

# Embellish a Turned Post with Timeless Acanthus Leaves

*Take advantage of "opportunities for creative adjustment."*

*This carving lesson is excerpted from Mary May's upcoming book, The Acanthus Leaf: A Rite of Passage for the Classical Carver, to be published by Lost Art Press in 2017; details at [acanthusbook.com](http://acanthusbook.com).*

One of the more challenging tasks for a woodcarving teacher is how to answer the often-asked question, "What do you do when you make a mistake?"

I prefer not to call them mistakes, but "opportunities for creative adjustment." This has helped students greatly when they realize that removing wood is usually a whole lot easier than trying to put it back.

So I freely confess that these opportunities happen, even after years of carving experience. With the unpredictable nature of wood, there are times when a piece may unexpectedly break off and fall to the floor. As you helplessly watch it land amongst a pile of shavings, you quickly remember your good intentions of sweeping the shop that morning, but realize you forgot. Can the broken piece of wood be found in the pile of shavings? If so, can it be discreetly glued back? Or is this one of those times where

the design allows subtle carving cuts to be made to adjust the design and disguise the error? These solutions may work on minor mistakes, but there are rare times when the only solution is to take a deep breath and start over.

Such was the time I was working on a commission to carve two turned bed posts with spiraling acanthus leaves curling up a 36" section of each post. The customer provided me with a deeply and beautifully carved original 1850s mahogany bed post that I was to duplicate on two freshly turned replacements.

The first post was progressing very nicely, as I referred to the original antique post to assure the carving details matched accurately. I finished the first post and—pleased with the result—started right in on the second. As I was nearly finished with the second post, my husband, Stephen, stopped in to see how the project was coming along. He admired the carving, oohed and ahed as good husbands should, and then, as if he

had seen a ghost, his face suddenly changed. He gasped and put his hand up to his mouth.

Panicked, I asked, "What is it?"

Fortunately he was more composed than I, and he very gently asked "Are they all supposed to be spiraling in the same direction?"

Silence....

Now it was my time to gasp and panic. Oh, no! I only had the one sample post and that thought simply never occurred to me! It is very common in a piece of furniture with two or more spiraling posts, that the matching pairs twist in the opposite directions. I have seen this on many antique examples, but I was so focused on making sure my carving matched the original antique post that reversing the spiral on the second post didn't

even come into my mind.

I immediately contacted my customer to ask what he was expecting, and sure enough, the bed required that the posts be spiraling in opposite directions. I humbly admitted what happened, knowing full well that there was no way of



Mary's bed post with "wrong-way" acanthus spiraling leaves



By Mary May



Carved 3"-diameter post for this project; step-by-step details continue on the next eight pages. Carve this design for a bed post, lamp post, or table leg.

post. With the new post clamped to the bench, I checked, and double-checked that everything was laid out correctly before beginning again. This time I finished the carving without incident.

As it turned out, my client was quite happy because in addition to having the two carved posts that he needed, he asked if he could keep the "wrong" bed post as well. Of course I agreed. That post is still in his showroom today and has become a humorous conversation piece as he gladly shares the story of getting a phone call from an uneasy carver asking what way the post turns. Enough time has passed that even I enjoy the story now.

Since that time, when I get more than one of anything to carve, I remind myself to "lay-out twice, carve once," and happily I have not made that mistake since.

### How to carve your leaf on a turning

Acanthus leaves carved on a round or turned surface are seen on many designs in our everyday lives and have been used as a decorative detail since ancient times. They can be found outdoors on traditional style, cast metal street lamps, and inside homes as decorated bed posts,

table lamps, and table legs. The curvilinear flow of the acanthus leaf lends itself well to this design, as the flowing "S" curve of the turned vase shape flows well with the natural shape of the leaf. Studying the side profile, the leaf curves in at the base, gently flows out for the main "belly" of the leaf, curves back in again towards the top of the leaf and often ends with a curling leaf tip.

There can be any number of leaves positioned evenly around a turned surface, but two, three, or four leaves are most common.

Secondary or minor leaves are often positioned between and behind the primary or main leaves. These secondary leaves appear to flow underneath the primary leaves and are often less ornate than the primary leaf.

The primary leaves often connect directly into the next primary leaf creating a semi-circle where the leaves join, as shown *below*.



