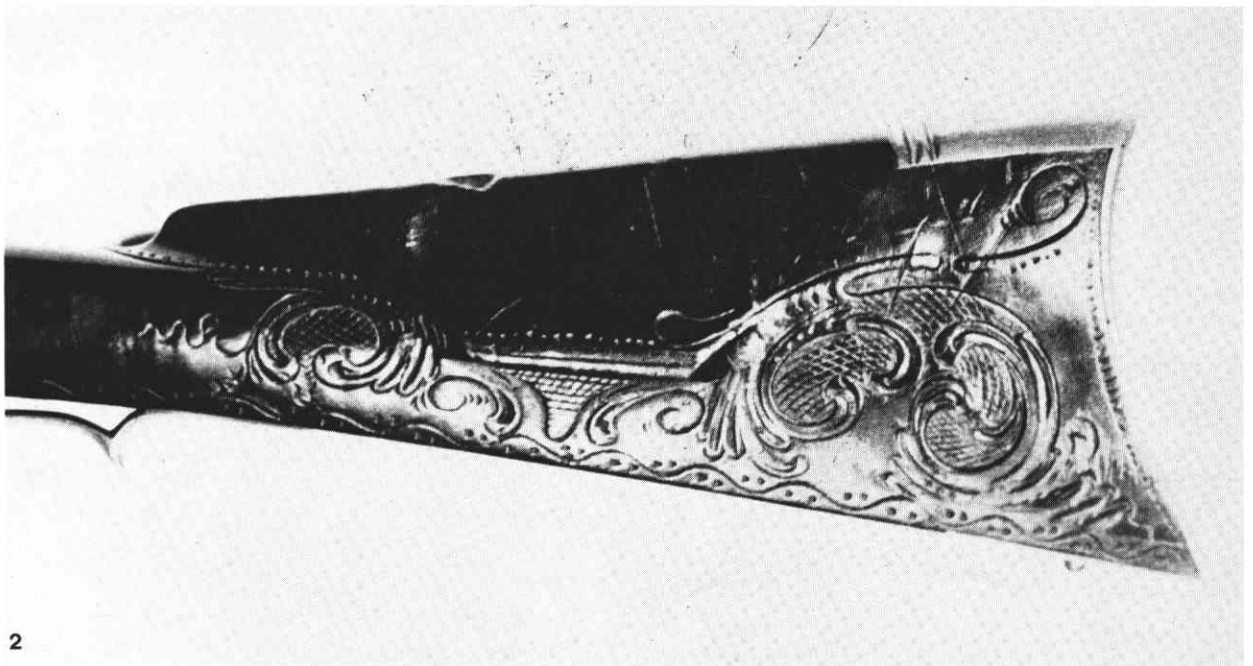




**Incised carving on a pre-Revolutionary rifle by an unknown maker.**



**Relief carving on a stock by Christian Gumpf.**

# The Art of the Kentucky Rifle

*Harmon C. Leonard*

The subject has numerous classifications and may be categorized by: area of manufacture, period of manufacture, and style of arm. The form of art or decoration may be expressed by choice of wood carving, inlays, hardware, engraving, and overall architecture or design of the gun.

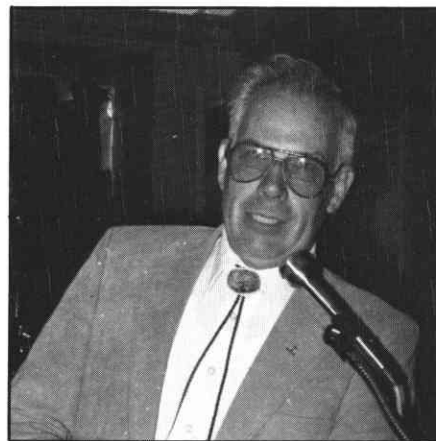
In general, the gunsmiths of Colonial America were trained in the traditional European Guild system. Colonial painters went to Europe to study under the master artists, while master gunsmiths came to America to teach their craft. This master-to-apprentice training continued in America until about the end of the first third of the nineteenth century. At that time the changes of the industrial revolution made its impact on many of the hand-crafted industries.

