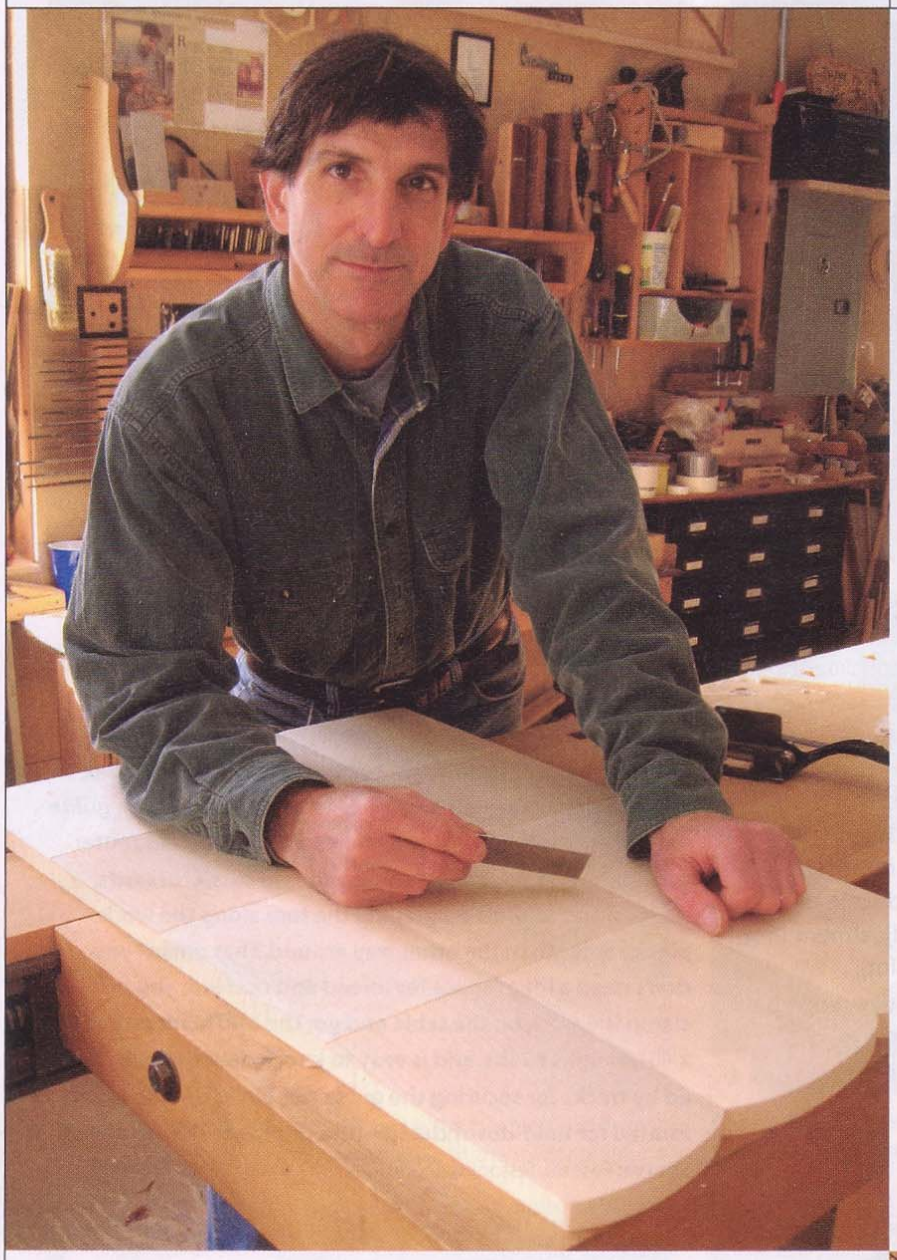


Tim Coleman

It's all in the details.

