

Surface Attraction

West Stockbridge, Mass., cabinetmaker Thom Walsh is a virtuoso of veneers and varnish

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THOM WALSH RUNS A LONG-FINGERED HAND over the smooth surface of a neoclassical-style daybed, which he made in his West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, studio, and which he calls his “signature piece.” The flame-grain mahogany crotch veneer—a deep reddish brown swirled with a darker feather pattern and hand-polished to produce a rich sheen—flows seamlessly from the arch of the cyma curve to the side of the piece. Walsh describes the way the veneer follows the curved form as “erotic.” The word choice not only expresses the craftsman’s passion for his work, but evokes his fascination with the elegant colors and patterns that distinguish the surfaces of his finished pieces.

“What really sort of bothers me,” Walsh says, “is the idea embedded in people’s minds that equates veneer with furniture that is not of good quality. Some of the most expensive and beautiful pieces ever made were made with veneer. It gives you endless possibilities. It’s like a painter’s palette. There’s no way you could find solid wood to give those patterns and still have a piece of furniture with structural integrity.”

Walsh creates the daybed—recently selected by the Furniture Society for display at the 2007 International Contemporary Furniture Fair, running May 19-22 at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City—by overlaying a plywood form with veneer of a tropical mahogany, the gold standard for furniture since the eighteenth century. The crotch mahogany Walsh uses on the daybed requires veneer because the tension involved in sawing the timber—harvested in West Africa under internationally accepted forestry guidelines—causes it to disintegrate. The veneer is sliced deli-thin into sheets, called flitches, which are dried flat, layered in the order in which they were cut, stacked in reams like paper, and shipped to a select number of specialty buyers.

One of them is Ben Barrett of Berkshire Veneer in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Barrett’s international business sources



and sells a variety of exotic species, ranging from \$5 to \$10 per square foot. “Veneering is very, very difficult,” Barrett explains. “A very limited percentage of woodworkers do it. It takes a certain finesse to be able to use a raw piece of veneer. Not everyone has the skill or patience, and it entails a whole ’nother level of skills, materials, and equipment.”

Barrett continues, “Thom is in a class of being a visionary. He has the ability to take a unique, figured piece of raw veneer and create something extraordinary out of it. He can take what might be considered an irregularity in the wood and turn it into something really special.”

The furnishings in the early-nineteenth-century Greek Revival farmhouse in West Stockbridge that Walsh shares with his wife, Joanne, and a large, aged Airedale reflect his fascination with furniture forms and surfaces. Included is a circa-1910 tiger oak sideboard that was once thickly covered with green paint, as well as pieces Walsh made: a Danish Modern chair; a blocky, contemporary television stand with multi-hued shelves treated with various colored dyes; an elegant veneered and pillared Biedermeier-style bookcase; and sleek console and coffee tables. “To me,” says Walsh, “furniture is a matter of doing something sculptural as opposed to just functional. Wood is something you can form and shape. It doesn’t matter what style it is; give me a style and I’ll create something that fits with it.”





Portrait of an Artist: Just another long day's journey (of a daybed) into night; a few of the intricate steps cabinetmaker Thom Walsh must take in order to reach a "finish" that's to his satisfaction.

Raised in rural New Hampshire, Walsh grew up in a big old Victorian home full of antique furnishings. "A lot of what I do comes from growing up in a house with antiques," he says. He points to a circa-1800 drop-front desk with bracket feet. "Look at this Federal desk. It blows you away." One of the antiques he grew up with is a relatively modest piece made striking by its use of wood: drawer fronts of golden bird's-eye maple set into a reddish-brown cherry case. "When you look at a good antique piece of furniture, nine times out of ten the underside will be finished as well as the top," Walsh continues. "You get the feeling that you don't let things out of the shop unless they're perfect." He pauses for a beat, looking at the desk. "You can be a perfectionist when you're doing one piece at a time. The most important thing to me is to try to build something that will last."

At one point in his childhood, Walsh recalls, his father owned a lumber business, so he had plenty of wood to play with. "We were yard rats, cutting up blocks of wood, making little boats and things like that. I've always been handy." In high school he built a guitar and caught "the fine woodworking bug." Planning to become an architect, he enrolled at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), but switched his focus to woodworking and industrial design. His first veneered piece was a table with mortise and tenon joinery and simply shaped legs.

"I'm willing to try anything," he says. "I needed stereo speakers, so I learned about the electronics from a friend, and made cabinets veneered with Hawaiian koa wood. I wanted a fly rod, so I got the parts and made it. I made a set of golf clubs; I bought the parts and put them together. I'm not afraid to do that. The more you can think something through, the less likely you are to have a problem. I might spend two days figuring out something that could take three hours to make."

