

LEATHER CARVING 101

LESSON ONE

THE LAYOUT

MISCONCEPTIONS AND AXIOMS

Perhaps when you first became interested in learning to carve leather you thought you had to be an artist. Perhaps you even asked the store manager where you purchased your first beginner kit that question. He more than likely told you: “No, you don’t have to be an artist, all you do is trace a pattern, then transfer it to the leather and cut and tool it.” That probably established in your mind the worse misconception you could ever have about leather carving. The problem is in the statement “**just trace a pattern**”. This probably put you in memory of the times when you were a child and put a picture on a window and traced it. Was too difficult was it? I cannot tell you how many people I have taught who have been doing leather carving, sometimes for many years, who have never gotten that misconception out of their head.

The second misconception is derived from the part of the statement “**you don’t have to be an artist**”. Well, that is true, to a point. You know what? You don’t have to be an artist to learn to draw or paint picture either. But you do have to have a mind-set that will inspire you to become one. If you hold on to the mind-set that all you have to do is “mindlessly trace a pattern” then you will be like the artist that thinks he will become a painter by using “Paint-by-the-Numbers” canvases.

That seems to be the general idea of a lot of leather carvers. That is why they never advance their skills beyond the “by-the-numbers” leather carving. Trace this line ---- Cut that line ---- put this tool there and hit it ---- without much thought as to what any of the lines represent, or what the function of the tools really are. In other words what am I trying to **define** by my carving. That is the first question you should ask yourself before anything else takes place. **That is what starts the thinking process!**

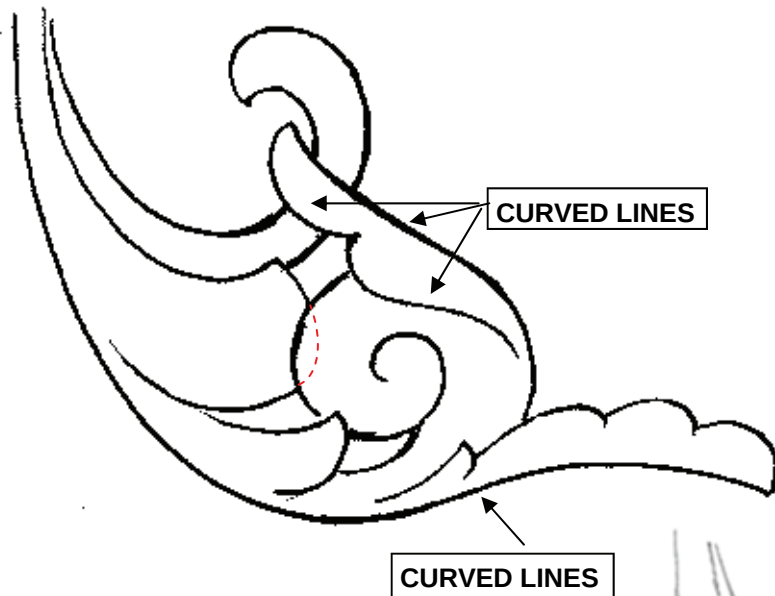
If you have little or no drawing skills, you might find it difficult to even make an accurate tracing, which I will refer to as a “layout”. You should not expect that those skills will come to you overnight. Like anything else, the more you do it, the more skilled you will become **providing you think about what you are doing**. The **key** to developing your skill is to become a **careful observer of what you want to accomplish**, then train yourself by practice to perform what you have determined to do from your observations.

Now that we have discovered some misconceptions about the “layout”, let’s look at some axioms for make an accurate layout. First thing you need to understand about layouts, is that it is the preparatory stage of making a cut pattern for what you are going to tool or relieve. Now there is a word you don’t hear very often in leather carving circles, but it is what you are preparing to do. Leather carving falls in the category of a “bas-relief” sculpture, meaning sculpture in low relief standing out from a background. The purpose is to give a two dimensional figure or part an affect of being three dimensional. Just something to keep in mind.

