

Getting Started In Wood Carving

By H. M. SUTTER, Portland, Ore.

After 40 years of teaching woodcarving to beginners, in various ways and to various groups, I have recently handled a class exactly as I think it should be done. I now have 12 kits of beginner tools, so the class was limited to that number. We used standard-height tables and chairs, the seats topped by cushions sewn from canvas 5x16x16 inches, stuffed with planer shavings, to give a better working height for the carver. After only a few minutes of orientation with the tools, they all started to carve.

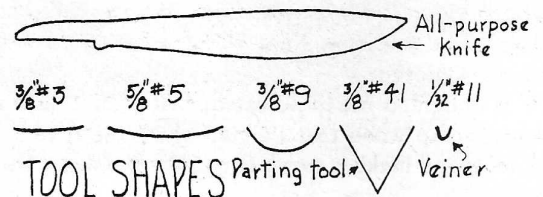
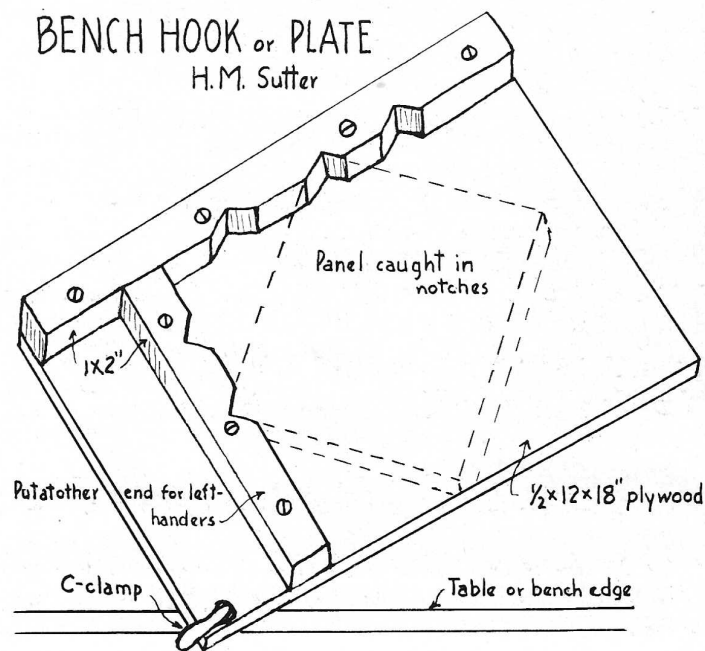
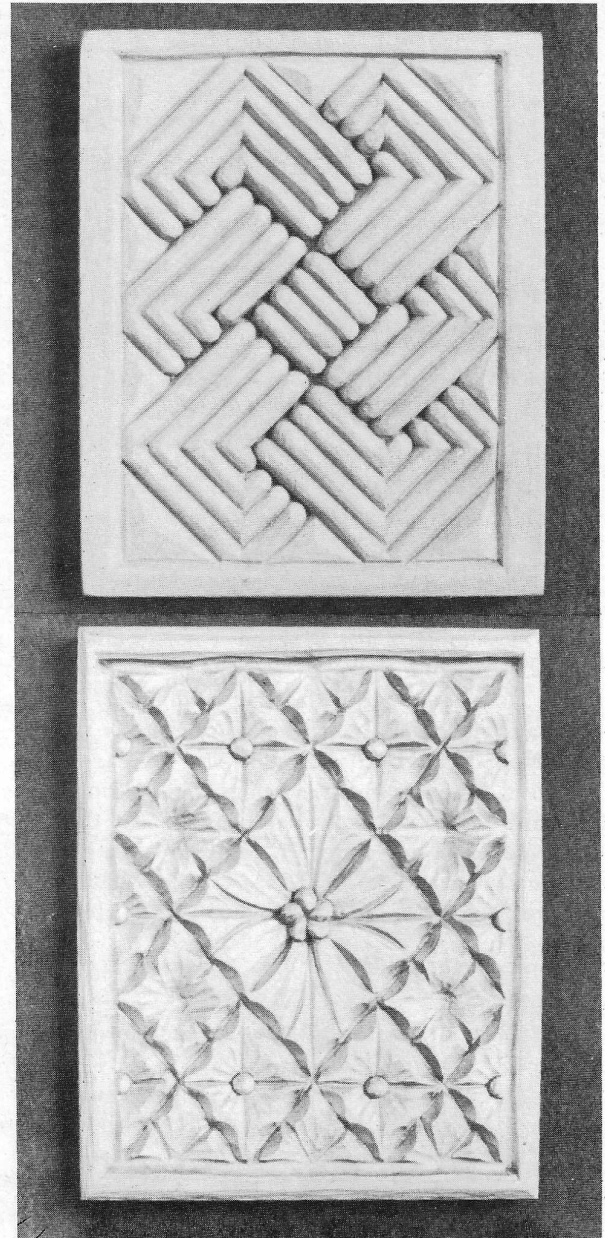
In past years, it has taken weeks for everyone to get the basic tools and sharpen them, I suggest an all-purpose knife (1 $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch saber-type blade; 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches including handle), and five tools, 3/3-inch #3 gouge; 5/8-inch #5 gouge (fishtail preferred for these two), 3/8-inch #9 gouge, 1-mm or 1/32-inch #11 veiner, 3/8-inch #41 parting tool. (The numbers are the London style designations.) These tools are provided sharpened and honed, and because students work bass or jelutong, the initial carving is easy.

