

Relief carving outlines

John Samworth's first exercise in relief carving

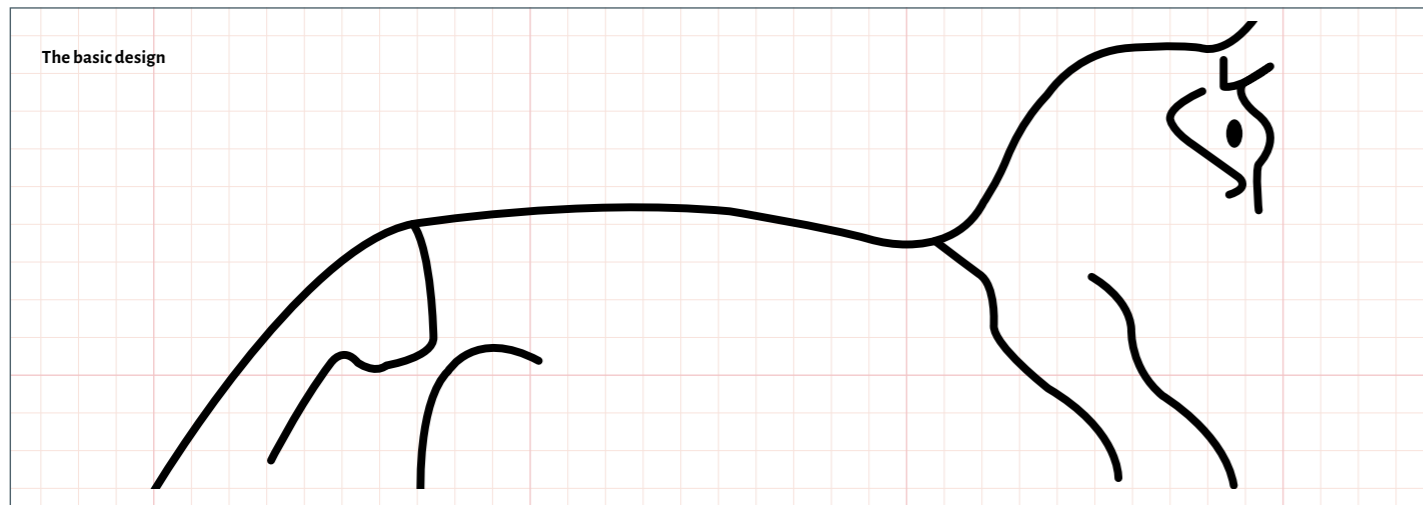


PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN SAMWORTH, EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED

Following on from my previous article on relief carving, I'm going to look at how to draw then carve a simple piece. At its simplest this form is more of an etching than a carving, but at times very

effective. Normally when I relief carve, I focus on an image, therefore I choose a simple wood, will little figure in the grain. Lime and tulip – aka poplar – are ideal.

The basic design



My first exercise is inspired by the brilliant Bronze Age people who carved in the earth the White Horse of Uffington. The original white

horse lies in harmony with the earth from which it was raised. I try to capture the simplicity of its form with sympatric presence within the wood.



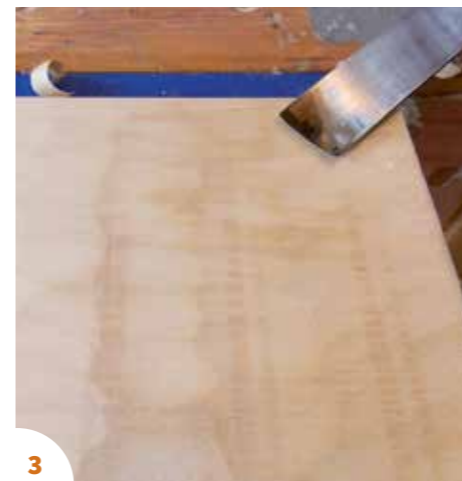
1

1 The piece of wood I have chosen is 4½in x 6in (115 x 150mm) and 1in (25mm) thick, with the grain running along the 6in length. The sides of this carving will be seen and must be prepared before any work is done on the face. Use a plane or sand paper to smooth the sides. When working on any carving it is vital for safety and accuracy to clamp the work tight to prevent any movement while you are working on the carving. Here I have opted to clamp it within a vice, because the wood is reasonably thick and the carving very shallow.



2

2 Hardwoods are typically sold in their rough state, as they left the saw mill, unless extra is paid for planing. The wood often has many superficial marks, water stains and dirt. On this piece it is covered in bandsaw cuts running at right angles to the grain. You could use planes or sandpaper to get rid of these, but I have chosen to use a large 1in (25mm) flat gouge; either a No.3 or No.4. A few light, slicing cuts soon established that the grain was indeed running along the 6in length, but also dipping down very slightly on the left. Thus, cutting from right to left made for a cleaner finish than cutting from left to right.



