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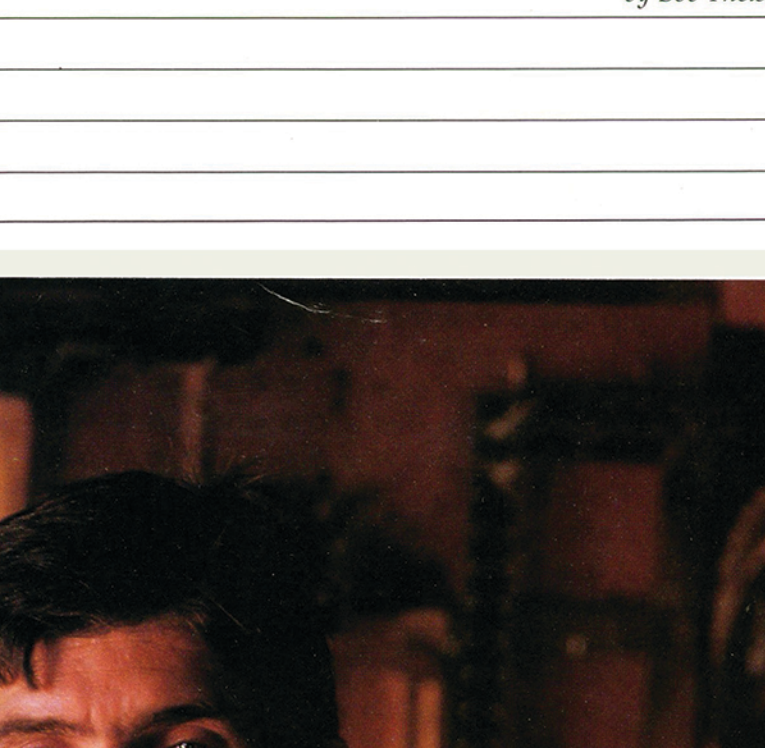
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## Which woods best suit a project?



An exploration of design ideas, page 38

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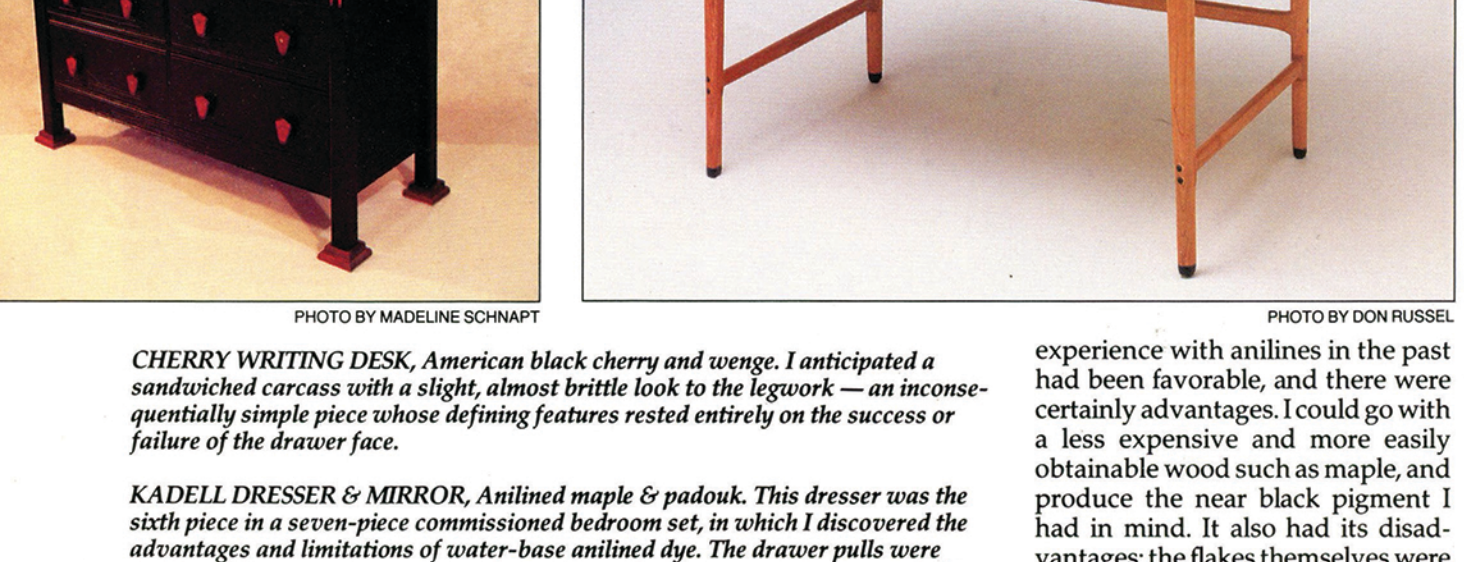
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# CREATING A TRESTLE TABLE