During the time they carve, I can talk about books, woods, patterns and demonstrate cutting techniques, to the group or individually as circumstances warrant.

My beginner designs are all 7x8 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches on $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch boards, thus the blank can be held conveniently on bench hooks or bench plates (see sketch) which are of $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch plywood 12x18 inches, with stopboards screwed on as shown. The stop boards are notched, so the work can be set at an angle if desired, and some of the boards are reversed to take care of left-handed carvers. The bench hook is held to the table with a 4-inch C-clamp.

My first lesson is not a particularly easy one and requires a great many different kinds of cuts. It is called the Eternal Knot and requires the student to work in a great many directions, so

he or she learns about grain promptly. For Design #2, I use Charles M. Sayer's Project 26 as a basis. This is a diaper pattern, but I provide only the basic outline; each student must work out his own repetitive pattern for the diamonds. No two students have ever made exactly the same design.



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Part Two

Like many woodcarvers, I have found tool sharpening a time-consuming and onerous chore, particularly because I teach classes to which students bring new or mistreated tools. Also, in recent years, because of the spiralling costs of tools, I have been making some simple ones as a "starter" kit from such steel as I had available. As a result of all this, about five years ago, I developed a simplified and much faster method of sharpening.

The first and primary machine is a belt grinder which takes a 1x42-inch belt and is available at several companies, including Sears, Ward, Rockwell, Belsaw and Grainger among others. For rough grinding of blades, I use a 60-grit belt; finish shape with a 150-grit, and do final sharpening with a 320-grit or crocus cloth. A little care will produce a better edge on a tool than most people can obtain on hand stones.

Next, I produce a micro-bevel on the inside or concave surface of the tool. (See R. Bruce Hoadley, "Micro-bevels," *Fine Woodworking Magazine*, Spring, 1976). In my opinion, a micro-bevel is essential; not as deep as some books suggest, but a bevel none the less. I usually cut it with a hand stone to keep

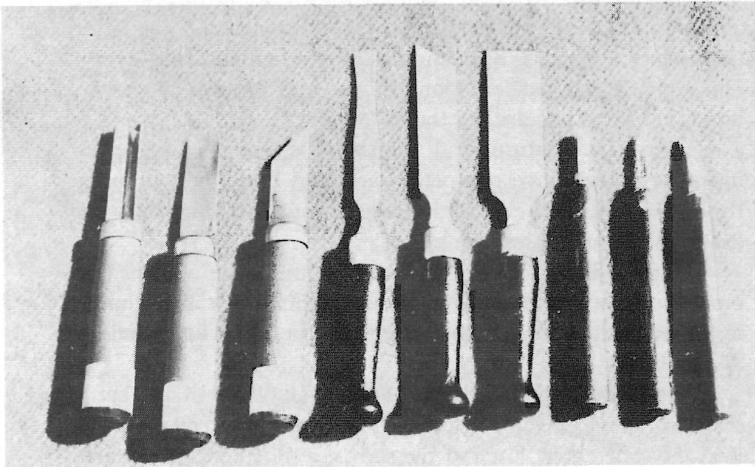
it minimal, then finish it with a leather or plastic wheel and tin oxide.