3



4

3 After the first pass, the surface was smooth, not flat, but the bandsaw marks ran deep into the surface and must be removed. No straight lines are to be visible in the carving. In this picture the sunlight just caught the surface, highlighting the tooled finish. This is the effect I was intending, not a flat finish. The effect evokes the image of a gentle, undulating landscape.

4 A couple more passes over with the flat gouge and the surface is perfectly clean and smooth ready for the detail. Practise the cleanest of cuts – it is interesting watching the light reflect off the many facets of the surface while there are no blemishes to detract from the detail.



5

5 To apply the detail of the horse I shall use a parting gouge, in this case a 60°, 10mm Ashley Isles 39ZC. I have sharpened it to a keel at the base to cut a true V groove. The wooden block it is resting on is a protector, which prevents damage to the edge when not in use.

6 Hand grip is vital for proper control of the tool, for safety and accuracy of your cut. The picture shows a typical right-handed grip. Please note: my hands are behind the cutting edge at all times; the heel of my left hand rests on the surface at all times; my left hand is gripping the shaft of the tool*, with my thumb pointing up the handle; my right hand is gripping the handle with my thumb pointing down the tool. To make a cut I push with my right hand, break with my left hand to control the push and pivot off the heel of my left palm.



* On carving gouges, the tool's shaft is rounded, with no sharp corners for more comfortable holding in the hand. Transfer the image on to the surface. Either draw freehand or trace using carbon paper. The act of drawing/tracing is good practice for the shape to be carved. This is the beginning of the hand-eye coordination necessary for a pleasing carving.

7 The parting gouge cuts a two-sided groove through the wood. This means that the left (near) side is cutting cleanly with the grain while the right (far) side is cutting against the grain, leaving a rough finish. It is always the case that one side will cut with and one side against the grain. Swap hands and cut back in the opposite direction. In this picture, when cutting left to right, apply pressure to the far side of the groove, cutting cleanly with the grain. The nearside should just miss the wood and not cut.

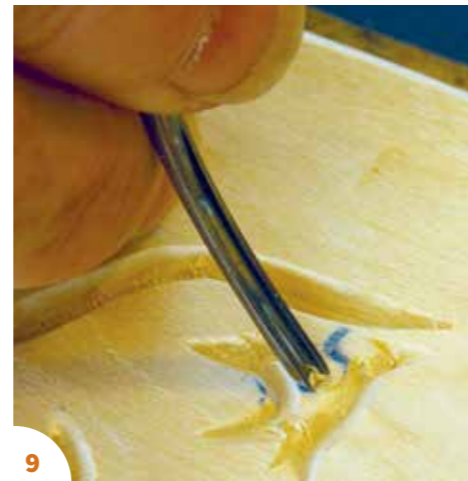


8 Continue to outline the entire drawing. Note the change of hands to cut in the second direction. Being able to swap hands is a time saver. The alternative is to turn the wood around. On more complex carvings, swapping hands will enable you to reach parts that are otherwise inaccessible with just one dominant hand.

Take the opportunity to experiment with various depths of cuts – deep and wide across the back, but shallow and fine around the head.



9 All the horse outline can be cut with one parting tool except for the eye. Here use the smallest U-shaped veiner available. I have used a 2mm micro gouge. Cut down at about 45° with the grain from both sides until the eye piece pops out.



10 To finish, go over the surface once more with your large flat gouge, removing any untidy edges and any stray tracing marks. The finish used is beeswax, but wood can take many different finishes, each with its own characteristics. I chose beeswax for the soft sheen and faithful reproduction of the wood's original colour. Oil finishes will tone the wood to match the oil's colour, but they penetrate deep into the cuts, emphasising the carving.



Tree of Life

A completely different effect was achieved by a friend of mine, Peter Clark, of Cornwall Woodcarvers, who, after carving a Tree of Life, filled the grooves with green resin and sanded back, removing any excess resin to reveal a stunning contrast of the tree against the red mahogany wood.

Green Man Triptych

The two halves form doors to open a triptych dedicated to the Green Man design of professional carver Chris Pye. A beautifully conceived and executed carving. While the basics of this carving technique are simple, the results can nonetheless be quite spectacular and embellish other techniques.

In the next article I shall discuss and demonstrate shallow relief carvings. ▶

LEFT: Tree of Life
BELOW: Green Man triptych

