



Samuel McIntire's Fruit Baskets

The Art of Shallow Relief Carving

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As a professional woodcarver, I have always found it an exciting challenge to show the illusion of great depth in a minimal thickness of wood. Much of the carving details seen on 18th-century furniture are carved in very shallow relief. Designs such as acanthus leaves, fruit baskets and shells can be seen carved as shallow as $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep with the illusion of being much deeper. A variety of tricks and techniques can be used to create the appearance of dramatic depth. In this article, I demonstrate some of these processes while carving a Samuel McIntire fruit basket.

Samuel McIntire, a native of Salem, Massachusetts, is well-known for his carved baskets of fruits and flowers, and they are excellent examples of shallow relief carving. These baskets come in a wide range of sizes and styles. No matter how small or shallow the carving, they are represented with amazing detail and give the impression of being fully 3-dimensional. There are over 100 examples of carved baskets that have been attributed to Samuel McIntire and while they are similar in style and content, each one is unique.¹

One common image in these baskets is the ribbed melon or gourd which is usually located in a central position in the basket. Various other items such as clusters of grapes, pomegranates, peaches, apples, sheaves of wheat, roses, and grape leaves complete the design. The example of McIntire's work illustrated in Figure 1 shows the detail possible within a very shallow depth.

The fruit basket on which I will demonstrate the techniques of shallow relief carving is adapted from the frieze of a mahogany chest-on-chest, made for the influential Derby family of Salem by John or Charles Lemon in 1796.² The carving itself is attributed to Samuel McIntire.³ The overall dimensions of the finished carving are 4"H x 9"W x $\frac{3}{8}$ "D. This particular project is an example of *appliqué* carving, which is sawn, carved, and then applied to the background, typically proud of the surface. To achieve a similar result in solid stock would otherwise require the removal of large amounts of material.

Fig. 1 Side chair, detail of back, 1791. Attributed to Jacob Sanderson (1757-1810), Carving by Samuel McIntire (1757-1811), Mahogany, Salem, Massachusetts, H: 38, W: 21 $\frac{1}{2}$, D: 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Peabody Essex Museum, 103713, bequest of Miss Marion C. and Elizabeth C. Allen, 1913. Image © Peabody Essex Museum, Photograph by Dennis Helmar, 2007.



To begin, transfer the drawing (plate 1) to your workpiece with carbon paper. Saw around the outside edge with a scroll saw or band saw. There is no need to transfer details of the leaves or the basket weave now as they will all be lowered. At this point, the carving blank can be glued directly to the final surface (fig. 2). Be careful, however, not to cut into the background when carving the details. Another option is to glue the blank to a temporary board with newspaper sandwiched between the two pieces. You can also use double-sided tape. Be careful when removing the finished carving from the temporary backer to avoid damaging the fragile leaf tips.

Define the major elements with a 5mm or 6mm v-chisel to cut $\frac{1}{8}$ " deep, following the edges of the individual fruits and upper edge of the basket. Also cut around the two central leaves that overlap the front lip of the basket (fig. 3). Do not yet divide the individual leaves with the v-chisel because they still need to be lowered into the blank.

Excavate the leaves to a thickness of $\frac{1}{8}$ " using a #4-12mm (fig. 4). Do not be concerned with individual leaf details since the purpose of this step is to create the appearance that the leaves are located beneath the fruit. Make another $\frac{1}{8}$ "-deep cut between the fruit and the leaves. Next, finish lowering the leaves to a flatter shape using the #4-12mm so that the leaves slope down to meet the fruit.

VISUAL TRICKS

With the 5mm v-chisel, divide the individual leaves. Locate the foreground leaves and define the edges with gouges that have appropriate sweeps. Next, lower the leaves that are below others with a #3-3mm and #3-6mm (fig. 8). Refer to a photo of the original or of my copy to carve the individual leaves, as some are curved up at the end or are raised in the center.

REFINING THE FOLIAGE

Using the low relief technique, round over all the individual fruit. When carving round objects grouped together, it is as important to consider the areas between the fruit and how they are formed, as it is the actual shapes of the fruit. Where three fruits meet, there should be an inverted pyramid shape, so make sure not to create flat areas here as they are very difficult to clean out. Adjacent elements should always meet at a clean sharp line or point. In order to give the illusion of a fully-rounded object, leave the majority of the large fruit flat, and round over just the edges with a #3-12mm or #3-6mm (fig. 7).

Shallow relief carving can be made of the basket remains flat (fig. 5). Flattening the basket. Make sure the surface appearance that the leaves are overlapping the two center leaves to give the appearance of the basket $\frac{1}{16}$ " around the surface of the basket $\frac{1}{16}$ " around the surface of the basket. Make sure the surface appearance that the leaves are overlapping the two center leaves to give the appearance of the basket $\frac{1}{16}$ " around the surface of the basket $\frac{1}{16}$ " around the surface of the basket.

