

# WOODWORKER'S JOURNAL

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## Classic Project

### In this plan you'll find:

- Step-by-step construction instruction.
- A complete bill of materials.
- Construction drawings and related photos.
- Tips to help you complete the project and become a better woodworker.

## Cherry Letterbox with Carving



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WJC174

# C H E R R Y Letterbox

With photo step-by-step for carving

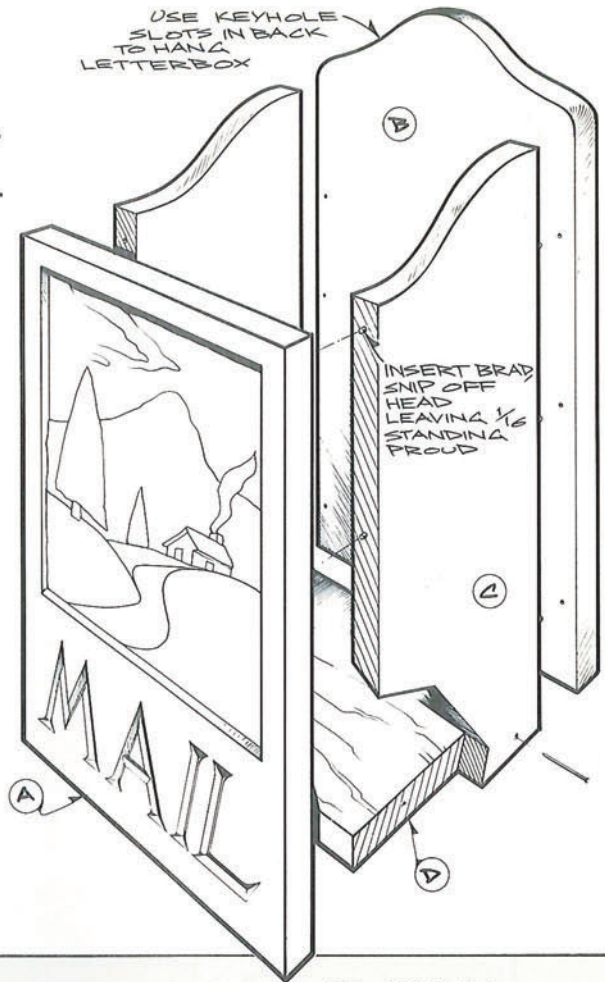


Tired of the mail always ending up scattered across the counter or on the kitchen table? With our handsome letterbox hung on the wall, now there's a convenient spot to place the mail, so everyone will know exactly where to look. And when the mail's all gone, the letterbox can double as a handy place to put that outgoing mail in the morning, so you won't forget to take it to the post office or out to the mailbox.

Our letterbox is decorated with a mountain scene carving, and with the word "MAIL." Both the mountain scene and the lettering are easy to do. We've included step-by-step photos for the mountain scene (page 57), and for the incised lettering in our Special Techniques column on page 28, both by master carvers Rick and Ellen Bütz.

## Get Out Stock

Because the letterbox isn't a large piece, we've used 1/2 in. thick stock for all the parts. Building a piece like this from 3/4 in. thick material won't be a total disaster, but the project will be



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### Bill of Materials

(all dimensions actual)

Part	Description	Size	No. Req'd.
A	Front	1/2 x 7 1/2 x 10 1/2	1
B	Back	1/2 x 7 1/2 x 14	1
C	Side	1/2 x 4 x 12	2
D	Bottom	1/2 x 4 x 6 1/2	1



rather clunky looking. Since there isn't much stock required, even if you don't own a thickness planer you should be able to quickly thin down enough  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. thick stock to the specified  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. thickness using a hand plane.

The letterbox is a very simple project, with just a front (A), back (B), sides (C), and bottom (D). Cut these parts to size, then use the grid patterns on page 56 to transfer the curved profiles to the sides and back before cutting these shapes. Next, carve the mountain scene and lettering. We've used cherry for our letterbox, because it's a fairly easy wood to carve.

### Assembly

Once your carving work is complete, assemble the letterbox using glue and brads. We insert several brads into the sides and then snip off the heads of the brads to leave about  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. standing proud. This insures that the parts won't slip out of position once the glue and clamp pressure are applied. Several small brads inserted through the sides hold the bottom in place.

### The Finish

Here's how we finished the letterbox. First, brush a coat of Minwax Antique Oil on the carving and incised lettering, allowing it to soak in and then wiping away any excess. When dry, add a coat of Minwax Special Walnut stain, allowing it to penetrate for about 10 minutes before wiping the excess away. If any stain gets on sections of the front, outside of the carving or lettering, a rag dampened with paint thinner can be used to clean the area. Once the first coat of stain has dried, use a detail brush to add a second coat of stain to cracks and crevices as needed to highlight the contrast and bring out the depth of the carving. Lastly, coat the entire piece with two coats of the Antique Oil.