Typically, you will be working from original layouts provided by someone else, at least until you develop the skill of developing your own layout drawings. In almost all occasions they were reproduced for you in a mechanical fashion, maybe by someone who doesn’t even know a thing about leather carving. In other words, they were just following the lines that were drawn by someone else. So there is the **first occurrence where things can go wrong**. You may or may not be able to recognize the errors that one often finds in layouts provided you by the industry.

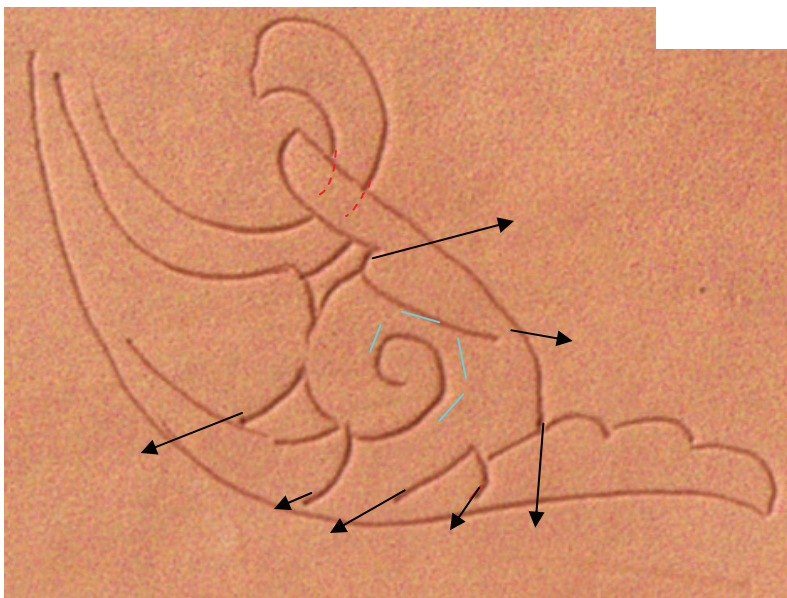
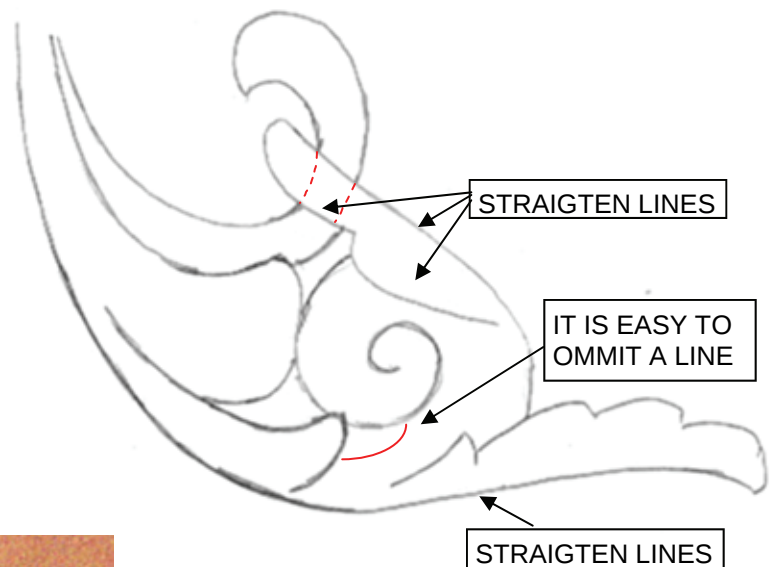
Secondly, **you will probably add to those mistakes** when you make you “tracing”; particularly if you are just getting started in leather work, or have been for years working with the afore mentioned misconceptions.

Once your layout (tracing) has been “drawn” you have another chance for making errors as you transfer it to the leather. What this means is that by the time you are ready to cut your pattern into the leather you have had **three chances** to make errors. Now, if you are just “following lines” without giving much thought as to what they represent pictorially, or sculpturally, can you not realize how important it is to THINK AND OBSERVE ---OBSERVE AND THINK!