Using a #3-6mm and #3-12mm, lower the surface of the basket $\frac{1}{16}$ " around the surface of the basket $\frac{1}{16}$ " around the surface of the basket.



Fig. 2 The carving blank is cut out and temporarily adhered to a backer.



Fig. 3 Individual elements are defined with a v-chisel.



Fig. 4 Lowering the surfaces of the leaves.



Fig. 5 The basket takes shape.



Fig. 6 The bottom of the basket is given perspective.



Fig. 7 The edges of the fruit are rounded into crisp valleys. Inset shows side view.



Draw the center vein lines onto each leaf. It is important to gently curve these lines, as the curves themselves will give the leaves extra shape, even if the leaf is carved completely flat. Use the 5mm v-chisel on either side of the vein line and then lower the surrounding leaf to this cut with a #3-6mm to create the appearance of a raised vein (fig. 9). With the 5mm or smaller v-chisel, carve the smaller veins in the leaves, making sure they all flow gently toward the center vein (fig. 10).

Define the edges of the two center leaves that overlap the basket with gouges that best fit the



Fig. 8 Adding depth to the leaves.



Fig. 10 Secondary veins are added.



Fig. 9 Veins are added to the leaves.



Fig. 11 The overhanging leaves are modelled.

edge of the leaf. I prefer the #3-6mm and #3-3mm sweeps for this style of leaf. Repeat the steps for Figures 9 and 10 to carve the details of the front overhanging leaves. Make sure that the right-hand leaf has a center vein that is shaped like a gentle S-curve to give the illusion that it flows back into the basket (fig. 11).

CARVING THE BASKET WEAVE

Transfer the details of the woven basket to the workpiece by cutting out the basket section of the paper template. Trace the primary lines of the basket weave onto the wood using carbon paper. You may need to sketch the areas where the basket curves away and becomes distorted. With a 10mm flat chisel, make vertical stop cuts along all edges of the weave. Keeping track of which sections of the weave are tucking under, gently carve the edges down. It may be a good idea to practice this method before using it on your finished carving, as it can be quite complicated. With a 5mm or smaller v-chisel, carve the two parallel grooves in the basket weave (fig. 12).

FINAL DETAILS

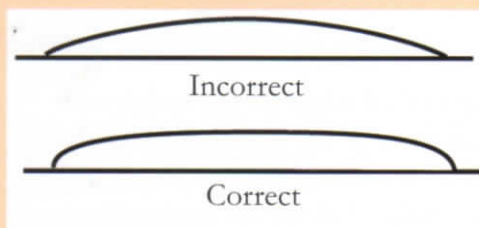
Carve the fine details like stems, pits, and lobes that give the fruit its character. It is important to carve flowing lines that show dramatic perspective. By incorrectly depicting these lines and other impor-

HOW TO TRICK THE EYE

The eye and brain understand and recognize that a peach, for example, is spherical in shape. The trick to successful shallow relief carving is to give the brain just enough information to recognize the object as a peach, and it will fill in the remaining information. The carving technique used to achieve this is to round over the object only at the edges, and leave the majority of the shape flat. A coin is an excellent example of this technique. Examine the face on the coin closely and you can



see that the majority of the modelling is just at the very edges, and most of the surfaces are relatively flat. You can use this technique in carving both the large fruit and rounding over the edges of the basket.



tant details, it is easy to make the fruit appearing flat. When defining the lobes of the melon, for example, make the primary cuts with a v-chisel, and round over the sharp edges with a #3-6mm or #3-12mm (fig. 13). Figure 14 illustrates the proper way of showing perspective on round objects.

With a #3-6mm or #4-12mm, make small s-shaped cuts along the top and bottom edge of the basket, and also a simpler center cut between these s-cuts to give the appearance of a wrapping weave. With a v-chisel, carve the final details in the bottom of the basket with lines radiating from a center point (fig. 15). Carefully remove the carving from the backer, scrape the reverse side, and it is ready to apply to your project.



Fig. 12 The reeds of the basket are carved.



Fig. 13 Fine details are added to the fruit.