The prime factor determining the extent of the art incorporated in the rifle was the economic vitality of the times. In Europe, the guild gunsmiths made finely crafted guns for the nobility or wealthy merchants. This type of clientele was scarce in Colonial America, and is reflected in the rarity of highly decorated arms made in the period prior to 1780. Arms made before this time as a rule had rather simple carving, and very little engraving of the furniture. The wood was selected for its functional stability rather than its appearance.

In a very short period following the end of the War for Independence, a tremendous economic vitality developed along the eastern seacoast. Numerous Europeans, who visited America during the period of 1790, expressed amazement at the affluence of the people, especially around the Philadelphia area. With this sudden and extensive prosperity, a new clientele developed for the gunsmiths and artisans.

The center of Kentucky Rifle artistry lay in a 50 mile radius of Philadelphia. Highly skilled masters of the craft developed distinctive patterns, and their apprentices and disciples followed and created area characteristics.

The most distinctive artistic feature, and the most desirable, to the modern collector, is the carving of the stock. This carving varied from light incised simple patterns to very intricate designs of relief work and raised carving, and all degrees in between. It gave a chance of expression to many talented artisans. Perhaps the differences of incised, relief, and raised carving should be



included at this time. Among collectors, raised and relief carving are often considered the same. Incised carving is the design carved with a sharp pointed chisel; only the line of the design is removed (Fig. 1). Relief carving is executed by sketching a design on the wood and removing that portion unnecessary to the pattern, thus leaving the artwork outlined in relief with none of the design above the level of the stock (Fig. 2). Raised carving has the design laid on the stock and the surrounding surface of the stock removed to allow the carving to be elevated above the surface of the wood (Fig. 3).

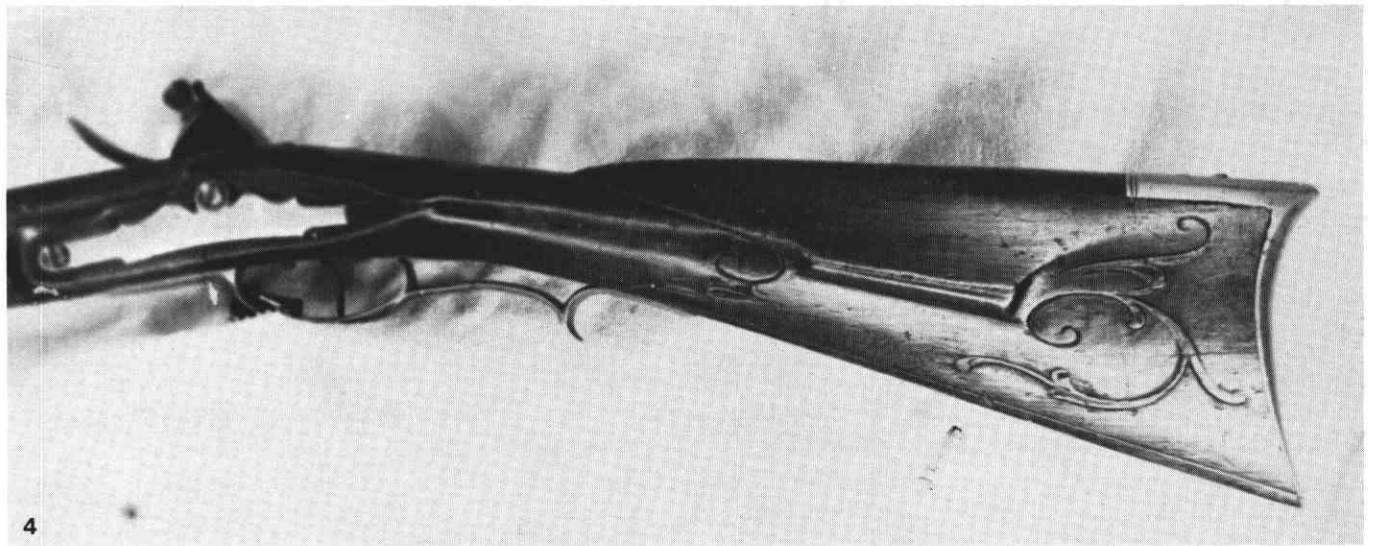
The rococo design so widely used on the cheek piece is credited with having been developed in the early 18th century in France. The "C" scrolls and ram's horn motif go back for centuries, and can be found on ancient Greek marble carving. Another possible source of the idea of the design has a religious origin. Most of the early gunsmiths had very deep religious backgrounds. There is a great similarity in the intricate carving of the Crosiers carried by the hierarchy of the Christian church, and the pattern of the early carving on the guns. The Crosier is a symbolic shepherd's crook (Fig. 4).

