



MARQUETRY MASTERY

■ *PAUL SCHÜRCH KEEPS THE ART OF DECORATIVE VENEERING ALIVE THROUGH HIS FURNITURE AND THROUGH TEACHING OTHERS.*

By Sam Gazdziak

To perfect his woodworking craft, Paul Schürch spent several years in Europe learning from masters. The time and effort has more than paid off; Schürch has become a master himself, specializing in decorative veneering.

The furniture Schürch creates combines his classical design styles with marquetry images that mimic nature, complete with plants and animals made of wood or stone. One table was named "Whiptail," because one corner featured a small stone lizard tearing apart the inlaid pattern. Another table, entitled "Peach Blossom," shows

blossoms breaking through a pattern of diamonds at the center of the table. Placing the black areas in the pattern was the hardest part, says Schürch, as they had to look random, yet natural.

Another hallmark of his work is a ribbon of veneer that can wind around the top, sides and legs of a piece. As it wanders along the surface, the ribbon is sandshaded in some areas to create a feeling of depth.

Based in Santa Barbara, CA, Schürch Woodwork makes furniture that can range from a small table or chest, priced at \$4,000, to a large table that can cost \$80,000. "The bigger ones don't come that often, but when they do, they're fair-

ly intensive, sometimes using precious materials like gold or silver, gemstones, mother of pearl, and, of course, a whole range of exotic woods," he says.

Schürch builds furniture either for display in galleries or custom-made for clients. He also presents a solo show every two years with 10 to 14 new pieces of furniture. Some pieces are made in limited editions, varying from three to 10, but most are one-of-a-kind.

Above: The "Ribbon Chest," by Paul Schürch, features a strip of lemonwood veneer on a redwood burl background. The ribbon is shaded in some places to create a three-dimensional effect.

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Schürch says that the unlimited possibilities of decorative surfacing appeal to him. "If I can think it and I can draw it, I can render the image in wood," he says. "There are no limits, or at least I haven't found any yet."

Learning his craft has taken Schürch around the world. When he was 15, he went with his father to Switzerland and apprenticed for a year building pianos. Following that, he had a 4½ year apprenticeship building church organs at another company.

The U.S. church organ building market is nearly nonexistent, so Schürch started making cabinets and building up his woodworking shop soon after returning home. His company, with one employee, has been in a 2,600-square-foot shop, which is a converted residence, for 25 years.

To improve his woodworking skills, Schürch spent a year in England working on boatbuilding. There, he says he learned how to fair a curve, which is to create more natural curves in furniture design.

He says his first inlay job was a table that was "six months of absolute hell, trying to figure out what to do and how to do it. There was no literature on it, there was no one teaching it here, there was no way to know how some of the really fine antiques of the past had been done." After finishing it, Schürch started making trips to Italy to learn inlay techniques.

He worked for the Remonti family in a shop outside of Milano in northern Italy, where there was a small enclave of companies producing intarsia, or marquetry furniture. "I went back every year for two to four weeks to study with the master, to bring projects over, create them over there and bring them back," he says. All of his veneer and designs could fit neatly in a flat portfolio. "I was able to take a whole year's worth of work as carry-on luggage," he says.

That relationship continued until Schürch's teacher passed away in 1995. Since then, Schürch has worked out of his shop, perfecting techniques and developing new ones.

It took Schürch many years of training to perfect his style of marquetry, not to mention many trips to Europe. Fortunately, he's making sure that people who want to learn his skills have an easier time.



The "Whip Tail" table showcases Schürch's marquetry and pietra dure (marquetry in stone) abilities, as well as his sense of humor. The inlay design on the table is broken up in one corner by a hungry lizard. The lizard is made of lapis lazuli, malachite and river stone.