## MOUNTAIN SCENE

# RELIEF CARVING

By Rick and Ellen Bütz

**R**elief carving is an ideal way to create a picture in wood. For hundreds of years woodcarvers have used this method to depict scenes of historic events, religious images, and as a record of everyday life. The earliest surviving relief carvings have been found preserved in the tombs of ancient Egyptians, where the dry air kept the wood intact.

During medieval times relief carving in both wood and stone was an important way to record images and events in a manner that everyone could understand. Today, these remaining carvings preserve a story for us of how these people lived and thought.

Pictures carved in relief are also an

effective way to decorate a wooden surface and create a focal point of interest, or establish a mood. The pattern I selected for this letterbox reflects the serenity of a log cabin in the wilderness, a subject I especially enjoy. However, almost any outdoor image can be adapted to fit the space. The techniques for carving will be virtually identical.

The important thing to remember about relief carving is to establish the shapes or levels before you begin carving the details. If you don't carefully plan the main levels first, you may find that you have set a foreground element too deep, and not have enough depth left for your background. This is the woodcarving equivalent of painting yourself

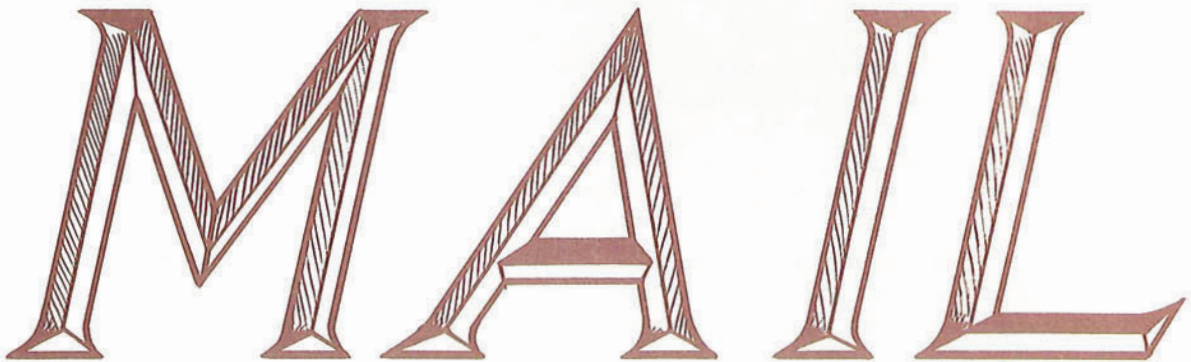
into a corner.

This relief carving has three basic levels. The first is the foreground, including the cabin with smoke, the tree, and the hill they rest on. The second level is the mountain behind the cabin, and the third is the sky.

To begin, transfer the design to the wood with carbon paper (simply trace over the full-size pattern) and darken the lines with pencil if necessary (Photo 1). Then outline the border with a 6 mm no. 12 V-tool (Photo 2). Make the cut about  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. deep. To make nice crisp corners, the best technique is to start your cut from the middle of the border and carve towards the corner. By working this way, the cuts end in the corner and



FULL-SIZE PATTERN







thereby create the cleanest results.

As a general rule, it is a good idea to make the cuts across the top and the bottom first, as these cuts go across, or perpendicular to, the wood grain. Then, make the side cuts which run parallel with the grain. By doing the steps in this order the crossgrain cuts act as stop cuts and prevent splinters from running into the surrounding border.

Then use the same V-tool to outline the elements in the foreground of the carving (Photo 3). With hardwoods like cherry, it is easier to remove the wood



with the help of a mallet. I like an 18–20 ounce lignum vitae mallet.

When you are outlining with your V-tool, you will need to pay close attention to the grain direction. For example, when you are making a diagonal cut with a V-tool, one side of the tool is always cutting against the grain. Make sure the side cutting against the grain is



positioned so that any possible splinters will run into the waste wood, which will be removed later, and not into the raised portion of your design. Also, having your V-tool absolutely sharp will minimize splintering and give better control.

After the foreground is outlined, begin removing the background with a 16 mm no. 5 or no. 7 gouge (Photo 4). Remember, you can always substitute gouge sizes to use what you already have on hand. Don't do any detailing work of the foreground at this time. You are just establishing the basic levels of the carving. Also, if you detail foreground elements like the cabin at this time, you will create fragile edges that



could be broken off when you carve the next level of depth.