If you are just tracing lines (or outlines, as many do) you will have a tendency to offset the flow of lines of an object that is behind another object. This can really get out of line the more times you trace something. This seems to happen more on lines that curve behind another object --- part of that tendency to straighten out lines.

There are some natural tendencies that you must overcome. Almost everyone has a tendency to straighten out lines when tracing. A line that is slightly curved can often times become straight. A circle, such as in scrolls, are often difficult for the novice or unpracticed draftsman. They some time are a little bit “squared up” or “warped” when traced.

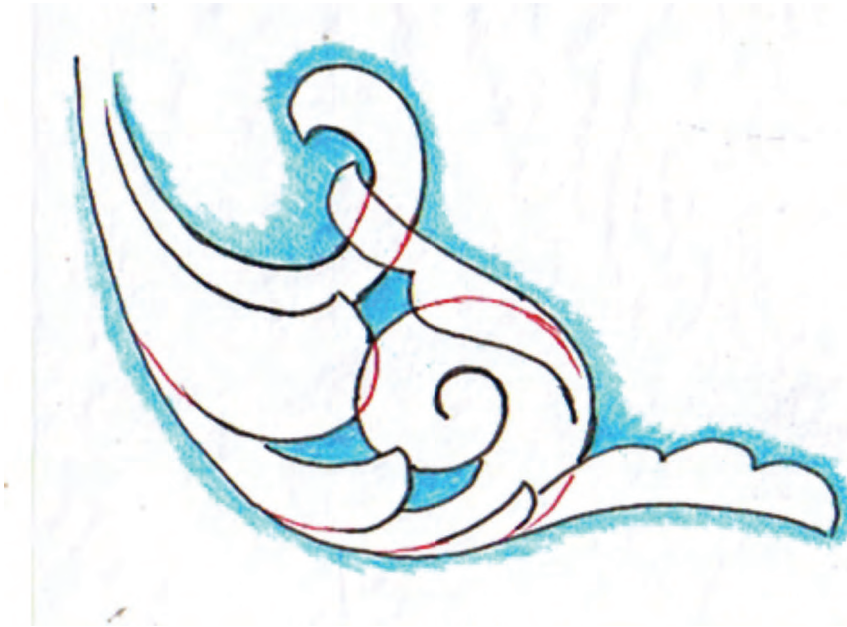


That same tendency often leads to lines that run off the edges rather than flow with the “beauty lines” of the design. I will refer to this as “follow-through” throughout this course. Many times that follow-through is more mental than actual. There are a lot of “imaginary” lines that must be considered when layout, transferring and cutting a pattern. I will teach this to you in great detail as we proceed. They are **vital in maintaining the rhythm and beauty of a design.**

THE BASIS OF A GOOD FLORAL DESIGN

What makes floral designs so appealing is that they are made up of rhythmic lines that flow into and out of each other to form a unified whole. The three primary lines are spirals, arcs and “S” lines called the “Hogarth line of beauty”. Usually these are referred to as “lazy S lines”. Your mission is to “see” these lines and trace, transfer and cut them as smoothly and as gracefully as your skill will allow. Your goal should be to develop those skills if you want your work to maintain the beauty, rhythm and grace that was designed in it. **You can not do that if you are “just following the lines”** in a careless or haphazard manner.

Nothing will kill the rhythm of a piece faster than improper follow-through. Study the red lines in the drawing to see what proper follow-through is. Notice how the lines of one form flow into the lines of the surrounding forms. Notice how the continuity of lines is maintained even when they disappear behind other objects or lines.