My other machine is a ball-bearing mandrel mounted vertically and operated at 250 to 300 rpm. I have made an assortment of leather and plastic wheels to fit on this mandrel, all 6 inches in diameter, with edges cut to various curvatures and Vs. Some of the plastic wheels are very thin, so are supported in the central section by thin plywood disks. Leather wheels were made of old belting glued together and sharpened with old-fashioned harness tools. I get mine from Tandy's, but there are other suppliers. (A dividend resulted from development of the very thin plastic wheel. Over 40 years ago, I got a 1/64-inch veiner which was the pride of my life until it became dull. I could sharpen it, of course, but could not get inside the U to hone off the feather edge, so I put the tool aside. The plastic wheel gets into the cavity with no trouble.)

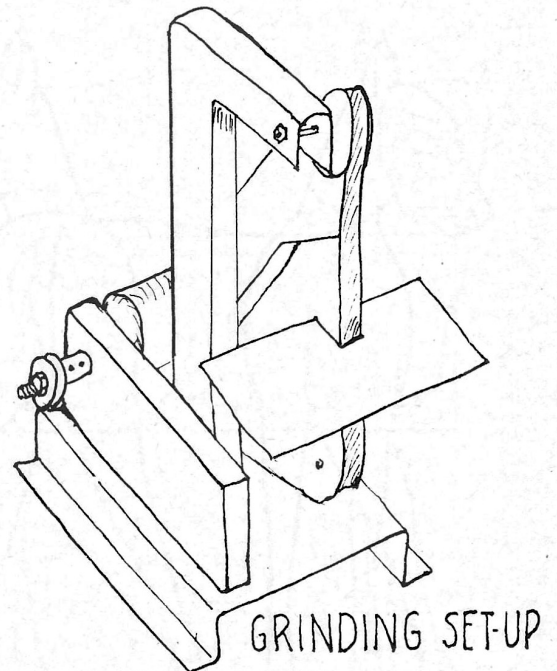
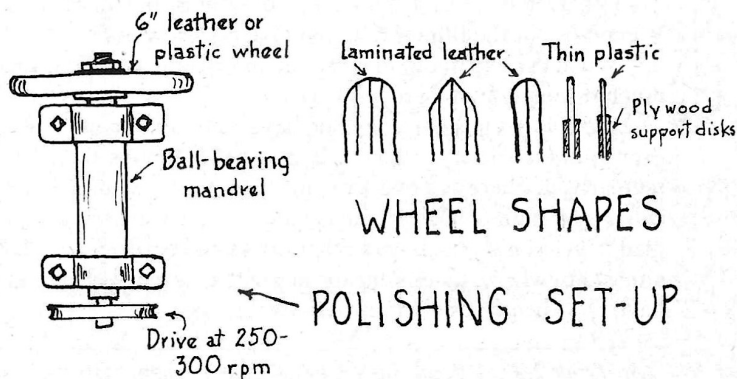
Wheels of either type are coated with a thin mixture of tin oxide in kerosene. (An alternate is to mix the tin oxide powder with water to which a few drops of detergent have been added. Another is the very fine abrasive used to polish eye glasses.) Both sides of the tool should be polished to a mirror finish. The final operation is polish further with a cloth buffing wheel and tripoli wax. (See Alexander G. Weygers, *The Making of Tools*, page 69. Van Nostrand-Reinhold.)

In normal carving of soft woods, the only resharpener treatment for a considerable period is likely to be buffing with the tripoli wax. (My buffing wheel is a shaft arbor on my grinder motor, so it's always handy.)

(Continued on following page)



Assortment of homemade carving tools.



Tangents

Laymen who visit woodcarving shows seem impelled to make comments, many of which might be better left unsaid. In fact, I wonder on occasion why carvers sit for hours under the barrage of uninformed and sometimes unintentionally insulting remarks. This has led me to list some of the more familiar ones, 30 in *The Modern Book of Whittling & Woodcarving*, page 167, and 27 more in "1001 Designs for Whittling and Woodcarving", page 79. On occasion, other woodcarvers who exhibit in local shows much more frequently than I do have added to these lists. Here are a few examples:

Howard Green of Houston, who wrote the book, *Carving Realistic Birds*, (Dover), has recently decided to sell his birds at what he describes as "ridiculously high prices" (probably equal to minimum wage). One woman who had recently bought a bird cast in pewter for \$50 asked why he expected a higher price for one made only of wood. Howard commented that if she went out and shot one, it would cost only the price of the lead.