Don't worry about carving off part of the pattern you have drawn. You will be redrawing it later.

The next step is to set in around the cabin. Use a small no. 1 chisel to do this. Cut straight down along the edges of the cabin (Photo 5). Then pare away the wood up to your vertical incision using a 8 mm no. 3 gouge. You can also use a sharp carving knife for this step. This will leave the cabin crisply separated from the background.



Now that the foreground level has been established, you can create the next level of depth represented by the mountains. Begin by sketching in the mountains and clouds using the pattern as a guide (Photo 6).

Use the 6 mm no. 12 V-tool to outline the mountains (Photo 7). Make the cut about 1/8 in. deep. At this time, also deepen the V-cuts around the top of the tree and the smoke where they overlap the sky. You may also want to deepen the cuts around the border. This will help increase the separation between the sky area and the mountains.



Then, level down the sky area. Use a 18 mm no. 7 gouge for the initial smoothing, and a 10 mm no. 5 for the finishing cuts (Photo 8). Try to arrange the final cuts so they form an interesting texture in the wood. This will add to the overall appeal of your carving.

As you remove the background, you may end up with a few "fuzzies," or tiny shreds of wood near the edges of the previously outlined shapes. Use a small V-tool, like a 3 mm no. 12 to clean up the edges along the top of the mountain, and around the tree.



At this point you have established the basic levels of the carving, and you can begin detailing. I like to start at the background and work my way forward, leaving the finely detailed areas for last.

To suggest soft, fluffy clouds use a 5 mm no. 11 veiner to outline them. This U-shaped tool leaves a softer edge than a V-tool would and helps create a light, feathery look (Photo 9).



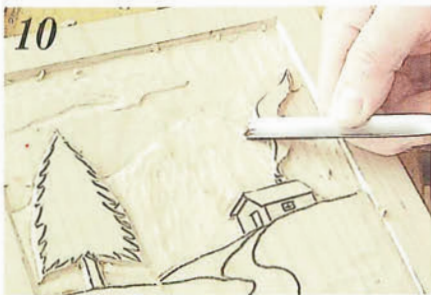
Another advantage of the veiner is that the tool can be rotated to one side or the other using the flat surface of the U-shape to bevel down the background area around the clouds slightly. This further softens the shapes.





Now, use the 10 mm no. 5 fishtail to remove the background around the clouds, leaving them raised slightly. Use a 10 mm no. 7 to texture the mountains and round the edges where they meet the sky (Photo 10). Make short scooping cuts with the gouge to create a pattern in the wood. This breaks up the flat shape of the mountain and creates the illusion of detail.

The next part to detail is the large evergreen tree in the foreground. Use an 8 mm no. 3 gouge to make a stop cut by pressing the tool down into the wood at



a slight angle. You want the cut to slope from the background area up to the surface of the tree itself (Photo 11). Next, remove a small shaving by using the same tool to make a downward sloping cut to meet the first cut (Photo 12). This simple technique creates a nice illusion of the spruce bough. You may want to practice a few times on a scrap of



wood to get the angles right. If necessary use a small V-tool to clean up the edges where the tree meets the background.

Texture the surface of the tree by using the 3 mm V-tool to make short scoops in the wood. This creates the effect of evergreen branches (Photo 13).

The next step is to detail the foreground. Use the 6 mm V-tool to outline the rolling hills. I also used it to incise along the pathway.

Use the same tool to outline the roof of the cabin (Photo 14). When you make your cuts, cut in from the sides of the building towards the center. Otherwise the wood may split.



With a 10 mm no. 3 gouge pare down the side of the building leaving the roof raised. Then, use the same tool to bevel the roof slightly, so the top of the roof is lower than the front edge (Photo 15). Remember, you don't need to make either of these cuts very deep. This is a shallow relief carving, so you are just suggesting depth, rather than cutting deeply into the wood.



Next, with the same tool, carefully bevel a small shaving from under the eaves of the roof where it overhangs the front of the cabin.

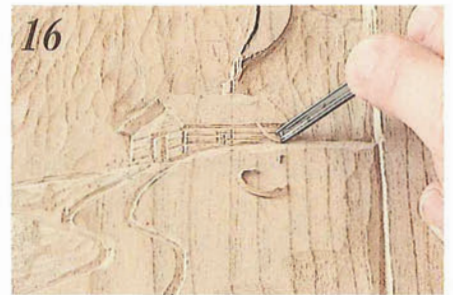
The final details on the cabin are done by drawing the shapes in with the 3 mm V-tool. Start with the chimney, then do the door and window (Photo 16). Use the same tool to suggest logs on the cabin.