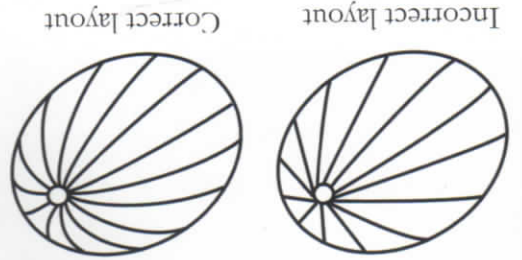
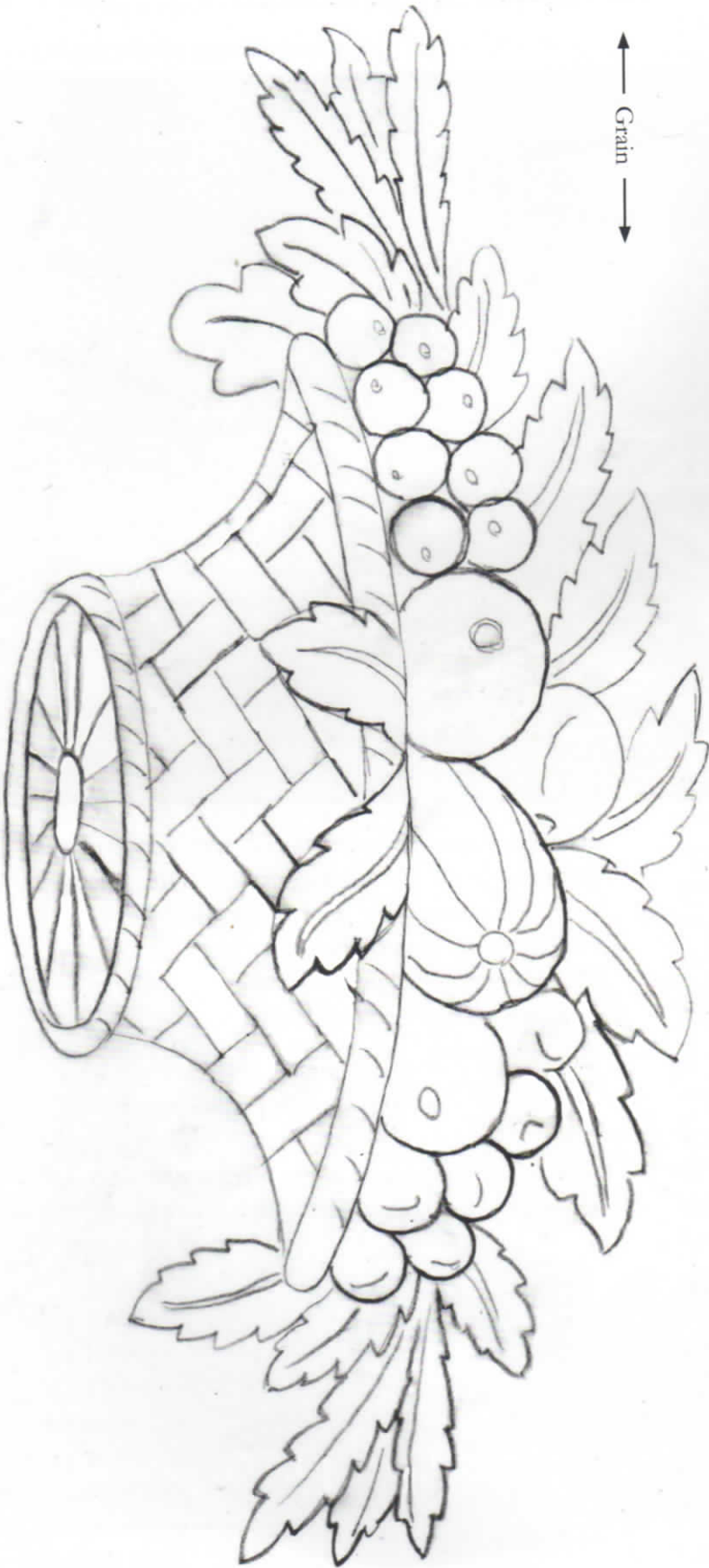


Fig. 14 The lines of the melon should be rendered as a series of gentle arcs as on the right-hand figure.



TOOL LIST

5mm or 6mm v-chisel (60°)

3mm v-chisel (60°)

#3-3mm

#3-6mm

#3-12mm

#4-12mm

#1-10mm

ENDNOTES

1. Lahikainen, Dean T. *Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style*. Salem, Mass: Peabody Essex Museum, 2007: 151. Print.
2. Lahikainen, 62. Figure 3-19.
3. Lahikainen, 149. Figure 4-105.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary May is a professional woodcarver in Charleston, SC. She specializes in antique reproduction furniture, architectural details and sculptures. Mary has recently started a school in Charleston that focuses on traditional arts, such as period furnituremaking, woodcarving, chair caning, fiber spinning, and a variety of other classes that emphasize techniques as they were used hundreds of years ago. Mary travels extensively to teach customized workshops for groups and individuals around the country. She has also produced a series of instructional DVDs and matching plaster castings on a variety of period furniture details. Visit Mary online at www.marymaycarving.com.



Fig. 15 Completed McIntire fruit basket.