Even though most gunsmiths used these rococo and "C" scroll designs, many incorporated an individual touch. These are often used by collectors to identify makers of unsigned guns; i.e., the fluting carved under the cheek piece by John Bonewitz (Fig. 3); the lyre pattern of Leonard Reedy (Fig. 5); and the heavy bold hand of Nicolas Beyer (Fig. 6).

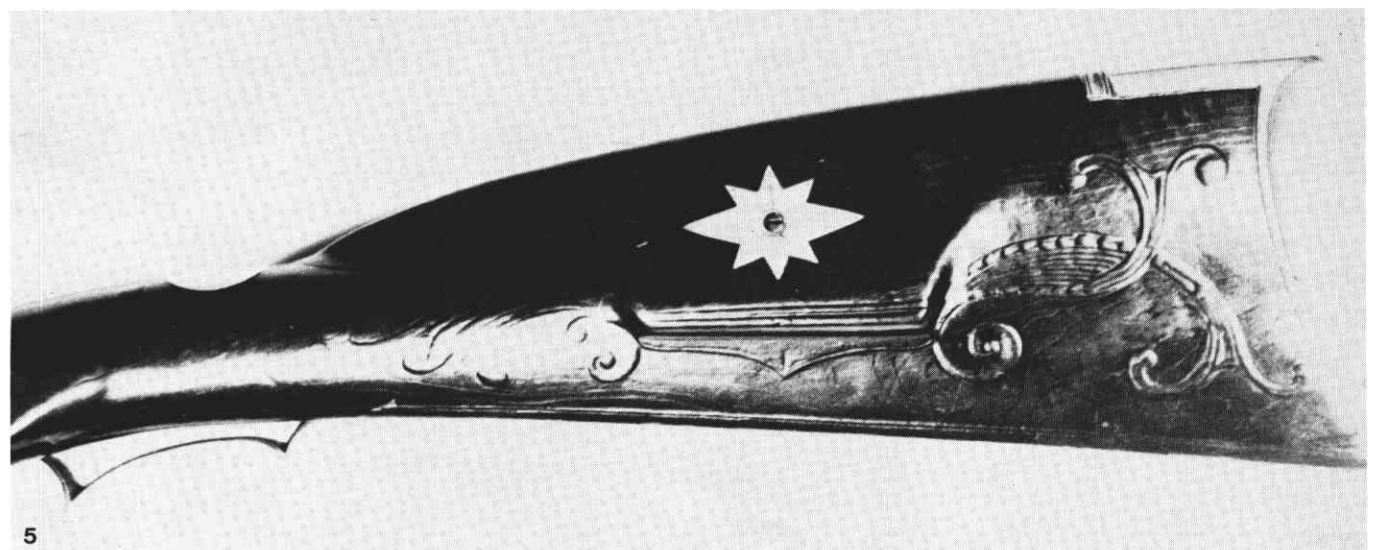
Finely grained wood, especially maple, was in