Round the smoke with a 10 mm no. 7 gouge. Just round off the angles and



texture the wood slightly. Be careful to work with the grain of the wood to avoid splintering. If you like, you can add a little extra texture with a V-tool.

Texture the foreground using the 10 mm no. 7 (Photo 17). This texturing breaks up the flat surface and creates visual interest. Remember to make your tool marks smaller as you move toward the top of the hills. Doing this creates a feeling of depth in the carving, and helps put the elements in perspective. For the flatter surface of the pathway, I used the 8 mm no. 3 gouge.



For a final detail, I decided to add a small tree in the background with the 3 mm V-tool. If you like, you could add a couple extra trees. Just remember not to make your carving too busy. On a shallow relief carving like this, it is always best to suggest detail rather than trying to carve it all in. Also, remember to keep your trees in scale. Trees in the



background are smaller and less detailed than those in the foreground.

Now, the relief carving portion of your letterbox is finished. For the lettering, please refer to the Special Techniques article on page 28.







## Photo Step-by-step

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# LETTERING

Rick and Ellen Bütz

Carved letters are probably the most demanding woodcarving subjects. It is not because letter carving is especially difficult. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that we are much more critical in how we view letters. All of our lives we have grown accustomed to the mechanical precision of printed words in books and newspapers. As a result, we expect a certain degree of perfection in lettering. Furthermore, our eyes have developed a remarkable ability to notice minor variations and imperfections in size and spacing.

And yet, letters carved in wood are still an impressive and dramatic way to communicate any message. The tool marks in handcarved letters add a dimension of warmth lacking in the mechanically printed word.

One of the most legible types of lettering to use is the Roman style. This form of lettering was developed by the ancient Romans for the inscriptions on their monumental architecture. They wanted a style of lettering that would be

easy to read from a considerable distance. Two thousand years later their letters are still the standard of crispness and readability.

It is believed that the key elements of the Roman style evolved as a result of carving in wood and stone. The variations in thick and thin lines were intended to create a subtle shading and balance of light and shadow when the carved letters were viewed under natural light.

The small triangular-shaped ends of

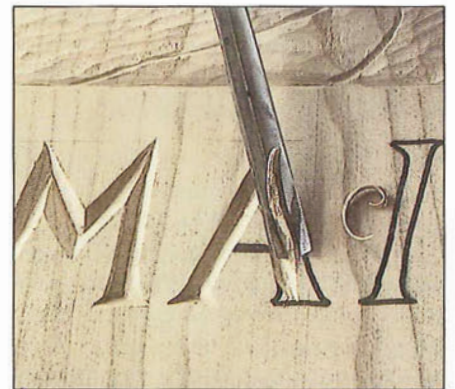


Photo 2



Photo 1

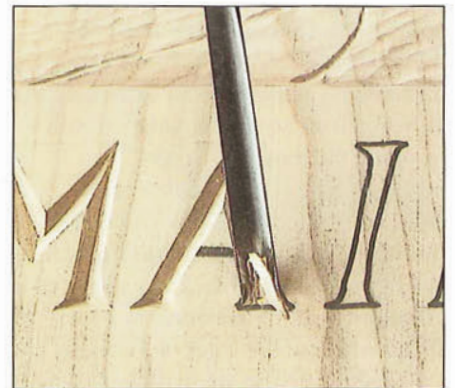


Photo 3



the letters, called serifs, were also added by stone carvers. The reason lies in the difficulty of finishing vertical letter strokes neatly in stone or wood. The carvers developed the technique of adding a small right angle cut to the end of each letter to solve this problem. The serif is still a useful device for finishing carved letters neatly. And it adds a nice decorative touch.

There are several secrets to carving nice, crisp, clean letters. First, draw the design on paper and view it from a distance to make sure the spacing is pleasing to the eye. Next, lay your design out accurately on the wood. Then make sure your tools are perfectly sharp. Above all, take your time and enjoy the process of woodcarving.