After graduating from RISD in 1976, Walsh spent four years in New Hampshire, then moved to New York City, where he crafted cabinetry and furniture, became a punk-rock musician, and started his own company. Having visited her family's Stockbridge,

Massachusetts, home, Walsh and Joanne bought their West Stockbridge house in 1991. "Enjoying living here means a lot to me," he says, "even if it's as simple as gardening, cooking, outdoor sports like bicycling and skiing, photography, working on the house. I'm interested in so many things. I'm one of these guys that's gotta be doing something."

A dowel's throw from the house, Walsh's barn-like 1,250-square-foot studio contains the sort of super-cool woodworking equipment that makes viewers of PBS's *Yankee Workshop* drool sawdust—a ten-foot-long Altendorf table saw, massive and sleek as a classic Mercedes-Benz; a drill press; a shaper for moldings and different kinds of joinery; a wood lathe; a hollow-chisel mortising machine; a band saw; a twelve-inch joiner; a planer; a tool cabinet containing an impressive array of wood planes and other hand tools; and a central dust collector to control ventilation. Rounding out the workspace are the cabinetmaker's bench Walsh built while attending RISD and a pond yacht his father made.

Walsh continues to be fascinated by the engineering it takes to make a pond yacht seaworthy or a chair graceful yet sturdy and by the painstaking craftsmanship it requires to piece veneer so its grain flows seamlessly. "Most people think that when you cut a tree it dies," he notes. "That's not true. Wood is alive. It responds to humidity, expanding in the summer and contracting in the winter. Architectural woodworking can be unbelievably challenging, and building a guitar involves very intricate work. Everything has its own set of issues."

The first step in constructing the daybed, for example, is making a plywood form. The plywood Walsh uses, however, is a far cry from what you'd find at Home Depot. He glues together 1/8-inch-thick sheets of Italian bending poplar ("stiff when you bend it in one direction, pliable in the other"), drapes them on a sturdy curved mold, places the poplar and the mold in a large "bag" of thick vinyl, then uses a vacuum pump to empty the bag of air. In the bag, the glue sets and the resulting air pressure shapes the plywood to the curved mold, creating the skeleton of the daybed.





Thom's Toys: Thom Walsh's single-armed daybed (left); drop-leaf dining table made for builder David Lanoue (right); an audio-equipment console (below).

Then Walsh creates the skin of the piece, composing the fitches of veneer into a coherent whole. "When you're dealing with solid wood, you can sand the hell out of it, but veneer is unforgiving," he says. "When you get into intricate veneer work, you're dealing with exotic, temperamental wood. Mahogany crotch is not very flat, and the idea is to piece it together to look like one continuous piece of wood. The daybed has to look nice on the curve, and the grain on top has to look like it flows into the grain on the side. Everything has to be very precise."

deep, rich color and character. It's important to me that the surface has a smooth feel. When you rub your hand over it, you want it to just glide like a pair of skates on ice."

As a case in point, Walsh cites a drop-leaf dining table he crafted for the home of Great Barrington restoration carpenter and builder David Lanoue. "I obsessed over the edge treatment," he recalls. "It's a solid tiger-maple top, and I was constantly making different profiles for the edge so it would work with the drop leaf, thinking about proportion, taking away the heftiness, and giving it a lot of detail. I'll often make a model to get the proportion right. You need the perspective of looking at it in three dimensions. You don't get the same sense from a drawing."

A member of the Berkshire Woodworkers Guild, Walsh exhibits at the group's annual furniture show and sale held the third weekend in July at the Berkshire Botanical Garden in Stockbridge. Though he has built kitchen cabinetry (notably for Ruth Reichl, editor-in-chief of *Gourmet*), he says, "I don't want to do kitchens any more because of the physical scope of things. I will do a wall in a library or an entertainment center." No, he greatly prefers crafting furniture, rising to the challenge of engineering, building, and then choosing from a "painter's palette" of veneers and varnishes to make its surface sing.

"Thom does impeccable work, flawless work," says Lou Boxer, whose eponymous firm in West Stockbridge uses Walsh for selective, high-end projects. "He understands his materials. He executes things perfectly. He has a good design sense and is very proactive." But most importantly, says Boxer, "People are always happy with what he does." **BL**

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The final step is applying finish to amplify the wood's natural beauty. "Finishes are very important to me," Walsh asserts. He uses a polymerized tung oil topped with polyurethane oil and builds it up layer by layer, hand-rubbing each. "There's a chemical reaction in which the resins within the wood oxidize and darken, creating a



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