T. E. Haag of Tualatin, Ore., tells a similar story having to do with a hand-carved bowl he was showing a lady. He had cut the tree down, cut it up, let it season, cut out the block and finally carved the bowl. She remarked, "Well, when you sell it, it will be all profit!"

Another lady asked, "Is that a copy of a masterpiece, or did you just make it all up?" And a high-school youngster

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(Continued from preceding page)

Also, I put a fine-grit 6-inch grinding wheel on the slow-speed mandrel described earlier and use it to grind straight edges on firmers, skew firmers and parting or V-tools. This gives a fine, true edge without danger of burning.

For beginning students, by the way, I provide two kinds of tool not listed in the usual references. One is simply a firmer with the corners rounded, which is very helpful in avoiding corner-score marks in grounding out, as well as for removing those caused by sharp-corned firmers and skew chisels. The other we call a bullnose; it is simply a firmer ground with an arc-shaped end, from one side only. This will replace flat gouges (#3) for those who have no way of whetting the inside bevel, and are extremely useful for shallow concave surfaces and for roughing out a ground. Tange tells me that he learned the same trick a score of years ago when he had a professional sharpen his tools and one firmer was returned with the rounded edge. ■

asked, "How long does it take to knock one of those out?" Another remarked to his friend, "Wait a minute; I want to see him make of couple of those."

I have fulminated previously about the unrealistic amount of time that goes into a good woodcarving, and have talked with professional carvers in Europe who have found it necessary to go to profile-roughing of carvings just to stay in business in competition with plastics, porcelain and metal castings. They deplore the necessity, but have no alternative; people simply will not pay a proper price for a hand-carved original, unless it's an antique.

In Mexico, I know one artist who has perfected a method of burying hand-carved and polychromed figures of saints in the ground for six weeks, then beating them up a bit to produce instant antiques. In Seville recently, I bought a copy of an antique candle sconce; the proprietor remarked that had it been a real antique he could charge five times as much.

In Israel, a camel carved by hand in olive wood costs four times as much as a profiler product hand-finished. In Mexico and Spain, prices have increased 25% or more in the past year.

The typical tourist tries to bargain and ends up buying a "factory" product small enough to go into a suitcase. And foreign carvers tell me that Americans are their most-frequent, but most-miserly, customers, with little appreciation for originality or quality of workmanship.

This is interesting, because there are more carvers in the United States today than in all its previous history, many of them amateurs or semi-professionals who sell their work for a song, or even give it away. Until now, the depressed economies of other countries have made it possible for a limited number of professionals in each country to sell carvings at prices below our cost of production, but that situation is rapidly changing as the dollar loses comparative value. However, professionals here and in other countries resent the "cutprice" amateur who takes the carving from their tools and the bread from their mouths by selling for a song or giving his work away. It is time for the "semiprofessional" to avoid selling (at a lower price) pieces that could be made by a professional who must carve to eat. There is plenty of room, and market, for us all; we need not snatch the food from someone else's table.

Tange

Looking For An Agent?

Carvers looking for an agent to handle their work may do well to contact LaBelle Distributors, P.O. Box 26758, New Orleans, LA 70186, telephone (504) 944-4305. Contact either Cindy A. Fagan or Paula B. Forman, representatives.

The firm is looking for high quality, hand-crafted work to sell in exclusive stores, boutiques and museum shops. The objective is providing support for those craftsmen producing "hand-crafts with a heritage." The services are jointly negotiable on a 15-33% commission on wholesale prices, and require exclusive Louisiana representation. Send photographs or 35mm slides and any information that will aid the firm in representing you. All information received will be retained unless otherwise specified and all inquiries will receive a timely response.