To make these Roman letters I used a 10 mm no. 13 V-tool. The two sides of a no. 13 V-tool are set at a 90-degree angle which makes a wider cut than the more



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7

**BONUS LETTER/NUMBER  
TEMPLATE\***





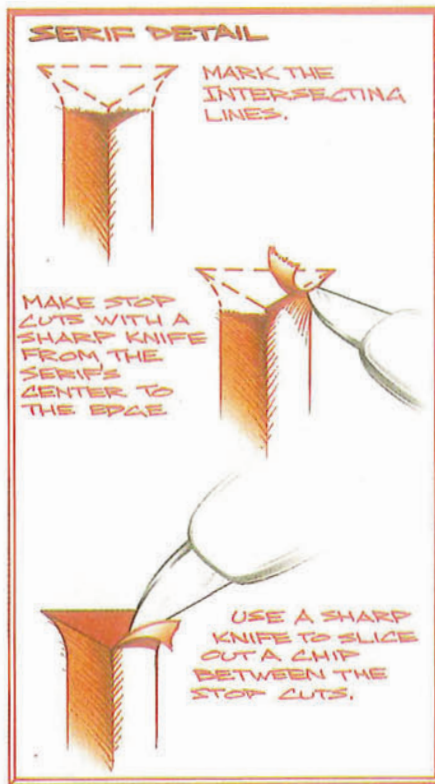


Photo 8

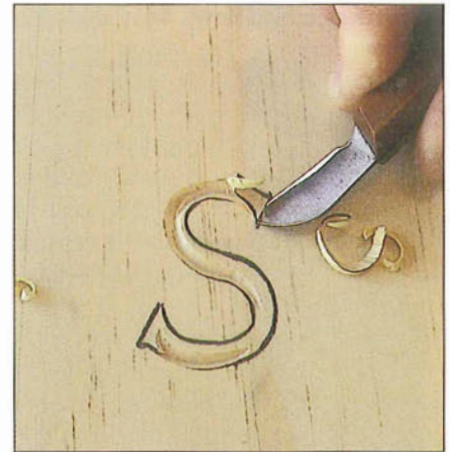


Photo 9



Photo 10

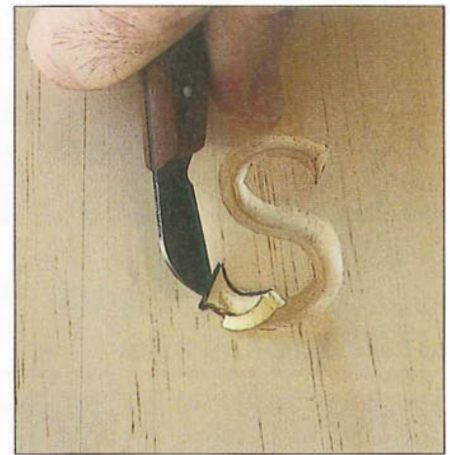


Photo 11

common no. 12, whose sides are set at 60 degrees. These sweep numbers, such as no 13, refer to the Swiss classification method, and may vary slightly from those of other countries.

There are other methods of carving letters. In a softwood the letters could be formed entirely with a chip carving knife. However, with a hardwood like cherry, it is much more efficient to use a mallet and gouges.

To carve the straight elements of the letters, use the V-tool to carve first one side (Photo 1), and then the other (Photo 2). Don't try to carve the whole letter with one pass of the V-tool. As I described in the Letter Box relief carving section (page 57), when cutting at an angle to the grain, one side of the V-tool is always cutting against the grain.

To make a sharp, crisp letter, cut one side in one direction, and then, reverse the tool and make the second cut from the opposite direction. If you feel any tugging or see any splintering as you work, you are cutting against the grain. Try to cut from the opposite direction. As always, make sure your tools are perfectly sharp for the cleanest cuts.

When you get to the end where the

serif is, increase the angle of the gouge until it is pointing down at about a 45-degree angle. This widens the cut to follow the lines of the serif (Photo 3).

Use a chip carving knife or a sharp whittling knife and cut across the end grain to remove a chip for the end of the serif (Photo 4). Use the chip carving knife to make any final adjustments in the shape of the serif (Photo 5). For a close-up look at how the serifs can be cut using just a sharp knife see the Serif Detail illustrations above.

After the sides of the A are cut, make the cross bar with the same V-tool (Photo 6). Use the same techniques to carve all the letters.

The finished letters look like this (Photo 7). Use the chip carving knife for any final touch up.

To carve curved letters, use the same basic techniques. But be aware of the changes in grain direction when you

carve curves, to avoid splintering.

To begin carving an S, for example, use the 10 mm no. 13 V-tool. For the most efficient carving, I started from the bottom and make all the cuts on the curved portions that were going with the grain from that angle (Photo 8). Use the chip carving knife and cut across the end grain to remove the serif (Photo 9).

Then, finish the curved cuts with the V-tool starting from the top (Photo 10). The object is to make every cut with the grain so the outline of the letter will be crisp and smooth. Take the cuts slowly, and once again make sure your tools are razor sharp. Nothing is less forgiving of a dull tool than lettering. Making a few practice curves on the same kind of wood that you are using for your project will give you a feeling for working with the grain.

For the final detail, cut the last serif with the chip carving knife (Photo 11).



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