By Charles Prowell



Staley Lumber, as I remember it from my boyhood, was located just outside of town flanked on one side by railroad tracks and cornfields and on the other side by old Route 10 and more cornfields. Staley's sold everything: barbed wire, hip boots, cattle feed, coal, miscellaneous hardware, lumber for the local builders like my father, and hardwoods. These hardwoods are what brought my grandfather, a furniture maker, into Staley's and, unlike my father, he would sometimes linger for half the morning before finally leaving with only a half-dozen boards in the back of his truck.

What they offered at Staley's was a basic inventory of oak, maple, birch, mahogany, a little walnut, and, for my grandfather, a longtime preferred customer, a standing reserve of American black cherry that arrived every few months by special order and was kept bound and tagged in its own particular bin. I don't suppose that either of them had ever offered the widest selection imaginable of both native and exotic hardwoods that it would have made any difference to my grandfather. The look of his work fell somewhere between a Shaker and Mission style, and seemed to demand the use of certain elements in a way that Kentucky-railed fences demanded white paint. Today, however, when furniture design is seemingly without limits or restrictions, the decision of which woods to use is never so simple. It becomes a process for the nonproduction furniture maker that must recur with each new piece. In this article I'll explore how this process of matching with my trestle table, a process that can be as ambiguous and indeterminate as matching a tie to a suit.

With the preliminary drawings of any piece of original furniture, and particularly my trestle table, the beginning of a design come almost simultaneously with the decision of what materials to use. Yet in a double boiler on a Coleman stove, I had with me a vague notion of a trestle-type legwork that would, at first glance, appear bottom-heavy with the accumulation of visible details in the base. The top surface would appear simple, without much detail, but by its sheer expanse demand the same attention as the supporting base. So whatever wood the top was made of, it should not be too eye-catching in itself so as not to upset the balance between top and base. I needed an absence of color, an extremely light, or extremely dark wood, and possibly both. The lines of a basic trestle design are simple and a stark contrast might help prevent the details from being lost in their surroundings. I decided on through mortises for the legs, along with exposed wedges and spline inlays for every exposed tenon. To highlight these details, the decision to go with contrasting woods was firmly made.

At this point, only a few sketches along, it seemed clear that anything I had developed a rolled, sandwiched edge to the top's perimeter and

experience with photos in the past had been favorable, and there were certainly advantages. I could go with a less expensive and more easily obtainable wood such as maple, and produce the near black pigment I had in mind. It also had its disadvantages: the flakes themselves were expensive; the application was time consuming; and it would be impossible to lay in my lighter highlights over an already dyed surface, for to sand them flush would discolor the surrounding wood (the idea of touching up with a fine brush seemed a little ridiculous). I had by this time completed the surface design, calling for an eighth-inch inlay at the bread-board joint. This detail, along with the pattern of laid-in splines for each exposed tenon on the legs, worked to overrule any notice of dyes. And yet by this time a new candidate had surfaced, a wood of ineffable beauty that would cause me more trouble than I could have imagined, because its working properties were somewhere between white oak and granite.

Somerset Maugham once wrote that "... one of the minor, yet more desirable pleasures in life is to wander about a well-stocked bookshop." By supplanting bookshop with local hardwood supplier, you'll find that most woodworkers tend

although the basic trestle design was rooted in the past, this new detail quickly set a contemporary precedent. Any woods that might be associated with the original trestle look (oak, cherry, pine) would only generate comparison and result in what we'll call a "conflict of generations." In other words, plant the design in its origins but make it far enough away so that it stands alone.