By Spike Carlsen

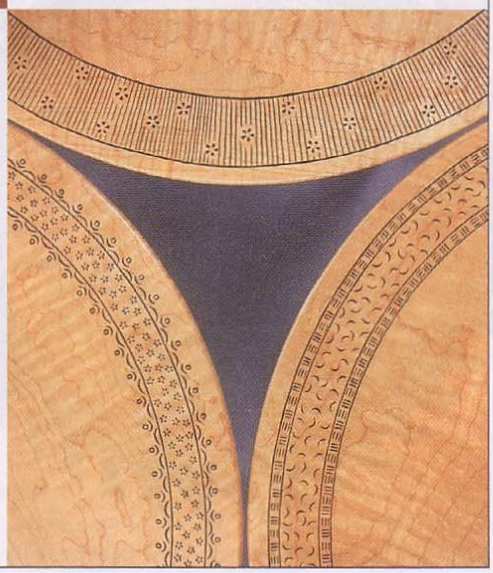
TIM COLEMAN has had sawdust in his veins for as long as he can remember. As a kid, he was so enamored by woodworking that he had his own workshop. At the age of ten—when most kids were asking for a bike for Christmas—Tim asked for a jigsaw. He couldn't wait to get to junior high school, where he could take wood shop. "And the year I started was the year they decided boys should take cooking and home economics and girls should take shop class. I was devastated," he recalls. But clearly this wasn't enough to stand in the way of Tim's passion for woodworking.

Post-graduate studies in wood

After graduating from college with an English major in the mid-80s, Tim decided it would be wise to have a skill to fall back on—and he naturally turned to woodworking. He moved to Seattle, where there was a vibrant woodworking community, and apprenticed under a furnituremaker. As luck would have it, the furnituremaker worked in a cooperative workshop with eight or nine other woodworkers. By peeking over the shoulders of others, Tim learned cabinetmaking, carving and sculpture as well, skills that show in his work today.

Tim learned countless techniques in the workshop, but it was a lecture by James Krenov that opened his eyes to the world of furnituremaking as an art form. "I was blown away by his whole approach. I fell in love with the idea of furnituremaking as a form of self-expression. That was a real turning point," Tim explains. As a

Tim creates unique borders reminiscent of hand-tooled leather by carving and stamping patterns into light colored wood, applying dark stain, and then scraping off the excess.



EDITOR: TIM JOHNSON • PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF TIM COLEMAN

Extraordinary patterns highlight Tim's work. The intricate border on his "Yew and Me" cabinet was created by applying a layer of sycamore veneer over western yew, and then carving away the bulk of the sycamore.

These lessons remain evident in Tim's designs today. His works range from freestanding cabinets to tables, chairs and desks. Before beginning a piece, he'll often make a mockup out of cardboard or scrap wood to get a feel for proportion, especially for pieces that have curves that are hard to get a feel for on paper. Since many of his methods are idiosyncratic, he prefers to work alone.

Details, details

One of Tim's trademarks is the exquisite detail that goes into each piece, detailing that takes many forms. One technique is the use of applied veneers (see "The Delicate Art of Applied Veneer," page 27). He also uses stamping on certain pieces. "My first workshop was in a former manufacturing plant that used to make steel stamps for the tool industry, and I kept finding old stamps between the floorboards and on the windowsills," he recalls. He originally used these old stamps to create patterns and to texture pieces, but eventually began making his own stamps. Sometimes the stamped patterns are dominant, other times they serve as background texture.

result of that lecture, Tim eventually wound up in California, where he spent several years working with Krenov at the College of the Redwoods.

What "Krenovian" ideas have stuck with him? "Krenov felt if you paid attention to the wood, it would suggest it's final form. Rather than starting out with a firm idea for a piece of furniture, then selecting the wood, Krenov often starts with the wood and lets it inspire the project. It allows for spontaneity. It's very gratifying when it works," Tim explains. "Krenov talked about composing a piece, rather than working off a strict plan. He'd cut out parts larger than needed then rough clamp them together to get a sense of scale and proportion. But he's still old school in some ways; he never sacrifices quality or function."

The upper doors of Tim's "So Sweet" cabinet feature stamped and carved patterns. The divider features pierced veneer applied over a contrasting substrate (see "The Delicate Art of Applied Veneer," page 27).

In this graceful jatoba settee, Tim creates pleasing patterns using nothing more than wood and space.