Marble baptismal font, Evangelical Lutheran Kirchengemeinde, Obermbreit, Germany.

fixing the mistake. The completed leaves were carved far too deeply to make a "design adjustment." The only option was to chalk this up as a learning experience and start over with a completely new

## Tools and Supplies

### Tool list:

Thin plastic for template  
White chalk or wax pencil  
6mm V-chisel  
3mm V-chisel  
#3, 6mm  
#4, 14mm  
#5, 5mm  
#5, 8mm  
#5, 14mm  
#7, 6mm  
#7, 10mm  
#11, 3mm

Before transferring the design to the wood, it is important to lay out accurate and evenly spaced guidelines along the surface of the turning. There are several techniques I use to locate these lines. The number of lines that need to be drawn are double the number of leaves – one line for the midrib of each primary leaf, and one line for the midrib of each secondary leaf (the area between the primary leaves). Here are some techniques I use:

1. Keep the turned piece on the lathe and use an indexing ring to evenly mark the location of the midribs for the primary and secondary leaves. Position the tool guide at the halfway point of the turning and run a pencil along the guide, holding your wrist and pencil tightly. This is the best method to get a complete, straight line drawn down the length of the turning, and not just a single location point.

2. Wrap a cloth tape measure (or strip of paper) around the circumference of the turning, marking the point where they meet. Divide the total circumference measurement into the number of

divisions needed, making evenly spaced marks along the tape. Reposition the tape around the turning and transfer the division marks onto the wood. This technique only locates points. The lines of the midribs that go along the length of the turning will have to be drawn by hand and will not be as accurate as the method described above.

3. Use a divider and step it around the circumference of the turning, estimating the distance between each line. Make a light mark on the wood at each point. This is more a trial and error method until the correct number of equally spaced points can be located. This method also only locates points. The lines of the midribs will have to be drawn by hand.

Examples of acanthus leaves on a turning appear *at right* and *below*.



Turned table lamp



Finial on antique cherry wardrobe

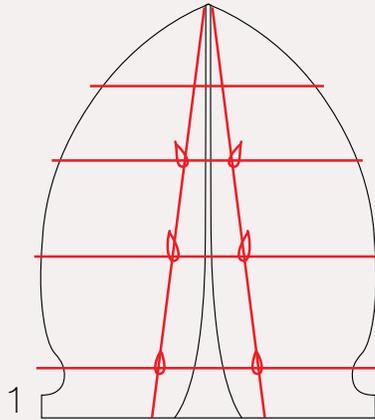


Detail on an antique cherry wardrobe

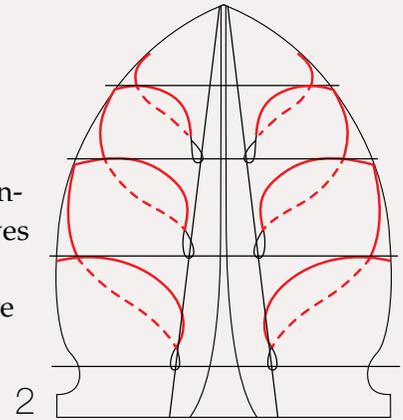
Photo by Donna Marshall

## Draw the leaf

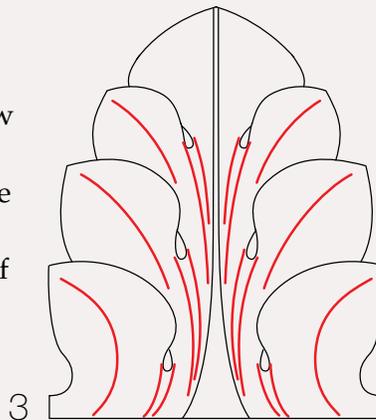
**Step 1:** Draw a basic, symmetrical leaf outline with a midrib that splays out at the bottom. Draw four horizontal lines that come closer together as they reach the tip of the leaf. Draw two straight lines starting at the tip of the leaf and angling outward at the base of the leaf. Position six “eyes” at the intersections as shown.



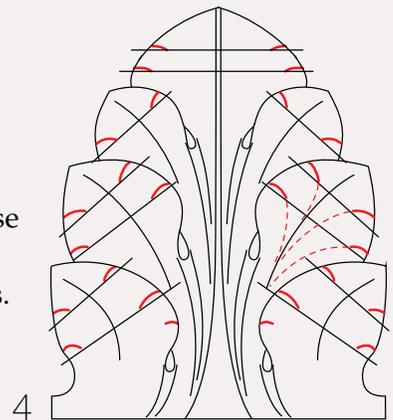
**Step 2:** Draw the individual lobes. The overlapping or upper edge starts from the end of the eye, is shaped in an approximate quarter circle and finishes at the edge of the leaf. The lower lobe also starts at the eye and curves around as shown. The dotted line represents the area of the leaf that is positioned underneath. *Note:* the “eye” represents a hole in the leaf where the lobes overlap.