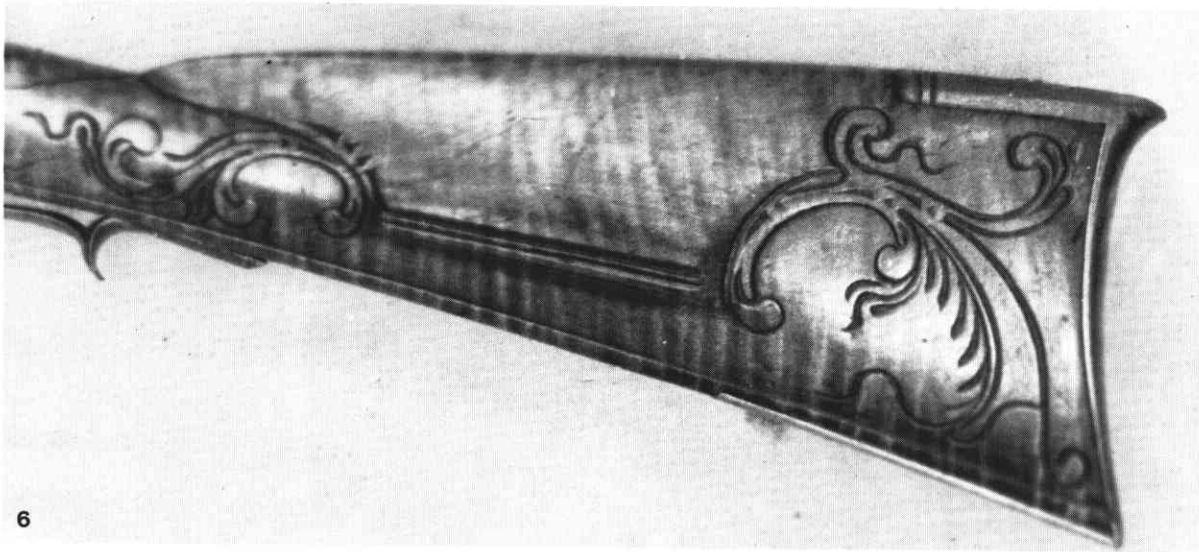
**Raised carving with silver inlay by John Bonewitz.**



**Carving similar to the head of a Crosier of church symbolism.**



**Lyre-pattern carving with silver star by Leonard Reedy**



Heavy, bold, and clean carving by Nicolas Beyer.

demand. If the curl pattern of the wood was not distinctive, a simulated curl was frequently painted on the stock (Fig. 7B). This is seen quite often on the guns in the Lehigh Valley. Also the curly graining might be simulated by burning. A cord that had been soaked in a solution of salt peter and dried was wrapped around the stock and ignited. The resulting charring of the wood in a definite pattern was enhanced by applying an oil finish on the stock.

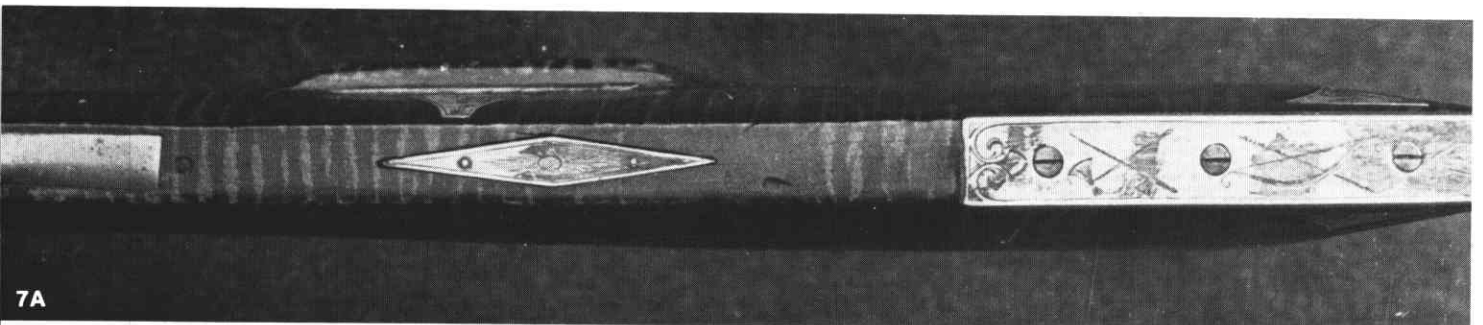
The brass patchbox is considered by most collectors as the single most distinctive feature of the Kentucky rifle. Adding a hinge to the patchbox cover is a definite American innovation. European patchboxes, up to this period, had sliding lids. Through design, engraving, and piercings, the artisan could find expression. As with the carving of the stock, some patchboxes and their engravings are distinctive to a certain gunsmith, his family, or an area. The other brass fittings, toe plate, butt plate, side plate, and ferrules were all areas where artistry could be expressed. Some gunsmiths are recognized by collectors as being primarily engravers of metal, and gave less attention to the detail of the wood carving, i.e., Melchior Fordney, best known for his brass engraving.