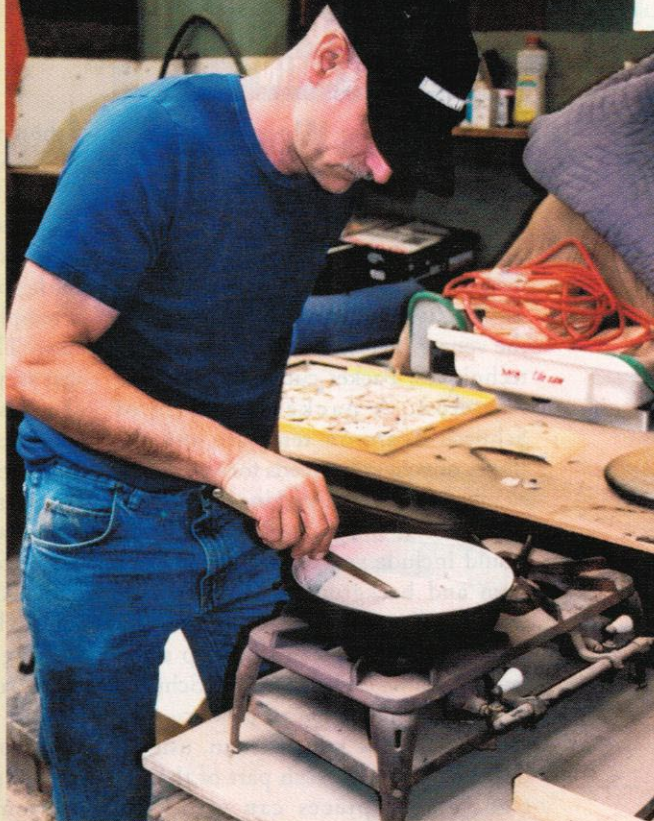
One table made for a vineyard in Texas features grape vines, as well as an inlaid bird, frog and various insects.

Schürch gives several seminars a year about decorative veneering, marquetry and inlay, including one at the upcoming Anaheim Woodworking Fair. He also teaches classes at the Marc Adams School of Woodworking in Franklin, IN, "The

Wood Shows" around the country and, once a year, at his shop. "We just close down for a week, and I teach about eight to 10 people," he says. "We work side-by-side, and hopefully they go home and start creating."



Schürch demonstrates sand shading, which he uses to create a shadow in his marquetry designs. He uses a V-tong to hold a piece of veneer in the hot sand, darkening it. When the final design is assembled, the shaded pieces add depth.

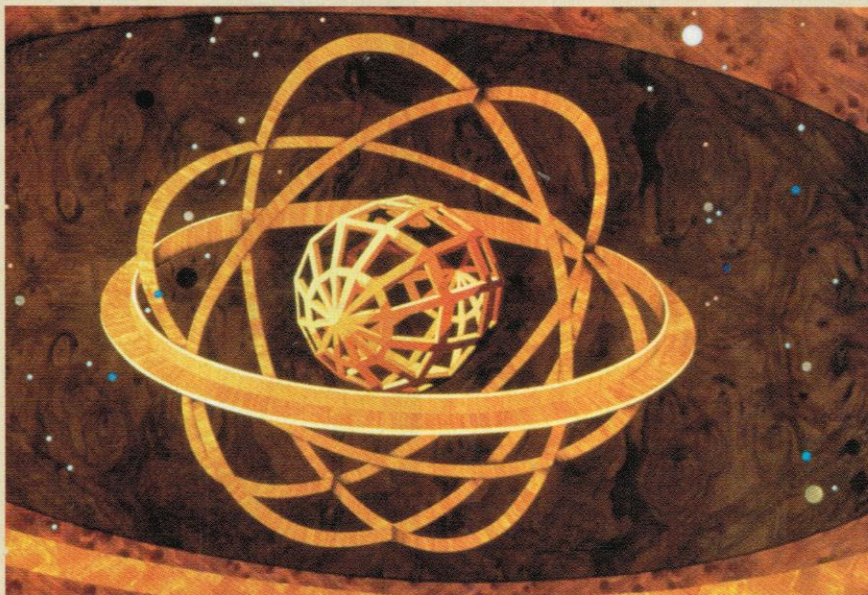


While other shops are hesitant about giving away their secrets, he says he is carrying on a tradition. "I'm able to pass on some of the skills that were given to me so graciously," Schürch says. "In Italy and Switzerland, there were masters who were so free and willing to give me their skills and techniques and time-honored secret finishes — all these things I had no way of learning on my own.