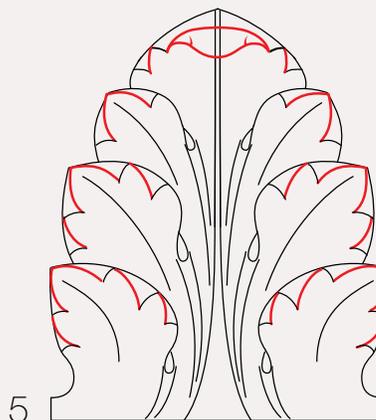
**Step 3:** Erase any unnecessary lines. Draw curved lines down each lobe that represent the primary vein lines. Also draw the “pipes” which flow from each eye, representing a wrinkle or fold in the leaf. All of these lines should flow gently down the leaf in the same general direction.



**Step 4:** Draw straight lines crossing each lobe as shown. Draw small, curved lines that represent the serrations along the edges of the leaf. These should start at the edge of the leaf, curve down to the straight guidelines and flow in the direction of each respective lobe as shown by dotted lines.



**Step 5:** Erase guidelines for clarity. Continue drawing the edges of the leaf by connecting the serrations drawn in STEP 4, and completing the tips of the lobes. Also draw the tip of the leaf that appears to curl over.



## Now, let's carve

To simplify the instruction process, I am only showing how to carve half of the leaf. The other half is carved exactly the same, only in reverse.

There are two complete primary leaves on this design, with a total of four lines drawn along the length of the turning (four equal divisions). Two lines identify the midrib of the primary leaves and two identify the midrib of the secondary, underlying leaves. I used the indexing ring on the lathe to locate and space these lines evenly around the surface of the black walnut.

### Step 1: Transfer your design to wood

Cut out template "A" in thin plastic or cardboard, making holes that are identified in red. Notice the curled tip of the leaf is not a part of this template, as it is too awkward



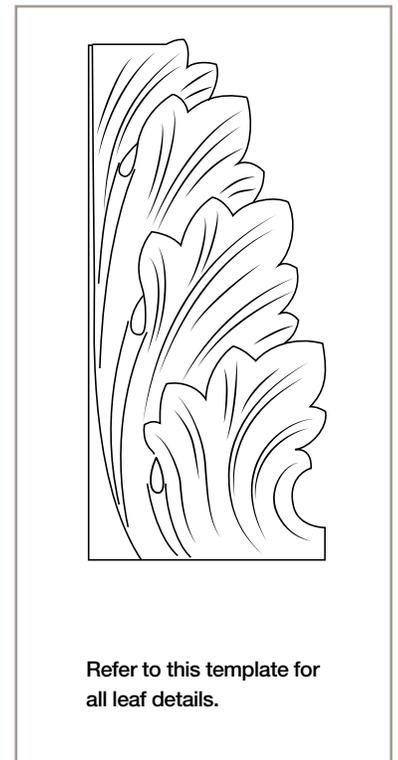
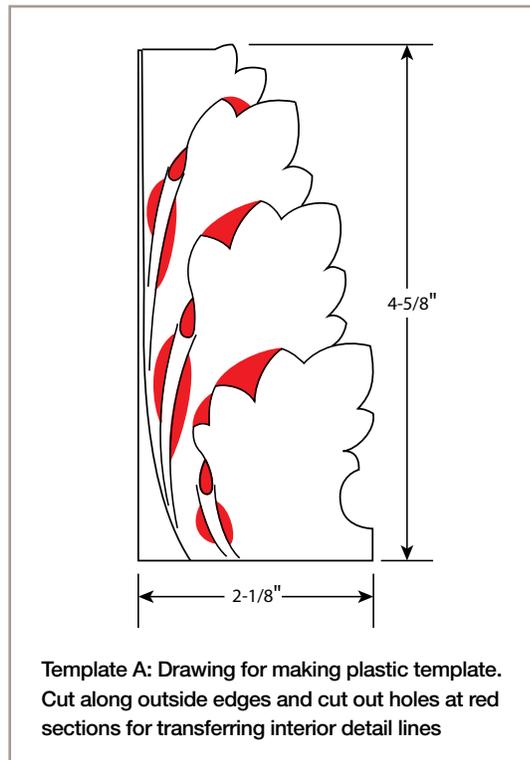
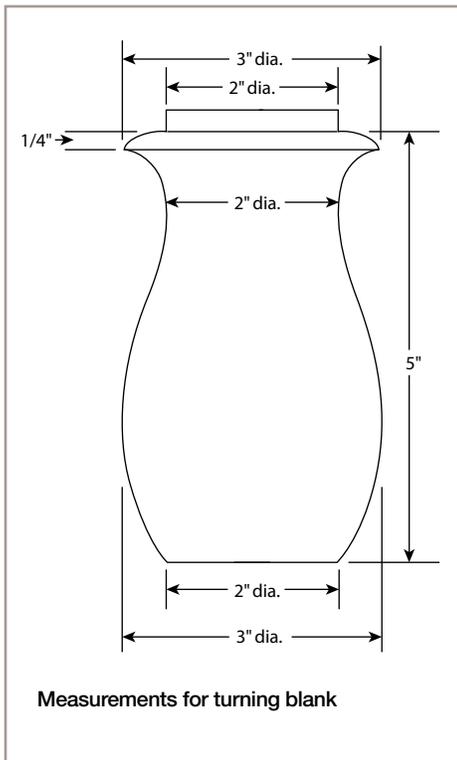
to lay this part of the template on the curved surface.