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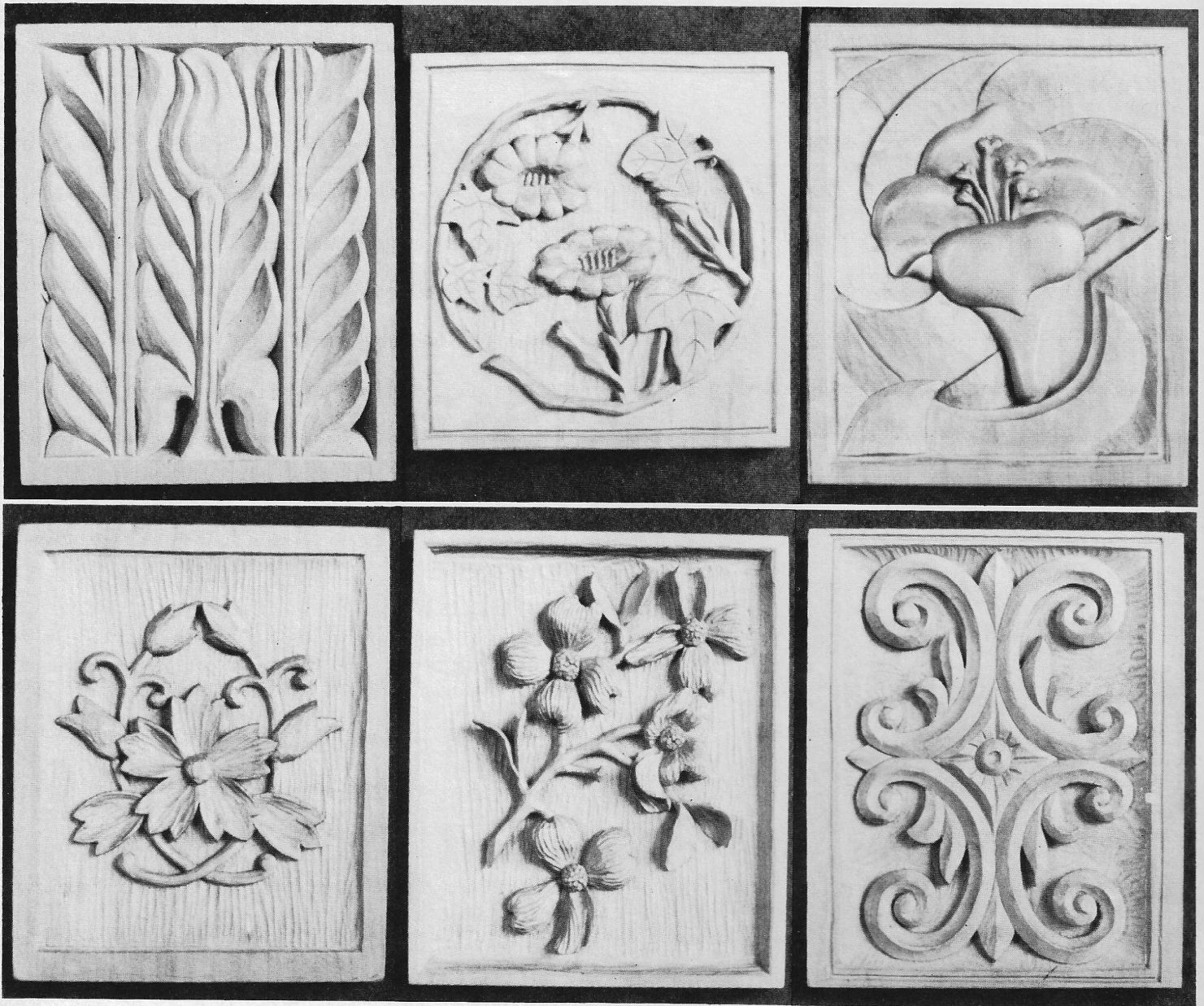
Part Three

My courses in wood carving cover three stages of development: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Each course consists of 10 two-hour lessons, although most students stay three. There is one lesson a week, and students are encouraged to carve at home as soon as they have their own tools and learn to sharpen them.

Presumably, they order the basic tools when the class begins, as listed in the first article of this series, but they may have to wait several weeks to get delivery. However, the sets of tools I furnish at the class enable them to get considerable prac-

tice before their tools arrive. This is important; the usual let-down while the student waits for his own tools can be disastrous, just as too much initial lecturing and emphasis on tool care and sharpening can be. The student can ease into this knowledge as he finds he needs it. Also, although I try to limit classes to 12, they usually end up with 15 or 16, so individuals have time to ask questions during the practice time. This leads to some repetition, of course, but it does enable the individual to get the information he wants when he wants it, rather than before he knows its value.

