).

STEP 39: With a small v-chisel (#41- 3mm) carve the vein lines (or use a #11- 1mm veiner).

STEP 40: With a #6- 12mm, carve the curled-over leaf details.



STEP 41: With a #5- 5mm, make a series of graduated curved cuts on the large pipe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary May has studied the fine art of woodcarving with several master carvers from around the world, and has a professional workshop in Charleston, SC. She works mainly on commissioned pieces for architects, furniture makers, and designers. Mary sells study casts, Dastra tools, and a variety of woodcarving supplies on her web site www.marymaycarving.com. May is available for teaching in Charleston or can travel to your location for workshops.

ENDNOTES

1. Vitruve, M., & Perrault, C. (1673). Les dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve. Retrieved 11/24/09 from http://echo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/ECHOdocuView/ECHOzogiLib?ww=1&url=/mpiwg/online/permanent/library/6DRGT93S/pageimg&pn=131&mode=imagepath&wh=1

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