Position the plastic template along the curved surface of the wood, lining up the center of the leaf (midrib) with the line previously drawn on the wood. Trace around the outside edges of the template and also any inside details. White chalk or colored pencil works well with darker wood like walnut. Finish drawing all the

inside details by hand, such as the pipes, veins and overlapping lobes.

*Note:* You can also transfer the design by tracing over the drawing using carbon paper, but it can get awkward positioning the template accurately on a curved and turned surface.

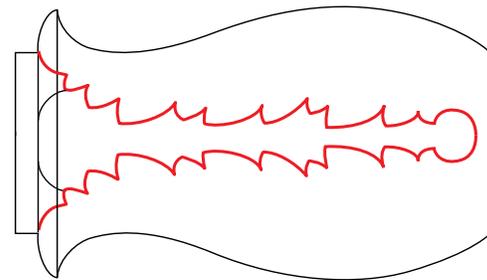
Use the plastic template to transfer lines. This shows all detail lines in white pencil that were completed by hand.



## Step 2: Define edges of primary leaf

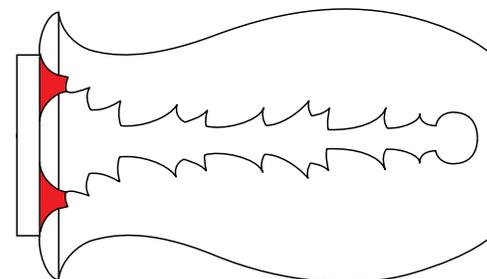
Carve along the outside edge of the main leaf with a 3mm V-chisel. With various gouges that fit the curves along the edge of the leaf (#5, 5mm, #5, 8mm, and #5, 14mm), make vertical cuts directly on the line to define this edge.

*Note:* In an attempt to show perspective on a turned and shaped surface, the acanthus leaf on the drawings are slightly different than the template. For accurate drawing of the leaf, use the template.



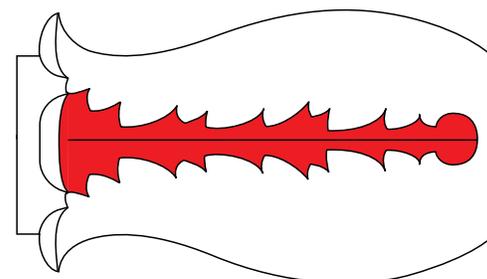
## Step 3: Carve space between primary and secondary leaves

With a 6mm V-chisel or larger, remove the wood between the primary leaves and the secondary leaves where the tip of the leaves curl over. With #4, 14mm tool, define and round the upper side of the curling leaf tips in both the primary and secondary leaf. There should be a clear separation between these leaves. The background should flow into this area as one continuous surface.



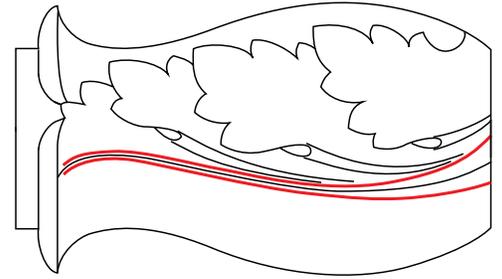
## Step 4: Lower secondary leaf

With a #4, 14mm and #3, 6mm, carve the secondary leaf at a slight angle on both sides of the centerline or midrib, giving the appearance that this leaf is under the primary leaves (about 1/16" deep). The midrib of the secondary leaf should appear as a straight, sharp, high corner.



