Relief carving landscapes

John Samworth continues his series with an introduction to scenery

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN SAMWORTH
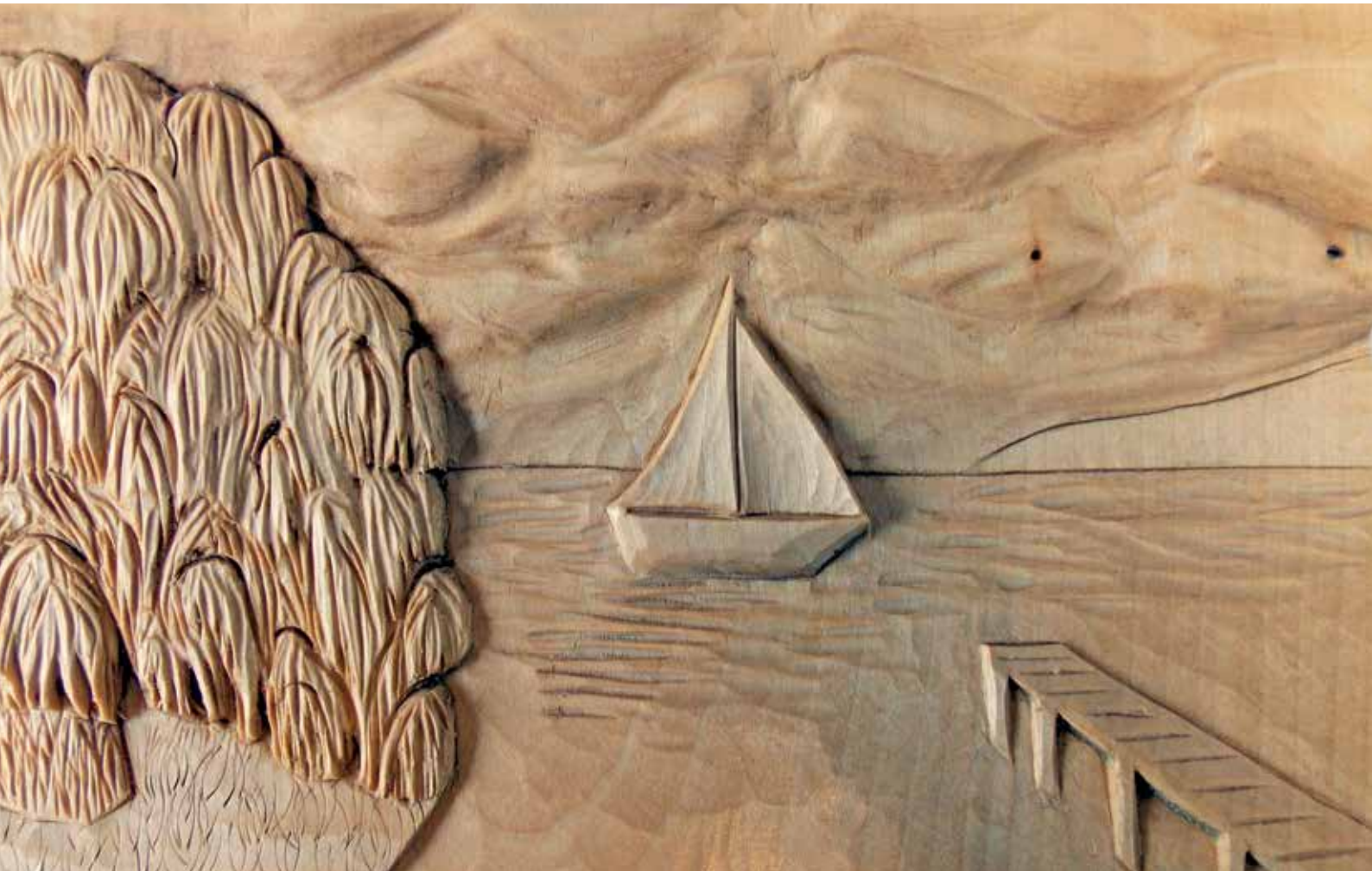
Following on from my earlier article on relief carving, I'm going to look at how to carve a landscape image. Landscapes have been a popular source of inspiration to artists for hundreds of years. Since the discovery of