As explained in the first article, I start beginners with the Eternal Knot, then give them a chance to experiment with a



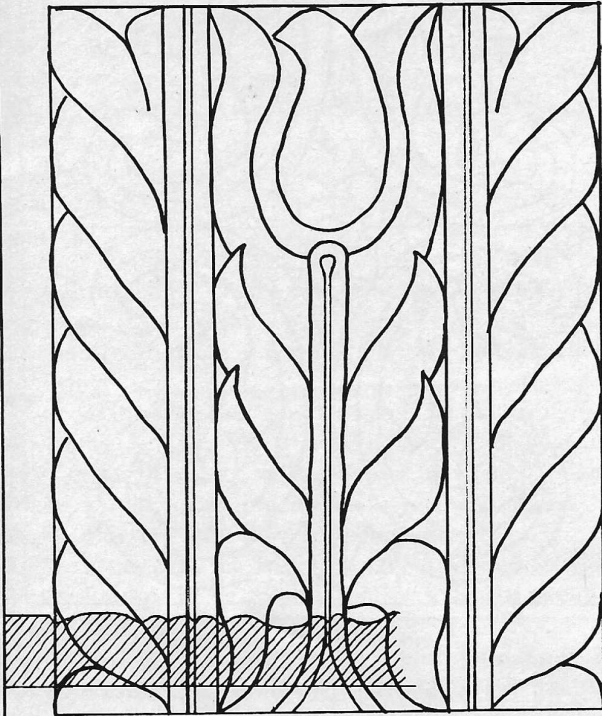
After making these panels, students will readily be able to design and execute patterns of their own.

diaper pattern. Both are illustrated in that article. The student may take the entire time to complete these two, but I would like each person to complete a third, Exercise #3, the tulip

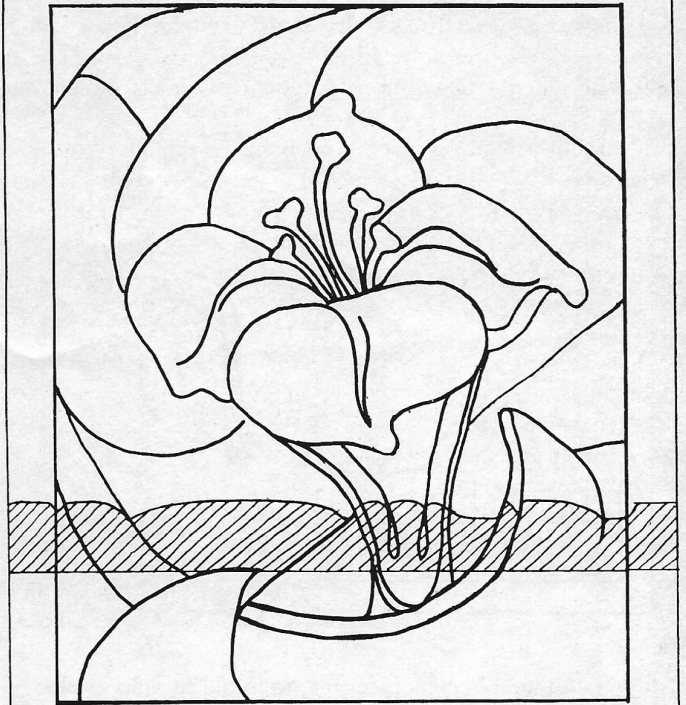
motif, as well. Note that none of these exercises require bosting (setting-in).