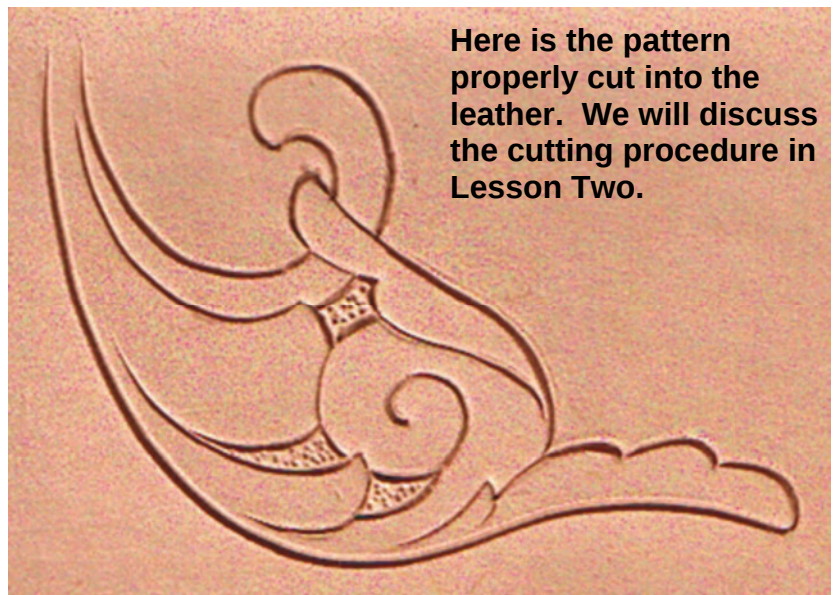


Every line in this piece is a spiral, arc or lazy “S” beauty line. Mostly the design is made up of lazy S beauty lines. These lines are paramount in maintaining the rhythm of a piece. There are a lot of “unseen” rhythm lines in this little design that I could explain in great detail, but in this instance I am merely trying to introduce you to the concept and the importance of knowing that tracing a design involves a lot more than “just following the lines”.

Many times one can get confused about which line is an outline of an object, especially if they are “just following lines”. This often results in areas of the background that doesn’t get back-grounded or areas of some part of an object being back-grounded. The more complex the piece, the more likely that can happen. I will often color my background on a tracing in order to establish them in my mind. This not only helps me cut those lines properly, but also becomes a quick reference when it is time to background my piece.

Often when I transfer a design that has a confusing area of background I will make a series of dots with my stylus when I am transferring my design to the leather. Even after 45 years of tooling leather I still find occasions where this is helpful. I recently did a piece where I slipped up and back-grounded an area that should not have been back-grounded.

Now let’s see how this misconception can play havoc when carving a figure.



Here is the pattern properly cut into the leather. We will discuss the cutting procedure in Lesson Two.

FIGURE CARVING

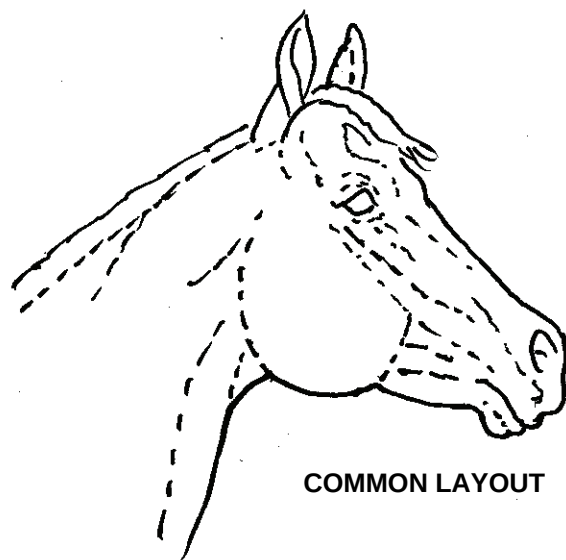
You will never be able to achieve realistic results in figure carving if you don't shed the misconception that all you have to do it "follow the lines". You must know and understand that **every line in an original drawing means something.** Not only do those lines distinguish one object from another, they also indicate the forms, textures and the amount of space that exists between those objects. All the things just discussed in floral carving apply even more in realistic figure carving. Every little "hump" and "bump" in an outline indicates a change in form of the figure you are carving. If you succumb to the **tendency to straighten out lines** then you will destroy your ability to accurately model the interior forms of that figure.