geometric perspective by Leon Alberti, landscape pictures have developed into an amazing likeness of the vista in front of us.
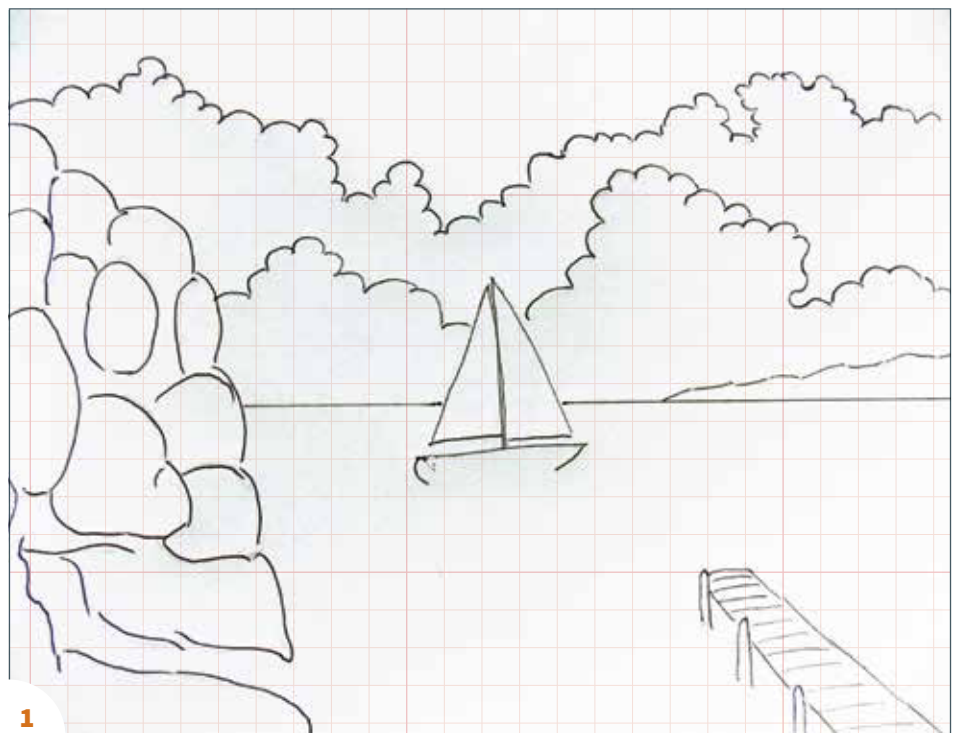
1 I have drawn a typical landscape image to emphasise the topics discussed in my earlier article, but first we need to consider the various elements contained here:
• Central focal point
• Weeping willow tree
• Clouds
• Boat and boat's shadow
• Jetty
• Water