The intermediate class starts with bosted designs. This re-

Exercise #3 - Tulip Motif

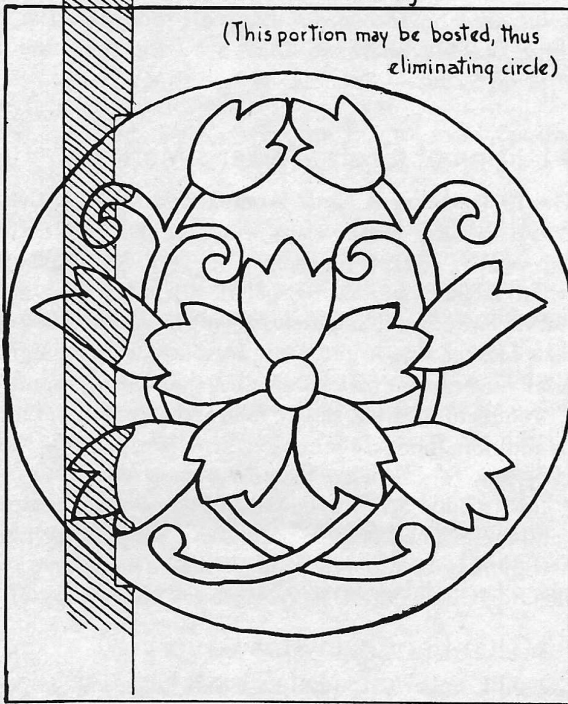


Exercise #5 - Lily

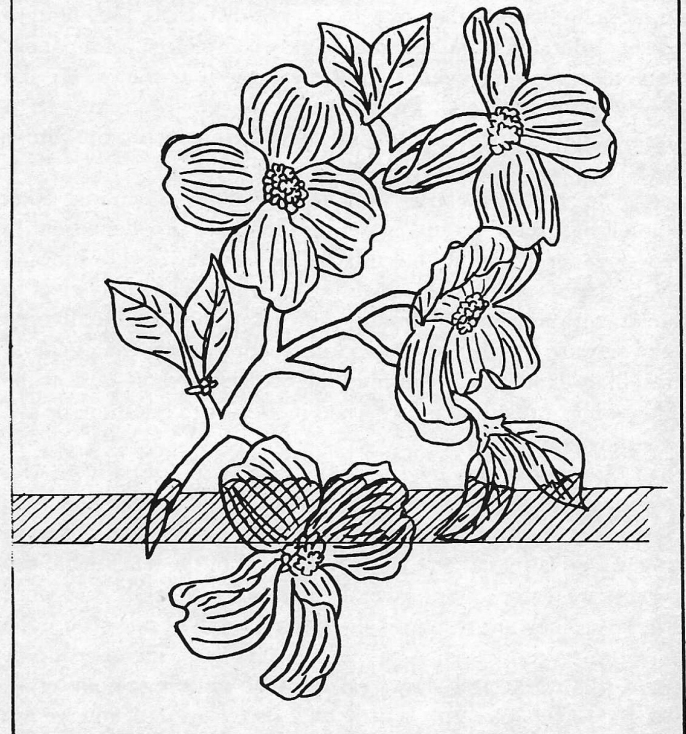


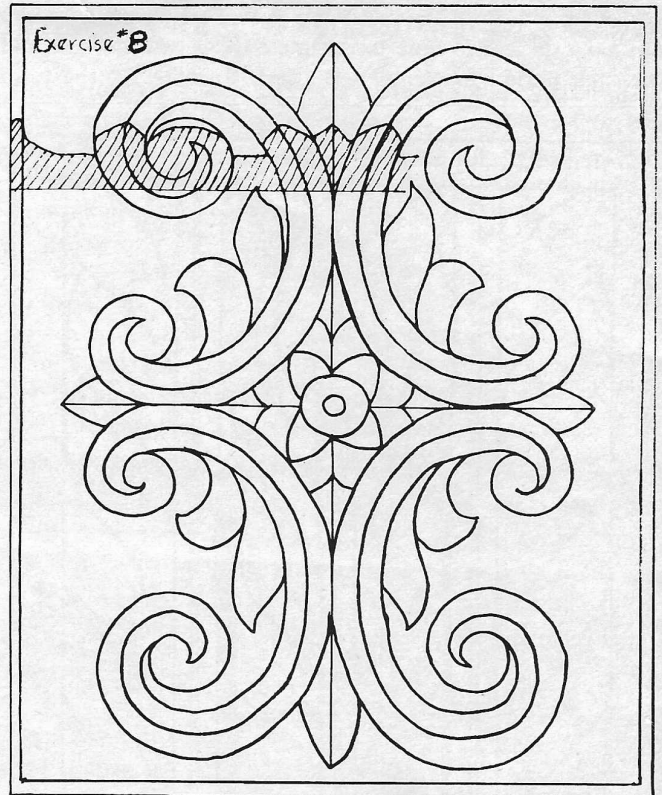
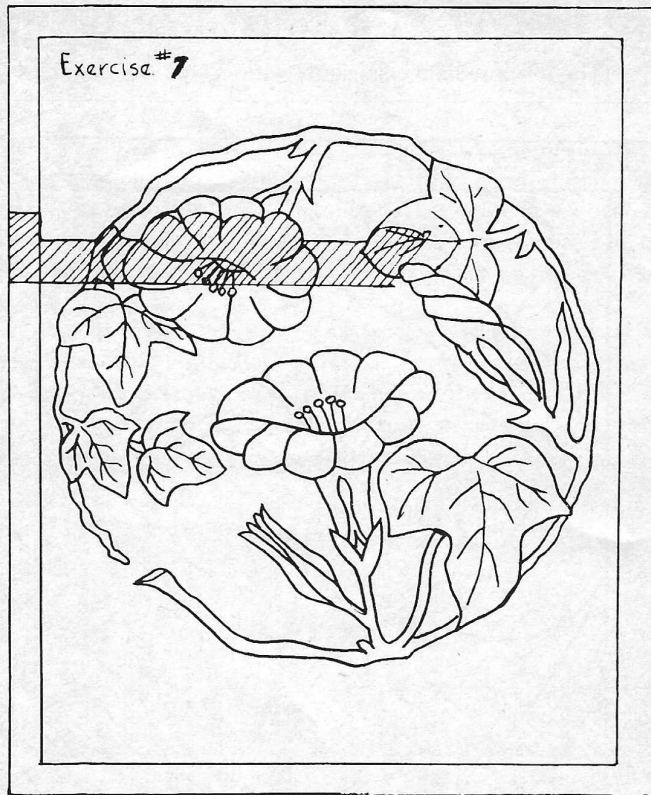
Exercise #4 - Bosting