I considered the dark, straight grain of Peruvian walnut for the wedges and inlay details, onto first maple, then birch, then satinwood, then discarded them all and turned to the walnut as the primary wood for the details with the lighter woods for the table. It worked, and for the first time I was able to envision the piece in my mind, an asset that allowed me to begin filling in the gaps of the legwork. This is the part of any design which I enjoy the

most; the structural needs have been met, and all that remained was the fine tuning, the missing links that would complement what already existed. Oddly enough, this is normally done away from the drawing board, in the early morning before the work day begins, or evenings, under the guise of walking the dogs, or even, alas, in the midst of a conversation with my wife.

Meanwhile there was a problem with the walnut, namely its availability. I could find little, and ordering stock could take months, an inconvenience at best.

By this time I was considering adding my own color to the wood, a viable alternative that had me suddenly considering the range of colors offered by aniline dyes. It was intoxicating (I could have Fire Truck Red with Lemon Yellow highlights!) My

and I cut a dado in the center of each to accept the single cross-board that essentially connected the base together (fig. 4). Once the dados for the cross-board were cut I returned with a dovetail bit and a router aligned with a straight edge to give the dado sides their dovetail bevels. The legs, lower rails and connecting rails were assembled and clamped together. I bored out a 1/2" hole at the top through the fitted legs and connecting rail and glued and dowelled these together. The base would now remain fixed in place and although the lower rails would not receive a glue bond, for now the clamps kept them in place until the wedges could be made.

To figure dimensions for the tenon

with a dado blade on the table saw, the legs were stood upright and clamped to the mitter guide. The initial cuts on the band saw were more a precaution against chipout than anything else; I trust the band saw with this type of cut more than the table saw (fig. 4).

The lowest rail was 1-3/4" by 3-1/2". To give some detail on this part of the base I elected to add the raised piece that would accept the trestle board. I cut out the lower rail and the fitted raised piece with a combination of the table saw and band saw and then took a 1/4" rabbit bit on the router where the wedges would be revealed (fig. 5). The fitted, raised piece was cut out to accept the trestle board wedge in the same way as the first (fig. 5). Then those edges coming into contact with the rabbeted front edge of the trestle board were distinct without waving any flags. The middle rail was made up and all rail tenons were cut with a straight bit on the router set at 1/4"

to agree. I was "showing" one afternoon, killing time between appointments, when I came across the wenge (wen-gay), black as night and enough backed-up stock to furnish half a house. I had worked with wenge before, more to complement other woods, and each time I was struck by how wonderfully

finished up. In each of those projects the wenge had threatened to upstage my primary woods (it seemed to come into a life of its own with even a hint of finish). Yet at the same time it was dark enough not to make the table top jump out visually. I returned the following day and purchased what I needed,

a sentence that's easy to write but which, in practice, took me almost two hours to complete and cost a substantial sum.

I chose cherry as the secondary wood for the wedges, the trestle board, and inlay. The tendency had been toward a lighter wood, which would give a look of absolute contrasts. But that gave way to the subtler cherry in a conciliatory effort to avoid a deco-like sleekism. If the woods had been reversed, with wenge as the primary, this in fact would not have existed. And in danger to have used any woods other than those chosen would have created as many different effects.

Many furniture makers, my grandfather among them, develop a line that they get to that late in life more than I created this piece, with the exception that there is usually one or several prototypes constructed before introducing the piece to the open market. By this time the kinks have been worked out and the piece is as perfect as it will ever be. For the one-of-a-kind commission this is a luxury that almost never afforded. The design and construction has to be as close to perfect as possible with just one go-around. But aside from whether you are a one-of-a-kind woodworker, or a more production-minded, the maxims of your materials defining your design, and vice versa, remain the same.

And yet perhaps overriding all else, no matter what style of furniture you create, the most startling dictum is that there essentially are no rules. There are techniques. And as long as these techniques are met, then the only basis for judgment left is purely objective: does the piece reveal some of the maker's hand? But this is an endless dilemma, wrestled with throughout the art world, consisting of opinions that by their very nature will always be open to debate.

depth on the 5/4 rails and 1/8" on the 2-1/4 rails. I left the tenons routing 3/4" beyond the outside of the mortise.

