

# Paul Schürch

Photos by Benjamin Marshal & Wayne McCall | Words by Andy Patterson



There are those who prefer assembly-line furniture to custom craftsmanship, choosing convenience over quality, budget over investment. Paul Schürch is not one of those people. He occupies a singular niche in the realm of high-end furniture manufacture, specializing in the venerable and complex art of marquetry, and in his Santa Barbara, California shop, he preserves traditional marquetry techniques while engaging his own unique woodworking sensibilities. Upon entering his workspace, I wondered if Schürch—who speaks several languages and has built organs in Europe, boats in England, and fashions world-renowned furniture—would be approachable about his work. He was. With an affable smile, this unassuming man in his fifties displayed his shop as if it were his living room and he was entertaining a guest for dinner. Such is the intimacy between this man, his tools, and his work. And as we strode from project to project, I began to grasp the extent of his talent.

Marquetry is the art of covering the surface of a wooden structure with artistically rendered veneer. The veneer picture, or motif, often contains thousands of separate pieces of material, like a jigsaw puzzle picture fashioned from rare wood, shell, bone, or polished stone. Your toolbox dictates the quality of the piece. Quilted maple, opal, lapis lazuli, makore—the names of the materials in Schürch's shop read like ingredients to an exotic recipe. Schürch also employs the art of inlay, whereby fashioned pieces of wood, metal, and stone are embedded



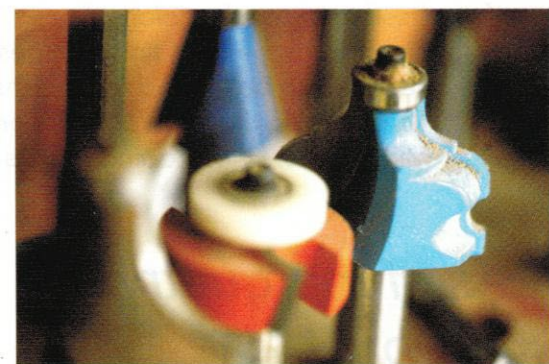


into the surface of wood. Schürch often combines inlay and marquetry to great effect. One tabletop features a richly patterned fish, tail upturned in the throes of a leap, its mouth agape in pursuit of an out-of-reach fishing line. The fish, constructed from a kinetic combination of colorful woods against a quilted maple background, is a dynamic counterpoint to the streaming fishing line, crafted from highly polished precious metal.

According to Schürch, "Marquetry has been around for thousands of years, in many different forms." Yet most people—including accomplished woodworkers—know little about its rich heritage. This art form flourished in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries under Italian and French craftsmen, whose work adorned the palaces of royal families and aristocrats, including the ostentatious palace of Versailles. During the Industrial Revolution, however, "properly handcrafted marquetry was discarded for cheaper and faster alternatives," bemoans Schürch. However, the last century has ushered in a resurgence of skill, quality, and enthusiasm for the technique, as well as a boom of creative experimentation with traditional form, function, and materials.







