

DESIGNING AND MAKING CUSTOM FURNITURE – PART 3

DENNIS ZONGKER CONTINUES WORK ON HIS HALLWAY
TABLE BY HAND-CARVING THE TABLE APRON

In my previous articles (*F&C* 309 and 310), I explained how I got to this stage on a commissioned hallway table. Here, I will describe how I carved the apron.

Woodcarving to me is very therapeutic once I begin to hear and feel my sharp gouges shaving off each layer of wood. It is also great practice for hand and eye coordination when using a mallet or just pushing a gouge into the wood, controlling

the amount of pressure needed to remove the hardwood or softwood. One of the biggest skills of woodcarving is to hone your gouges before they start to dull with a slip stone and leather strop. By doing this it will keep you from having to resharpen your gouges. Not only will you spend less time sharpening if honed at the right time. Some of my most used gouges I have never had to re-sharpen.



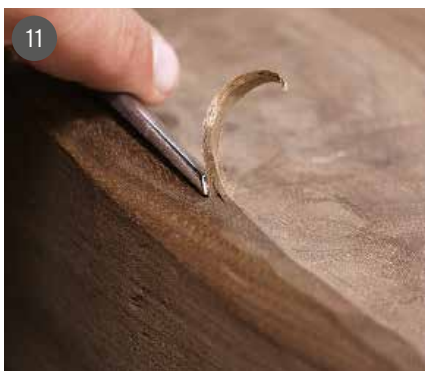
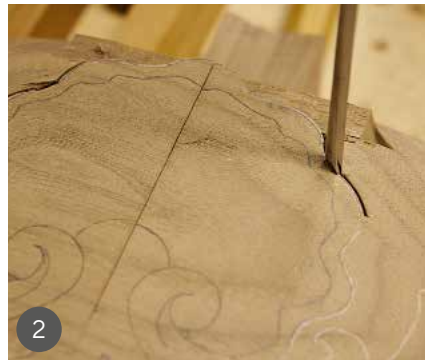
THE ACANTHUS LEAF DESIGN

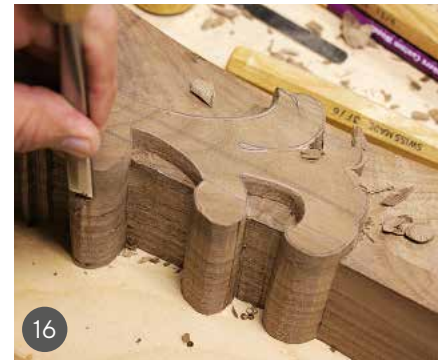
For this hallway table carving design I enjoyed exploring all types of styles to blend with the apron. I chose the acanthus leaf motif because it was an elegant way to flow across the apron overhanging the bottom edges also connecting to the center shell with scrolls and two side shells. The acanthus leaf has been a decorative architectural element dating back as early as 500 BC. When you see acanthus leaves used, they are stylised, with simplified lines and graceful curves. Each culture that used the leaf adapted its image to their taste and over time the styles have changed. Today, the acanthus leaf

is still associated with luxury and richness. It is often used in traditional and classical-style interiors.

For me it is important when carving on furniture from the beginning concept throughout the finished carving to keep enough strength and thickness because you don't want the wood to be too thin or fragile in order for it to withstand any abuse on the furniture throughout time. It's important to remember that carving is not as complicated as it looks: these steps that I will show you can be learned by beginners or seasoned woodworkers. All you need is a little patience and practice at a new skill, continuing to practise and improve.







CARVING THE APRON

1 To start the carving, I use an assortment of carving gouges and a mallet. American black walnut is a medium density hardwood so my mallet will come in handy when stab cutting for depth and removing the bulk of the waste wood. First, I print out a full scale of my design drawing of the centre shell with the scrolled acanthus leaves. I cut the drawing into smaller sections so that I can draw the design onto the wood with a pencil. I save it so that if I need to redraw the template after removing waste wood I can just redraw in new lines.

2 To remove the waste wood around the outside edge of the shell I use several different sizes of carving gouges that match up to the shapes or radiuses. Then with the gouges at a straight 90° angle to the carving I use my mallet to tap the gouge three times to equal about 1/8in x 3/16in deep cuts. This is called a stab cut. I repeat this step all around the shell, being consistent with the same amount of pressure applied when tapping the gouges.

3 After I am done stab cutting around the shell, I remove the waste wood by relief cutting up to the stab cut at the outside edge of the shell. I use my mallet and tap the gouge handle. This way I can control the amount of pressure applied to the gouge. This will keep me from damaging the outside edge of the shell. I repeat the stab cut and the relief cut until I reach the total depth of 3/4in equal to the apron.