While Tim uses power tools in the initial stages of production, he enjoys working with hand tools. "I love the immediacy of a hand tool on a piece of wood. It's not only pleasurable; it's often more efficient than using power tools. I don't even own a belt sander."

Tim likes working with domestic hardwoods, such as cherry, walnut and maple, but also uses more exotic species, such as English sycamore and Japanese ash. "I have some absolutely incredible Japanese horse chestnut stashed away that's unlike anything I've ever seen," he muses. "Every couple of months I'll pull it out and stare at it, then put it back. I haven't found the perfect use yet, but I will some day. Luckily there's no expiration date on wood."

Tim's work is split evenly between commissions and speculative pieces. He's had some unusual commissions. One was working on a cabinet that now houses the Emancipation Proclamation. Another involved creating molds for forming the fiberglass seats for a sports stadium. Speculative pieces allow Tim the freedom to really stretch and try new things. One piece required over 600 hours of painstaking labor.

Learning by teaching

Tim likes to pass on his woodworking skills and passion to others. He's taught summer classes at the College of the Redwoods and Peter Korn's Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. "I hold a lot of information in my head when I do my own projects and it's hard to articulate. But when I start working with someone else on a project, the information flows. I learn when I teach," Tim explains. "It's fascinating to watch students react to wood as it misbehaves. It isn't the easiest material to work with, because it doesn't always do what you want it to do. Wood reacts. A board has a lot of life in it."

Tim's work shows a lot of life, too. His pieces weave influences from India, Asia, Art Deco and modernism. He also draws from nature and from the teachers he's studied with. To see more of Tim's work, visit these two websites: www.furnituremasters.com www.timothycoleman.com.

Spike Carlsen is author of A Splintered History of Wood: Belt Sander Races, Blind Woodworkers and Baseball Bats, *published by HarperCollins.*

The crisp fluted patterns on this cabinet are tempered by delicate patterns of tone and texture, the result of Tim's deft use of maple and quartersawn oak.

The Delicate Art of Applied Veneer

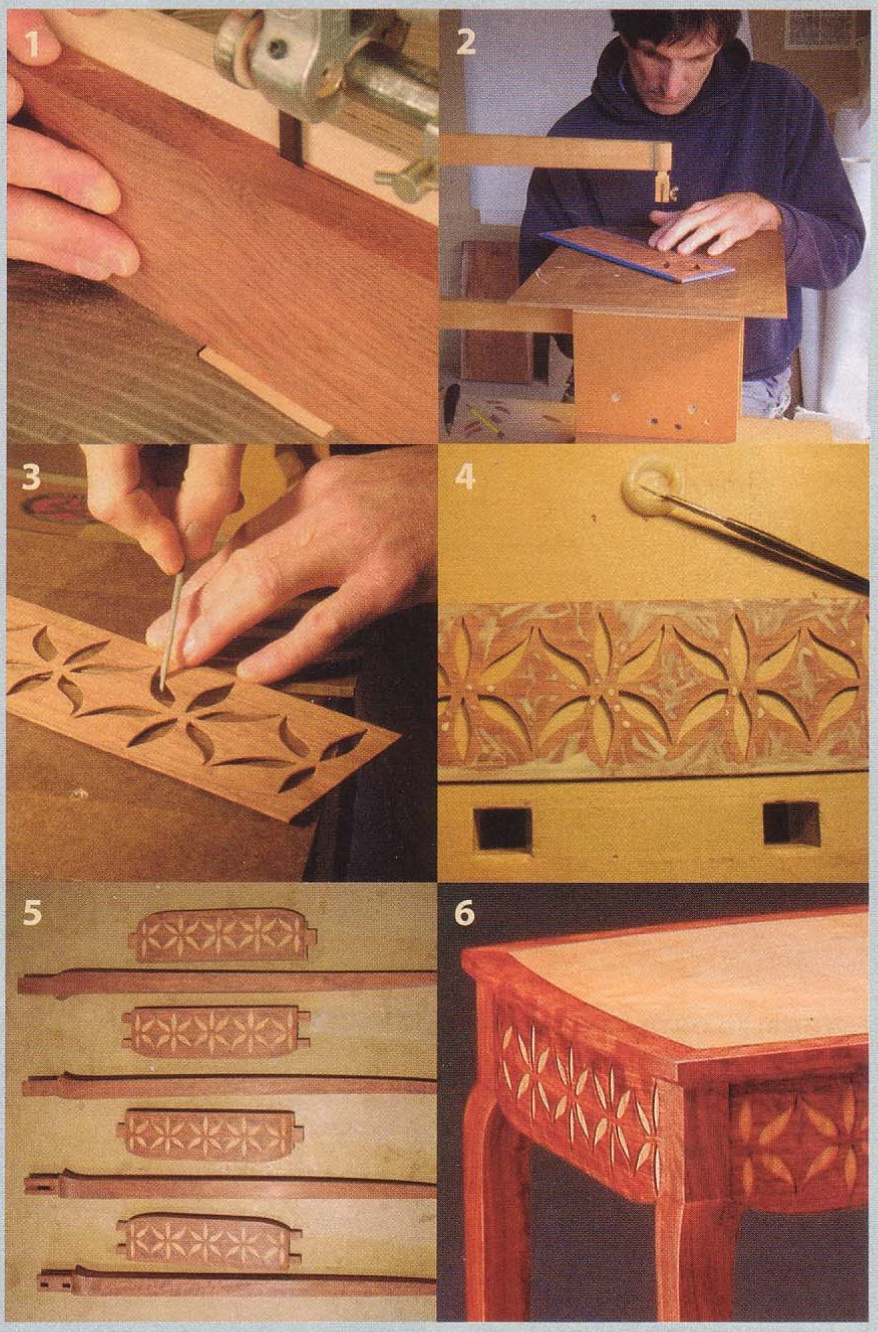
WOOD VENEER HAS BEEN AROUND for a long time; examples have been found on well-preserved Egyptian coffins nearly 4,000 years old. But Tim has developed some rather unique techniques for working with the material.