Inlays of silver were incorporated in many stocks. A single 8-pointed star on the upper cheek piece is the most common. During the Federal period, eagles became popular. Other animal inlays increased in popularity following the War of 1812. By the end of the Golden Age of the Kentucky (1825-1830), silver had become the major part of the decoration. This took the forms of moon, stars, fish, or simple geometric patterns.

When silver wire was used as an inlay on rifles made in Pennsylvania and Maryland, it was a heavy gauge. This was in contrast to the fine wire used in rifles made in New England during the same period.

In the engraving of the patchboxes, toe and side plates, and escutcheons, Indian motifs were popular. Cross bow and arrows, peace pipes and tomahawks were frequently used (see 7A). The trophy of arms seen on European rifles is rare on American arms.

Presentation Kentucky rifles were made under government contract as gifts to Indians at treaty ceremonies. Derringer and Leman were two of these contractors. A few of these rifles were highly decorated and engraved. One illustration is inlaid with sterling silver and judging from its condition was never issued or presented (Fig. 7A and 7B).



Indian motifs on a toe plate; three other silver inlays can be seen.



A sterling sideplate and "painted" pattern wood; note "24" on front trigger

Silver inlays on the barrel were occasionally used as a place for the signature of the maker. John Schuler of Liverpool, Pa., inlaid his initials in silver and decorated the length of the barrel with knives, tomahawks, hearts, and diamonds (Fig. 8).

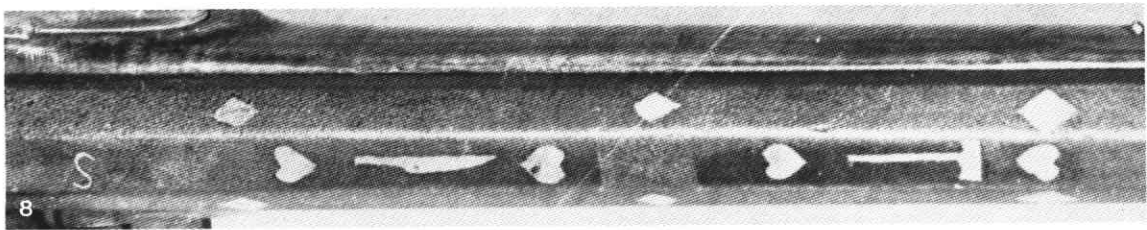
With the introduction of the percussion system came the end of the high art Kentucky. Although some percussion guns were artistically decorated, the beautiful carving of the stocks were largely abandoned. The possible exception to this would apply to the guns made in the Bedford County area. The end of the era was due to several factors, i.e., the economic depression; opening the west, where emphasis was on heavy serviceable guns; and the start of mass production.

In a discussion of the Kentucky rifle art, even one as brief as this, mention should be made of the large number of contemporary rifle makers. Many of these

are fine craftsmen building rifles that would do credit to the original masters of the gunsmith art. Most are following the style and art designs of the old masters. A few are truly innovative as was the late William Buchele with his original designs (Fig. 9).

Mention should be made, too, of the miniature makers, such as the unsurpassed art of Billy Johnson in crafting his exquisite pieces.

The Kentucky rifle has been in nearly continuous production for well over 200 years, more than any other American arm. No one will argue that it is a very functional arm, but its longevity and popularity is largely due to the mystique that surrounds its origin. Born of necessity, it served to help gain our national freedom. The American heritage of our frontier is embedded in its beauty.



Barrel inlays by John Schuler of Liverpool, Pa.



Modern stock work by the late William Buchele.