4 Next, I move onto the acanthus leaf sections. Basically, I remove the waste walnut hardwood and repeat my steps by stab cutting around the outside edges of the acanthus leaves ...

5 ... then relief cut up to the stab cuts.

6 To smooth the face of the apron flat I use carving gouges that are flatter with less arch to them. For example, here I am using a No.3/20 and then a 2/20 gouge. The first number is the sweep of the gouge and the second number is the width in millimetres, let's say a No.9/20 would have an arch like a circle. The lower the first number the flatter the gouge. I also just push my gouge without using a mallet.

7 Carving past the ends of the acanthus leaves to the sections of the aprons that have no carving. This is where the half-round circle trim detail is at the bottom edge of the apron. By using my

fingers as a guide following the bottom edge of the apron with a pencil. The circle trim is 3/4in wide x 3/8in deep.

8 To remove the walnut above the bottom radius trim. Using a 3/4in wide flat chisel and mallet to stab cut into the walnut by following my pencil line. With just a few light taps with a mallet will give me about 3/16in deep cuts which is plenty. I need to be careful not to tap too hard as it could cause the bottom trim to crack or chip.

9 I remove the walnut with a No.5/25 gouge, which is larger with a bigger sweep for removing wood faster. It takes about four steps of stab and relief cutting to get the wood almost flat to the apron. Then I can smooth carve with a No.2/20 gouge.

10 I carve the radius trim at the bottom edge of the apron by flipping a No.4/12 gouge upside down. Then I slowly shave off thin layers of walnut until it shapes a 3/8in radius.

11 On the inside radius trim there is a little less room to manoeuvre my gouge, so I switch up to a No.5/10 carving gouge to shape the radius trim.

12 Now that I have removed all the background wood and radiused the bottom trim, I can start to stab cut in the details of the scrolls and shell using an assortment of different sizes of carving gouges that match up to the shapes or radiuses. When tapping the handle with a mallet I tap very light, two or three taps to cut into the wood only about 1/8in to 3/32in deep. This is so I won't cause any chips or cracks.

13 When relief cutting up to the edge of the shell be careful not to tap your mallet too hard to avoid carving into the shells edge.

14 To balance the carving, I start with the bottom acanthus leaves and scrolls by stab and relief cutting.

15 This lower section of the radius trim below the scrolled acanthus leaves is carved approximately 1/2in deep. I then carve the radius trim the same way as in steps 10 and 11.

16 The ends of the scrolling acanthus leaves are returning all the way through the bottom face of the apron. I use a No.4/12 carving gouge with the face side inward to smooth carve the bandsaw cuts.





17 To carve the shell I start by drawing in the arched lines which are the ribs of the shell. Then with a No.9/3 and No.9/4 gouge I carve in a concave radius following the pencil lines.

18 To cut deep into the ribs I use a 15/3 V-parting carving gouge. The numbers on the V-gouges are a little different than the regular gouges. The first number 15 equals 45° angle between both sides and the number 3 is the width of the gouge. By using the V-tool I can carve approximately $\frac{3}{8}$ in deep into the shell.

19 To radius the sections of the shell I use a No.2/5 gouge upside down to shave the wood smooth.

20 The inside radiuses of the scrolls are carved by stab and relief carving with a No.7/6 and No.5/8 gouges. I also use a No.2/8 gouge upside down to radius the center dome of the shell and the outside edges of the scrolls.

21 The bottom acanthus leaf and the outside edge of the scroll can be radiused with a No.3/6 gouge held upside down.

22 To carve the small oval shape of the leaves, I use a small No.9/2 gouge by cutting straight into the center of the oval. I then carve outwards $\frac{1}{4}$ in and stop, and then carve from the opposite direction into the oval

23 I use the same No.3/6 gouge held upside down to trim and shape up all the ends and separate each leaf.

24 The next step is to shape the long section of the acanthus leaves on both sides of the shell. Most of my carving is done with a No.3/14 gouge by flat carving the flowing low and high points of each section. You don't have to be precise just whatever looks natural.

25 Then with a pencil I draw in all the details that need to be carved.

26 After using the same carving techniques to add detail, the last steps are to finish up these two sections of the scrolled acanthus leaves and the two side shells with leaves on both ends of the apron.

27 Here you can see the finished carving of the centre section of the apron with the dovetail spline.

28 The centre carving on the apron is carved while the joint is together; this is the loose joint separating the two sections. The front apron will have a loose sliding dovetail spline joint.

29 With 150-grit sandpaper, I hand sand all the carvings, radius trim and the back face of the apron.

THE NEXT STAGES

In my next article I will be showing the steps for making the three front legs. It will include how to do the glue-up, using the bandsaw and carving the front large cabriole legs to the hallway table.

You can also follow my work on Instagram: [@denniszongker](https://www.instagram.com/denniszongker)