The rails were then set in the bench vise and using a slotting bit with a depth of 1/2" the finger inlays were cut into the end grain of the exposed tenons. The lower rails were given two 1/4" inlays and the middle rails were given one 1/8" inlay. The cherry strips were installed at this point and sanded flush, and a 1/4" radius given the tenons. The two top connecting rails were cut to length and fitted around the inside lip of the surface's sandwich board. I cut them back to 2" from the outside lip. Their rails were dadoed on the table saw to accept the legs,

for the wedge to correspond to the thinner. The wedge was thus flush along its back to both the middle and lower rail.

I secured the top to the base with screw blocks, then drove the wedges in, each by hand to the wedge, and at this point that my glued up lamination on the end of the trestle board began to give. I had underestimated the pressure the wedge would exert on this piece. The trestle board was removed, re-glued and enough backed-up stock to furnish half a house. I had worked with wenge before, more to complement other woods, and each time I was struck by how wonderfully

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After sanding to 600 grit, I began to apply finish. The first coat consisted of 50 percent thinner, 25 percent boiled linseed oil, and 25 percent satin polyurethane, heated to a smoking simmer for five minutes in a double boiler on a Coleman stove out behind the shop. Because of the unusual density of wenge, I elected to go with this higher thinner proportion and heated solution on the first coat, allowing the solution to set for almost three hours before wiping it dry. For the second coat, I returned to my standard mix of one part boiled linseed oil, one part pure tung oil, and one part polyurethane, again brushing it on and wiping it dry. This too was heated to simmer and allowed to set for over an hour before dry wiping. This procedure

was repeated every 24 hours for six days, at which point the polyurethane was eliminated in lieu of pure beeswax (approximately a handful for a half-gallon of solution), and given two coats in two days. The beeswax eliminates the need for the final paste waxing, which, although good for show, always seems to smudge with fingerprints. The final two baked-on coats give the wood a durable, soft sheen that's smudge free.

In my experience there are two key steps to a good finish. One is the sanding, an exhausting job that seems to go on forever, and the second is the dry wiping, which must be done as diligently as the sanding. You'll know you're wiping hard enough when the sweat from your forehead keeps dripping onto the wood and your hand begins to warm from the sheer friction.

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for the wedge to correspond to the thinner. The wedge was thus flush along its back to both the middle and lower rail.

I secured the top to the base with screw blocks, then drove the wedges in, each by hand to the wedge, and at this point that my glued up lamination on the end of the trestle board began to give. I had underestimated the pressure the wedge would exert on this piece. The trestle board was removed, re-glued and enough backed-up stock to furnish half a house. I had worked with wenge before, more to complement other woods, and each time I was struck by how wonderfully

with the same 1/4" radius used on all the wedges.

After sanding to 600 grit, I began to apply finish. The first coat consisted of 50 percent thinner, 25 percent boiled linseed oil, and 25 percent satin polyurethane, heated to a smoking simmer for five minutes in a double boiler on a Coleman stove out behind the shop. Because of the unusual density of wenge, I elected to go with this higher thinner proportion and heated solution on the first coat, allowing the solution to set for almost three hours before wiping it dry. For the second coat, I returned to my standard mix of one part boiled linseed oil, one part pure tung oil, and one part polyurethane, again brushing it on and wiping it dry. This too was heated to simmer and allowed to set for over an hour before dry wiping. This procedure

was repeated every 24 hours for six days, at which point the polyurethane was eliminated in lieu of pure beeswax (approximately a handful for a half-gallon of solution), and given two coats in two days. The beeswax eliminates the need for the final paste waxing, which, although good for show, always seems to smudge with fingerprints. The final two baked-on coats give the wood a durable, soft sheen that's smudge free.

In my experience there are two key steps to a good finish. One is the sanding, an exhausting job that seems to go on forever, and the second is the dry wiping, which must be done as diligently as the sanding. You'll know you're wiping hard enough when the sweat from your forehead keeps dripping onto the wood and your hand begins to warm from the sheer friction.

to agree. I was "showing" one afternoon, killing time between appointments, when I came across the wenge (wen-gay), black as night and enough backed-up stock to furnish half a house. I had worked with wenge before, more to complement other woods, and each time I was struck by how wonderfully

finished up. In each of those projects the wenge had threatened to upstage my primary woods (it seemed to come into a life of its own with even a hint of finish). Yet at the same time it was dark enough not to make the table top jump out visually. I returned the following day and purchased what I needed,

a sentence that's easy to write but which, in practice, took me almost two hours to complete and cost a substantial sum.

I chose