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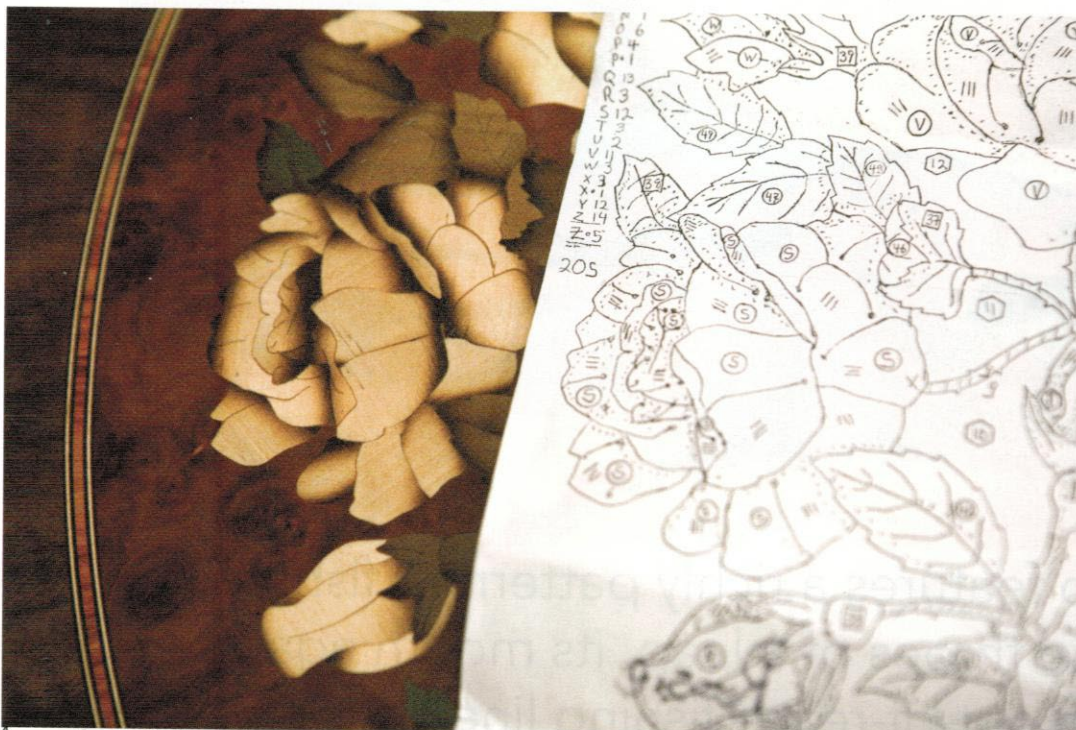




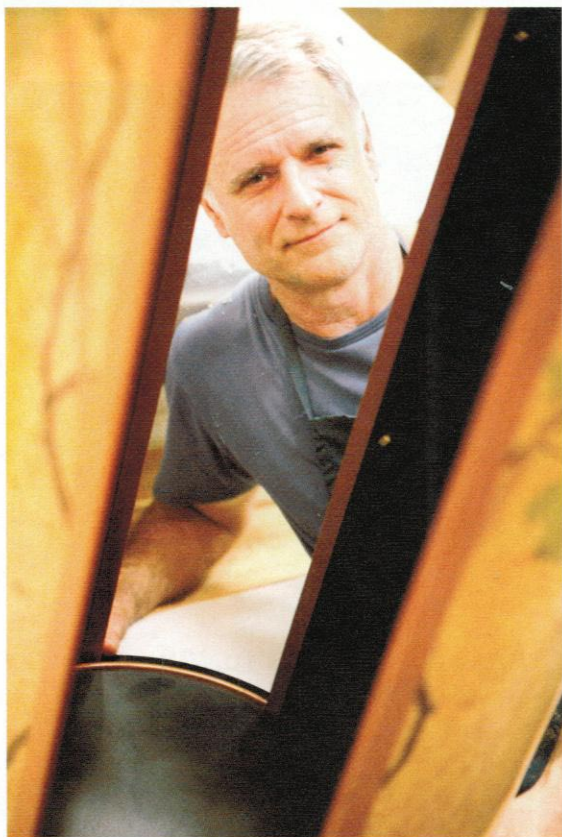
Schürch is optimistic about the future of the craft. "I think marquetrie is gaining a lot of momentum these days," he remarks.

Schürch's talent as a modern craftsman is the intersection of several traditions. "I am deeply indebted to classical styles of marquetrie, but I still incorporate new ideas into my work," Schürch states with a tinge of pride. Nevertheless, his desire to stay true to traditional techniques manifests itself in his methodology. For example, he uses special glue made from animal hides, "so that, if need be, the glue can be heated up and the furniture taken apart. You can't do that with a lot of contemporary fixatives," he explains. "I love doing repairs

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on old pieces of furniture. It continually reaffirms the basics of the craft, and keeps my skills up to par."

Schürch learned his craft from an aging Italian master who took on apprentices in order to ensure fine marquetry would survive into the next generation. For years, Schürch traveled to Italy for concentrated periods of tutelage, honing his ability until he accumulated enough experience to start his own business. Now, like his Italian teacher, he takes on his own apprentices, many of whom have garnered awards, pioneered their own businesses, and even authored books on marquetry. Indeed, Schürch has built a legacy of teaching, and, of course furniture. "I hope my furniture will last," says Schürch. "It's my way of carrying old world sensibilities into the present, and into the future."

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