

Ten-Year Journey to a Chippendale Footstool

Featured Piece of the Month – September 2021

Rob Carver



I've had a long fascination with the ball and claw foot. Long before I'd ever heard of Chippendale or entertained the idea of carving one, I just loved the form. When my dad would drag my sister and me to the MFA in Boston or the Peabody Museum in Salem, I'd linger over furniture with the unusual feet. Those feet reminded me of my favorite museum attraction—Spooky the Owl at the Museum of Science. This is the story of my decade-long, start-and-stop effort to make a stool with spooky feet and a salute to the people who showed me the way.

Here's the rough timeline with major events:

- Fall 2010 episode of *Rough Cut: Woodworking with Tommy Mac* featured a Chippendale footstool. I decided that this stool was achievable and could be a watershed project for me. After ordering the DVD and plans, everything looked straightforward: mortise-and-tenon joinery, 90° angles, rabbets for a drop-in seat. The challenge and learning opportunity would be the cabriole legs and carving. Bought 12/4 mahogany, milled, and prepared the parts. Well on my way!
- Around the same time, I took a one-day elementary carving class with Mickey Callahan at Walpole Woodcraft, so had a few basic tools and skills. I band sawed a couple of practice legs and began to remove everything that was not a ball or claw. My earliest efforts looked like an arthritic hawk had squashed a tomato. I retreated.
- c. 2011, I purchased Mary May's video on the subject, including a plaster cast of a Philadelphia style foot. I consulted relevant magazine articles and watched videos on YouTube. Soon I achieved "paralysis through analysis." Big pause and other projects.
- January 2015: Mickey Callahan offered a ball and claw class, beginning with some history and regional variations, referencing *Carving 18th Century American Furniture Elements* by Tony Kubalak (Fresno CA: Linden Publishing, 2010). Four students made a Philadelphia foot in class. Back home, I made practice pieces, bought Kubalak's book, and created some elegant firewood.

I was losing ground and feeling discouraged, so I put the stool parts in a 5-gallon pail and turned to other projects.

- April 2018: I attended Fine Woodworking Live, where I bumped into my friend and fellow Sharonite, Ken Zoller, in the hotel lobby. Ken introduced me to Don Michael and Tim Holiner, and I joined the Guild that weekend. Mary May was on the program to demonstrate her method of carving the ball-and-claw foot. Watching Mary reignited my energy for the project—right after my impending retirement and completion of two other projects in my pipeline.



Mary May at Fine Woodworking Live, April 2018

- August 2019: Mary May offered a carving class at Phil Lowe’s Furniture Institute of Massachusetts. Mary’s class was wonderful, involving a graduated sequence of exercises featuring different tools, techniques, and species. Early in the week she said there would be time for her to teach us in any special technique that we might have in mind. I responded, “ball and claw, please.” Phil graciously prepared a practice piece for me, and Mary printed out her instructions for carving. They each checked in periodically.



Inspiration: Interior decor in Lowe’s Furniture Institute restroom



Early steps: starting to carve a foot at Phil Lowe's shop.



Field Trip to the Peabody Essex Museum: Phil provided a guided tour, stopping at a pair of Chippendale-era card tables.

- Sept 2019 – March 2020: Completed several work-related and woodworking projects.
- April 2020: More ball-and-claw practice. Ultimately, I prepared a double-footed mahogany practice piece. Mary's instructions divide the carving process into stages. I decided to complete each stage twice on the practice piece and then on the actual legs, trying to randomize the sequence on the finished pieces to minimize accumulated errors. The photos below depict the progression.



Defining a ball and talons.



A more spherical ball with better defined talons.



A cradle to hold the leg for excavating the webbing.



A modified hand screw helps when rounding the leg with rasp, spokeshave, and files.



Rockettes

- The small transition blocks, or ears, are band-sawn from the same stock as the legs, to match grain pattern and color. Clamping is tricky, so these were ideal for a hot hide glue rub joint. Once the glue cured, I refined the curves with block plane and files.



After glue-up. My bandsaw work

on the small ears was poor.

- May 2020: For a finish, I consulted my sister Beth Carver Wees, a curator in American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Beth referred me to her boss, Morrison Heckscher's classic book, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Late Colonial Period - The Queen Anne and Chippendale Styles*, and to photos on the Met website. She emphasized two words: **dark** and **shiny**.

After testing numerous combinations, I used two coats of shellac, then Bartley brown mahogany gel stain, followed with several coats of semi-gloss wipe-on poly, and finally Briewax Tudor Brown, buffed out to a nice glow.

- June 2020: On the FIG Zoom, I explained my plan to simplify the seat by putting a piece of fabric over a foam cushion on plywood. Jim Allen and Jim Russell encouraged me to follow a more traditional approach. Tim Holiner sent along a link to Mike Mascelli's *Fine Woodworking* video series. <https://www.finewoodworking.com/videoworkshop/2018/02/woodworkers-guide->

[upholstery](#). Tools and supplies were available at my local hardware store, Etsy, Jo-Ann Fabrics, eBay, and my wife's quilting stash.



The slip seat construction

The finished piece (June, 2020) is as you see it at the top of the article. I've never made a piece that pleased me more.