"I feel that the more information I give out, the more that comes back to me," he adds. "It may be my downfall someday, but I don't care. I'm 45 years old. I've got maybe 20 or 30 years to do this, but the trade will continue. There will be more marquetry, more decorative veneering out there, and I'm already starting to see it happen."

Marquetry for one piece can include more than 1,000 pieces of veneer. Schürch gets much of his veneers from Certainly Wood, but he also uses David R. Webb Co. and some Italian sources.

Schürch starts any design by drawing it out in a notebook. Once he has the design idea right, he draws it out full scale as a cartoon template for the marquetry and mechanical shop drawings for the piece of furniture. Sometimes, the drawing can be the hardest part of the production process. "I had one project called the Rosie Table," Schürch says. "I came up with the idea for it and drew it seven years ago. I had the concept of roses in a circle, but I



One of Schürch's more intricate pieces was a library table that featured a 72-sided polyhedron surrounded by veneer ellipses and stars made from gems. This polyhedron, which is 4 inches in diameter, is composed of 180 pieces of wood. The entire table is made of more than 1,200 pieces of veneer.

Through his Web site, www.schurchwoodwork.com, Schürch also sells a video and book that describes his decorative veneering techniques. He also sells the tools

and materials that he uses, including the V-tong, which he invented. Schürch uses the V-tong to pick up the minute pieces of veneer used in his marquetry designs.

■ SCHÜRCH WOODWORK

didn't know how to draw the roses well so they could be made in marquetry." After perfecting his rose-making abilities, he made three Rosie Tables last year.

To cut the marquetry pieces from the veneer sheets, he uses three cutting techniques. Packet cutting is the most common. A packet consists of Schürch's cartoon template and the sheets of veneer he needs for the design elements. If he was making a scene using flowers, for example, the packet would include veneers for the flowers, stem and background. He then cuts along the lines of his drawing, using an old Delta-Milwaukee spring-top scroll saw. When he is done cutting, Schürch has enough materials to produce four variations of the same pattern, using a different wood for each part of the design. Those pieces can either be scrapped, or they can be used for another piece.

Knife cutting is used for intricate cuts.

Schürch uses a knife or chisel to cut out pieces of veneer.

Contour cutting is used for his ribbon designs. Similar to packet cutting, he cuts the entire ribbon out of the background first, then uses the cutout as a template to cut the ribbon motif out next. This way, the grain of the ribbon can vary from piece to piece, perfecting the illusion of a ribbon.

To enhance the realism of his surface work, some of the veneer pieces are shaded to create a 3-D effect. Schürch uses sand shading to achieve the desired effect. He places a pan filled with sand on a gas stove. As the stove heats up, he uses a V-tong to hold a piece of veneer in the sand, toasting the edge and darkening the color. Because the veneer shrinks when it is heated, Schürch has to rehydrate the wood to get it back to the right size with a moist sponge.