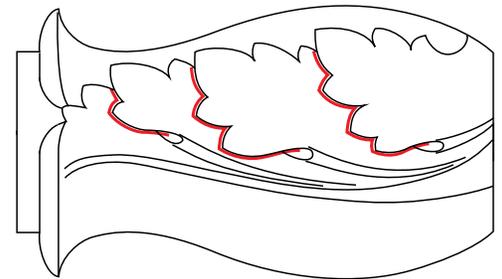
### Step 5: Define midrib of primary leaf

With a 3mm V-chisel, carve along the outside edge of the midrib about  $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep. With a #4, 14mm turned bevel side up, round the leaf so that it curves down into the edge of the midrib, giving the appearance that the midrib is higher than the leaf. Notice the repositioning of the turning so that the primary leaf is now visible.



### Step 6: Divide overlapping lobes

With a 3mm V-chisel, carve a  $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep cut on the outside edge of the overlapping lobes, leaving the line visible. This line should start at the center of the eye and continue off the edge of the leaf.



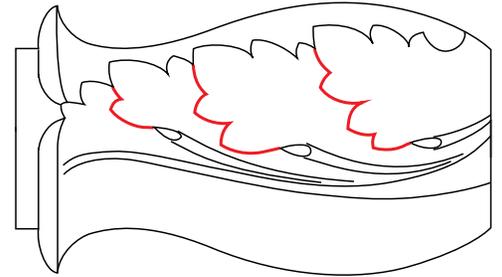
### Step 7: Carve eyes

With a #11, 3mm make a 45-degree angle cut to define the lower side of the eye. With a #3, 6mm, make two cuts at a slight angle that define each edge of the eye, creating a teardrop shape with a sharp, inside corner.



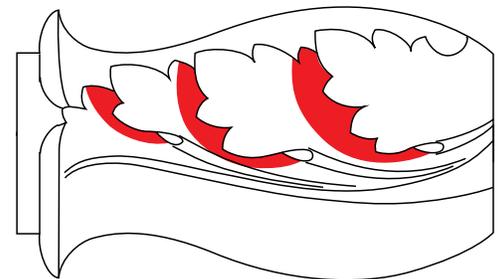
### Step 8: Define the overlapping edge

With various gouges that fit the edge of the overlapping lobe (#7, 10mm, #4, 14mm, #5, 5mm) make  $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep vertical cuts directly on the edge of the leaf. This defines the edge of the overlapping lobe.



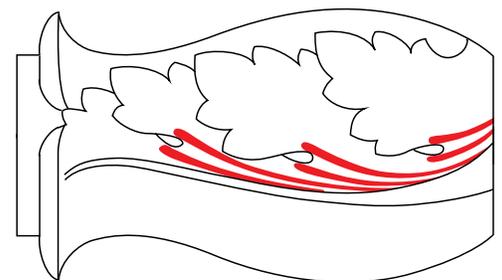
### Step 9: Lower underlying lobe

With a #4, 14mm, lower the surface of the underlying lobe to give the appearance that it is very clearly underneath the overlapping lobe. Gently blend this into the surface of the leaf without leaving abrupt angles or corners.



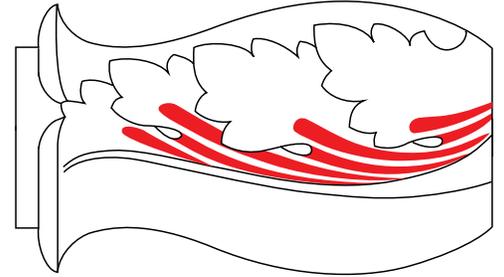
### Step 10: Carve pipes

With a #11, 3mm veiner, make two long, sweeping cuts down each side of the pipe. Start these cuts on either side of the eye so they curve gently down the leaf, ending alongside the midrib. Make these cuts about  $\frac{1}{16}$ " deep at the eye and let them fade off as they reach the midrib.