(This portion may be bosted, thus eliminating circle)



Exercise #6 - Dogwood





quires considerable demonstrating, so initial sessions go slowly. Therefore, I require only that they complete Exercise #4, the flower group. Those who finish it may pick any of many designs from Sayers' book or other sources, or they can make up their own. Because they now have their own tools, they tend to do considerable work at home, so may complete several panels. Among the more popular designs are the four shown, #5, the lily; #6, the dogwood; #7, a circular flower group, and #8, a regular design involving precise curves. Here again, the center of #6 can be any of several patterns.

The advanced classes vary in curriculum depending upon the wishes for the group. Sometimes they are broadened out to cover general carving, but usually they are devoted to the special interests of the individuals in the group. They may elect to go on with some of the designs shown, but they tend to diverge and require specific advice and instruction rather than general teaching. However, I continue the occasional short talks while they work, providing information in answer to questions or as I see the need for it arise.

My classes are, by the way, given free, usually in the evening and at the Western Forestry Center. Students include beginners and carvers who want to learn my method of teaching. These latter carvers, in turn, do most of the teaching at the Forestry Center and at several community colleges, and work for pay. They are responsible for the growth of our group, the Western Woodcarvers Assn., which now has a membership of more than 500 and shows no signs of stopping. Four of us started the chapter only a little over five years ago, and we are not starting satellite chapters nearby.

With the concluding part of H. M. "Mack" Sutter's lessons on Getting Started In Wood Carving, we wish to extend special thanks to Mack for sharing his method with us, and judging from the many letters received from grateful readers, the series was well received. For those wishing Mack's address: 3803 S.E. Carlton, St., Portland, Ore. 97202.—Ed. note. ■

New Edition of Craft Worker's Market

The 1980 edition of *Craft Worker's Market* is off the press and it is a valuable source of information to all craft workers who are seeking markets for their handiwork. It is probably the most thorough book pertaining specifically to crafts.

Carvers wanting to sell their carvings will find *1980 Craft-worker's Market* able to put them in touch with thousands of potential buyers — craft shops and galleries, museum gift shops, architectural firms, shows, fairs and competitions, etc.

In addition, there are numerous articles explaining the fine points of how to sell; what records to keep and how to keep them; how to build a booth; how to start a co-op; prepare publicity and more. The 684-page book is edited by Lynne Lapin.

A copy may be ordered from Writer's Digest Books, 9933 Alliance Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45242; it sells for \$11.95.

Ganahl Lumber Co. Invites Carvers

Ganahl Lumber Co., 1220 East Ball Rd., Anaheim, Calif., invites carvers to check their supplies of wood ranging from alder to zebrawood.