For starters, he cuts his own veneer **(Photo 1)**. Most commercially available veneers are thin—and getting thinner, according to Tim. He resaws veneer pieces 1/16" to 1/8" inch thick, and then runs them through a stationary belt sander to create strips of uniform thickness and smoothness. Tim sometimes applies these veneers in a conventional manner—to create a uniform surface or in a parquet pattern—but just as often he cuts decorative patterns into them and applies them to the surfaces of his pieces. The underlying wood shows through and the resultant texture and shadow lines create a richly unique look and feel. "It's not really veneering or marquetry—I'm not quite sure what to call it," Tim admits.

Once Tim has determined the pattern, he uses a hand made, hand-operated scroll saw to cut out the design **(Photo 2)**. Sometimes he cuts the pieces out individually, other times he gang saws two or three pieces at a time. He uses small files to clean up the cutouts **(Photo 3)**, and on certain projects rounds over the outer edges to create a "pillow" effect.

He applies the glue carefully and strategically **(Photo 4)**, because any squeeze-out requires tedious sanding and scraping to remove. He then uses a mini-press made from clamps and scrap wood to glue the veneer to the substrate, which is often a contrasting color **(Photos 5 and 6)**.

Though the process seems painstaking, Tim enjoys it. "I've done it long enough now that I'm pretty fast at it. It's almost become second nature."



1. The process begins by resawing 3/32" thick veneer from solid wood, and then running each piece through a stationary belt sander to create 1/16" thick strips.
2. Tim cuts out patterns using a unique saw called a "marquetry donkey," which he built based on plans from an old French woodworking catalog. To operate the donkey, Tim bounces its lower arm by hand.
3. Small files are used to clean the edges of the sawn out pattern. Tim sometimes bevels the outer edges, to create a pillow effect.
4. Glue is strategically dabbed on to avoid squeeze out around the pattern's inner parts, where it is especially difficult to remove.
5. The pattern is glued onto the substrate—table aprons in this case, with a piece of contrasting veneer sandwiched in between.
6. The thick, cut-out veneer adds decorative patterns, deep shadow lines and texture to the completed table.