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2 Start by preparing your piece of wood. In this instance we shall be working the entire front surface and only need to smooth the sides. Sketch or trace the plan on to your wood.

3 Mark the right side as shown. The blue line represents from X to Y the depth of the water sloping down to the horizon then the sky curving up and forward. The left-hand pencil line is the depth of the jetty and the central pencil line the depth of the boat. Note also the vertical pencil line to fix the position of the horizon. We will need to redraw the horizon several time and this mark is vital to keep the horizon fixed.

4 Using a parting gouge, make stop cuts around the objects and mark the horizon. Note the grain direction is vertical. This will be very useful when forming the tree.

5 Using a large No.9 fluter, followed by a large flat No.3 or No.4 sweep gouge to clean up the work, begin to waste away the water level and the sky. Keep at least 5mm of spare depth of wood in the sky to construct the clouds. Begin to shape the tree. The section closest to the viewer is the section just above the trunk. Gently slope the surface of the tree away from this point towards the background. The trunk is slightly lower than the shape of the tree immediately above it.

6 By reference to an image of a genuine willow tree, it is apparent how the tree is constructed of large sections, each subdivided into small sections and again to smaller section still before the individual willow rods droop down to the water.

7 Mark the main area on to your carving and label them 1. For the closest section, 2. For the next and so on. Use a large No.9. fluter to rough out these sections.
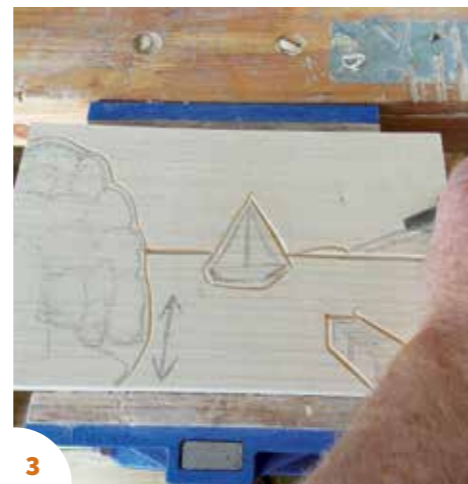

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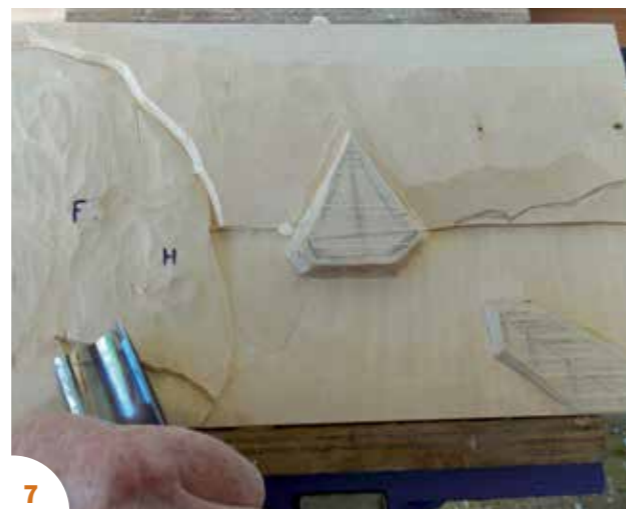

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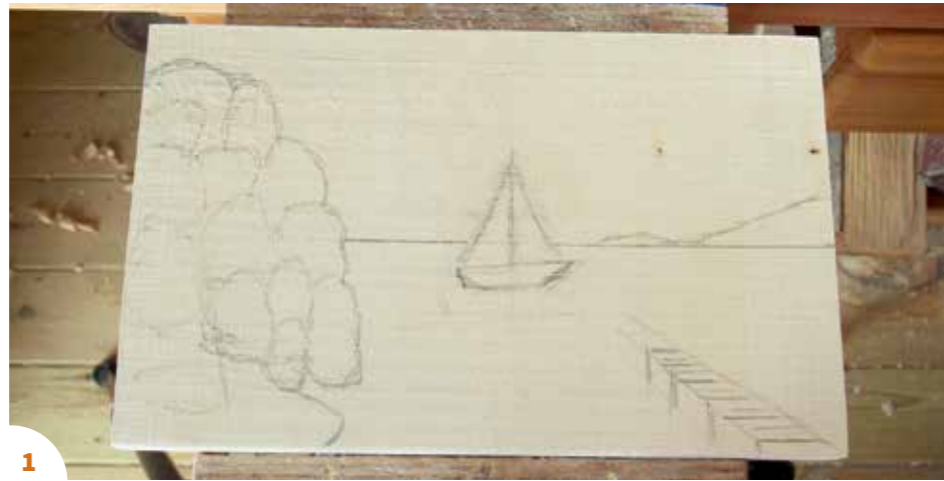
8 Check over your work. You are looking to ensure that the overall appearance is natural, there are no patterns to the sections, no straight cuts, no parallel cuts, no flat areas and that the various sections' heights are gently sloping from the centre to the background. I have spotted a flat area and a section too high. These will be adjusted.
  Note how the tree's edge is running into the sky. A small section of the sky has been taken back to accommodate the tree. In the final piece the sky will be behind the tree, but for the time being I want to keep plenty of wood to form the sky later.
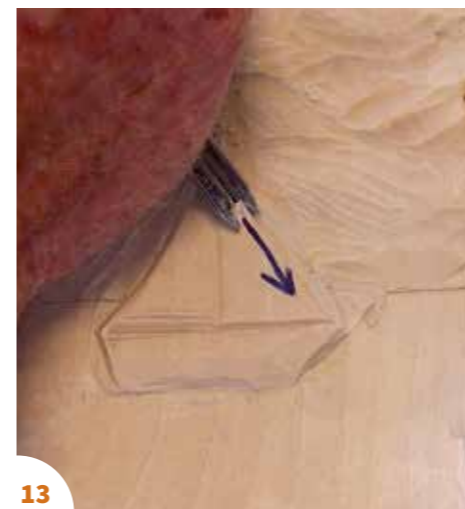
9 Repeat the exercise using smaller and smaller fluters to divide up the tree's sections and start to define the individual willow rods.