In figure carving you must add some new dimensions to your thinking process. There is a method that I use and recommend to overcome these misconceptions and erroneous tendencies. That "thinking method" is this: **always think of the real thing when tracing.** This single axiom can be the most important discovery you will ever make as regards to figure carving. I am going to go so far as to recommend that you just not "think" of the real thing while tracing, but actually verbalize those thoughts.

LAYING OUT FOR FIGURE CARVINGS

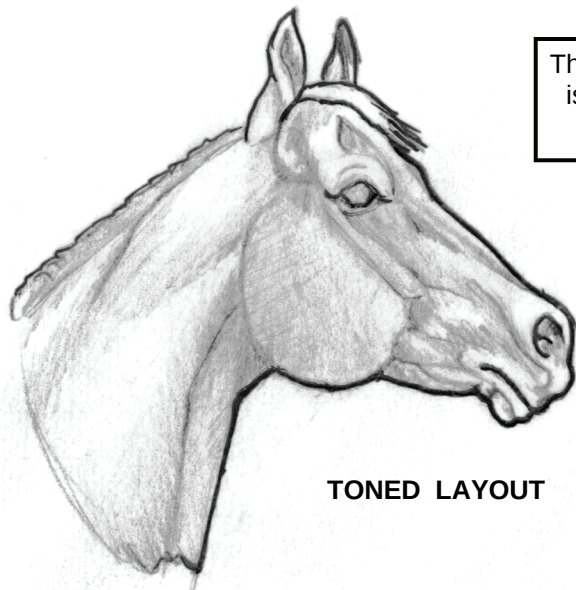
It has been a standard practice in the leather carving world to use dash lines to indicate where to model, rather than cut. I have a real problem with that. Here is why. If you transfer dash lines in leather that has lost enough moisture to where it will burnish the leather you will be left with them in the final product. Modeling lines should be considered like the blue layout lines used by computer document creators.....they should not show up on the final document. That is why the leather should be fairly wet to make transfers.

Another problem with dash lines is that they really don't tell you much. Therefore, they often cause people to err in their modeling. Most beginning carvers totally misunderstand them. I will discuss this further when we get to the lesson on modeling.

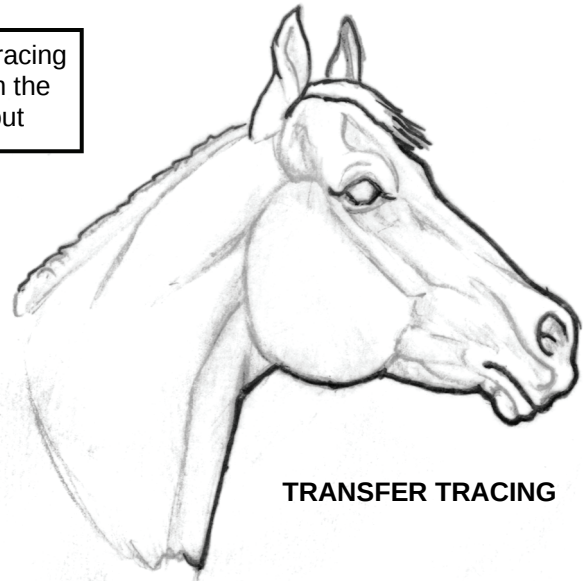


Some years ago, both Al Stohlman and I tried to remedy this situation by supplying toned drawings to facilitate the modeling process better. For some reason the powers that be, didn't like the change. I continue to fight on, so the layouts that you see in my publications and throughout this course will be that type.

In the toned layout, the black lines are what are cut with the swivel knife. The pencil lines are modeling lines. If you will compare the darkest lines in the toned layout you will notice that they correspond to the dash lines in the above layout. When making your transfer, you will only transfer the darkest lines, as they will be all that is transferred to the leather. By using the original picture and the toned layout as references throughout the carving process you will end up with a much more realistic figure. Modeling lines are transferred as solid lines but usually I use a lighter touch.



The transfer tracing
is made from the
toned layout



In the next lesson I will discussed the misconception and axioms of cutting the pattern with the swivel knife.