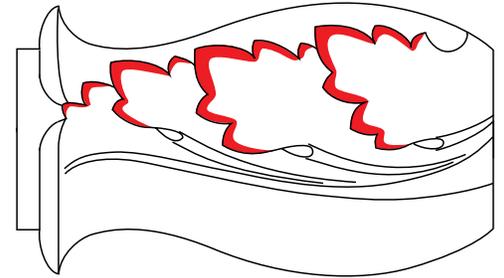
### Step 11: Round pipes and leaf

With a #3, 6mm, smooth any sharp corners that were created from carving the pipes. This includes rounding the sharp corners on the pipe itself and removing any sharp corners where this area flows into the surface of leaf. The pipe should appear to be higher than the leaf. The profile of this area should look like the drawing at *right*.



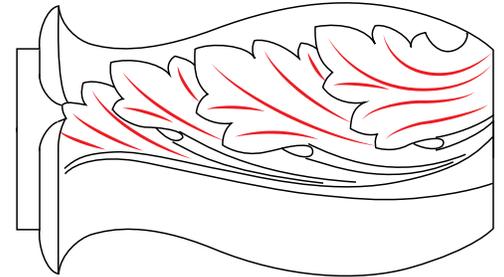
### Step 12: Round over leaf edges

With a #4, 14mm, carve along all the edges of the leaf creating a gentle rounded edge.



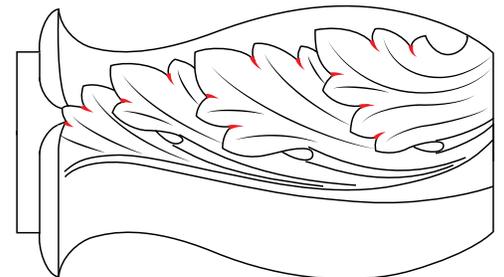
### Step 13: Draw veins

Draw the vein lines in each lobe. For this project, I only drew minimal vein lines, as the white pencil I used is quite thick. Any more lines drawn would have lost definition.



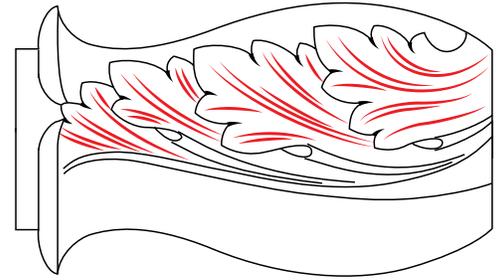
### Step 14: Carve serration notch cuts

With a #5, 8mm, make 2 cuts – one continuing the edge of the small leaf serration, and one at a slight angle just above this cut to create a small, triangular cut. Make sure the direction of these cuts flows towards the primary vein of each lobe.



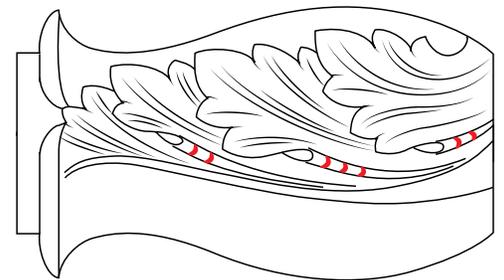
### Step 15: Carve vein lines

With a 3mm V-chisel, carve all the vein lines on each lobe. The primary veins should be slightly deeper than the secondary veins. Notice that I have carved several more veins than the ones I drew. All these lines should gently converge as they flow down the leaf.



### Step 16: Make wrinkle notch cuts

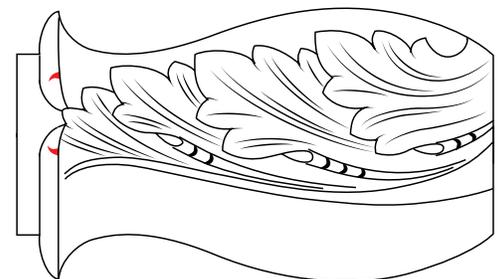
With a #7, 6mm, make notch cuts down the pipe. Make one vertical cut, and then one at a slight angle to create a fingernail shaped cut. Carve either 2 or 3 of these cuts reducing in size as they go down the pipe.



### Step 17: Finish curled leaf tip

As the grand finale – make small serration notch cuts on each side of the curling leaf tips. With a #5, 8mm make one cut defining the serration edge. Make another cut with the same gouge that cuts a small triangular notch out.

And now just repeat those steps on all the remaining leaf or leaves along the surface of the turning. Simple, right? Make your own lamp base, or tall post bed, or tea table, or whatever creative ideas you have. To understand



the cuts, try first carving this in soft wood such as basswood, then move to more challenging woods such as mahogany or walnut.

But above all, have fun! And happy carving! ♦