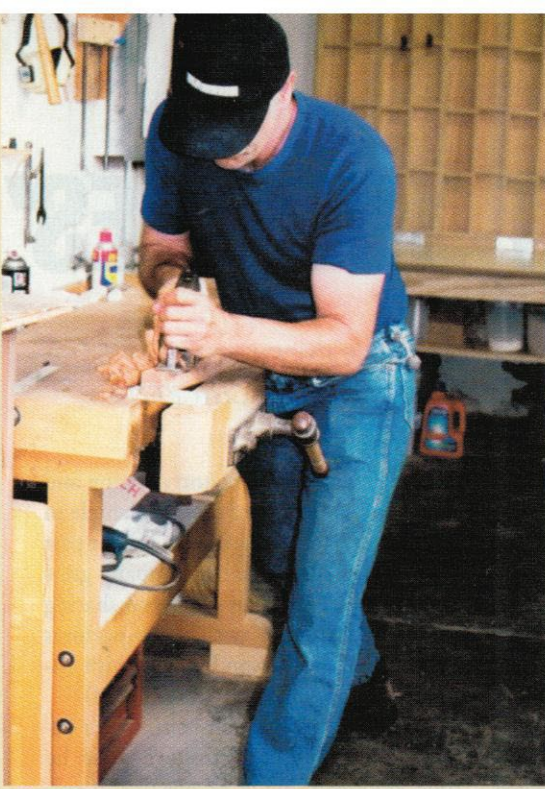
From there, Schürch assembles the finished design. "I tape all these little individual pieces of wood together with blue masking tape from 3M," he says.



To cut the pieces for his designs, Schürch uses a technique called packet cutting. A packet consists of a full-scale cartoon template and all the veneers he needs for the motif. The pieces are cut out on a scroll saw and assembled like a jigsaw puzzle.

Schürch has patented a device that illuminates etched glass. Fiberoptics in the panels light up the glass, causing the etched areas of the glass to be brightly lit. Several of these panels were installed in a temple in Los Angeles in a joint project with Laurie Gross Studios.





"I draw all the seams tight and assemble one skin of veneer as I would a jigsaw puzzle." The pieces are taped on the glue surface, so Schürch has to flip the skin over and put veneer gum tape on the front. After the furniture is glued up, this thin white tape can be sanded off or removed with water and a putty knife.

Marquetry with stone, also

Schürch Woodwork has a variety of hand tools to complement its saws and vacuum presses. Here, Schürch uses a compass plane, which creates a fair, natural curve in his furniture.

known as "pietra dure," is done in a similar way. The stones are cut with a diamond bandsaw (originally made for jewelers) and are glued together with a resin beeswax mixture. The stones are set into the furniture last, because wood has a tendency to reject stone.

"The combination of stone and wood is fascinating for me," Schürch says. "It's a pain, though. It takes a long time and an extreme amount of patience. The failure rate tends to be high."

With all the work involved in veneering a piece, Schürch makes sure that the actual furniture is of the highest quality. "The clients are putting this much money into it, I want to make sure they have the finest piece of furniture that I can possibly produce," he says.

The amount of effort also means that a finished piece can take one year to make, but he says his clients understand the amount of time that goes into a piece. "It's done well and they realize it's not going to be done in a couple of months," he says.

Furniture is made with Medex, a formaldehyde-free board from Medite Corp., as a substrate. The shop has a Powermatic saw and a Delta 12-inch joiner for machining the wood and three vacuum presses from Vacupressing Systems for laminating veneer. Much of the work is done with hand tools, including a compass plane that creates the fair curves found in many of Schürch's pieces.

Because many pieces are shipped to his clients or to galleries, Schürch designs the pieces to be broken down into many pieces. Tops and sides of cabinets can come off, legs can be unscrewed and decorative elements can be removed. Another benefit is that the pieces can be repaired easier, as a damaged leg can simply be unscrewed and replaced.

Schürch also includes a plastic care tag for each piece, detailing when the piece was built, the materials, the finish, repair information and tips for caring for the piece. "It has all the information that I would like to see if I'm repairing furniture," he explains. "What glues did he use? What are the finishes? What is the substrate material?"

"These things are the antiques of the future," he adds. "They need to outlast my lifetime. I want them to be serviceable for hundreds of years." ❖



The "Peach Blossom" table is a combination of French and Italian styles. The blossoms are made of pink ivory wood.