10 Begin to break up the outline by carving small notches from the bottom and where the different sections meet against the background.

11 A simple technique for the sky is to chip out a line of randomly placed curves. Use a mixture of No.5-No.8 gouges of different widths, 5mm-10mm. Two rows like the original drawing and you will have a very effective skyline. I am after a more dramatic skyline, perhaps evoking a storm coming.

12 Using a large No.9 fluter, rough out the basic shape of the main cloud sections. Use larger sections with more depth at the top but much more delicate work towards the horizon. We are using five tricks here – the sky is curving forward with the top closest to the viewer, the top has larger cloud areas than at the horizon, the top casts more shadow by the extra depth of the carving, the sky will run behind the tree, boat and distant headland and the jetty will create a perspective line to a vanishing point behind the boat. Together they will trick the viewer into seeing the sky fading away into the distance, creating great depth in the carving. Check over the rough work, make sure there are no flat areas, except perhaps right down on the horizon. There are now no straight cuts, no parallel cuts and the depths are right. Begin to gently open more space between the tree and the sky, while keeping the rough outline of the clouds consistent. Work over the clouds again with a smaller gouge.

13 Reduce the height of the boat and begin to add some detail. Hollow the sail to appear to be catching the wind. Using a fluter, cut close and parallel to the leading edge of the sail. Keep a check on your grain direction. Carving with the grain will leave a clean and sharp edge to the sail. Rotate the flute on to its side and gently remove the rest of the sail's hollow back to the mast. The mast will be slightly lower than the boat's hull top. Round the hull back to the water line. Repeat the hollowing of the rear sail.

14 Tidy the edges, checking that the various depths are correct and lower to the sky as necessary behind the boat, and blend this area into the rest of the sky. The mast itself is not carved, rather a fine line is carved to cast a shadow suggesting the mast. Let one sail be slightly taller than the other. Add a very small amount of undercut behind the sails.

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15 Lower the jetty with a large, flat No.3 or No.4 gouge. Slope the top edge away leaving the lower edge of the jetty boards as the high point. Slope the jetty into the carving such that the distant edge is almost level with the water background. Use a parting tool to mark out where the jetty piles will be.

16 Lower the background between the piles. Use a small fluter and short cuts, working back towards the jetty boards. If you try to cut too much out with one cut, the wood will split, leaving a scar in the background or tearing away one of the piles.

17 Where the piles meet the water, they are at different heights, which will look wrong. Before tidying the background, invert a flat gouge and lower the piles to form a smooth line between the water's surface and the jetty boards. By doing this you will make the piles stronger to carve and you may safely remover the rest of the wood between the piles and tidy up this area.

18 Finish the clouds with abrasive paper, working through the grits. The clouds are the only section to be sanded. Lime has a tendency to fluff when sanded and it is this soft, textured finish with no hard edges I am looking for in the clouds. If you catch the water's surface with abrasive, re-cut with a flat gouge. Add some texture to the water's surface with successive sized fluters and, using the finest veiner in your tool box, cut a few lines in front of the boat to cast a reflection of the boat on the water.

19 Apply the finish of your choice. Because of the heavy shadows within the tree, I chose an oil finish, because the oil penetrates deep into all the groves and will puddle slightly in the deep grooves, accentuating the shadows. A little beeswax only on the water will help reflect light.

20 Here is an alternative version to the sky. It is worth comparing the two. For me, both are convincing portrayals of sky, the first being moodier as if a storm is brewing and the boat must head for a sheltered mooring. The second is calmer and more picturesque and the boat can boldly head forth into open waters. ◗

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