



Applied fretwork adds color and texture

USE THIS INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUE TO DRAW ATTENTION TO OVERLOOKED SPACES

BY TIMOTHY COLEMAN

I am fascinated with patterns. I see them everywhere—in nature, on fabrics, on buildings, on playing cards—and I am always looking for ways to use them in my furniture to create surfaces that have depth and texture. One way I achieve this is to use my scrollsaw to cut fretwork-like patterns in veneer and apply them to table aprons. This technique produces a surprising amount of depth and shadow using a minimal amount of thickness. I also use a contrasting wood underneath, adding even more interest and flair.

The materials and tools involved are few and simple. I begin with veneer resawn to 1/16 in. thick on the bandsaw (you also could lay up sheets of commercial veneer to get the right thickness). I use a handheld fretsaw or a scrollsaw to cut the patterns, and follow with a knife, small files, and sanding sticks to clean up after cutting. Pressing the underlayer of veneer and the fretwork pattern onto the apron involves MDF cauls and hand clamps. This is low-tech woodworking at its finest.

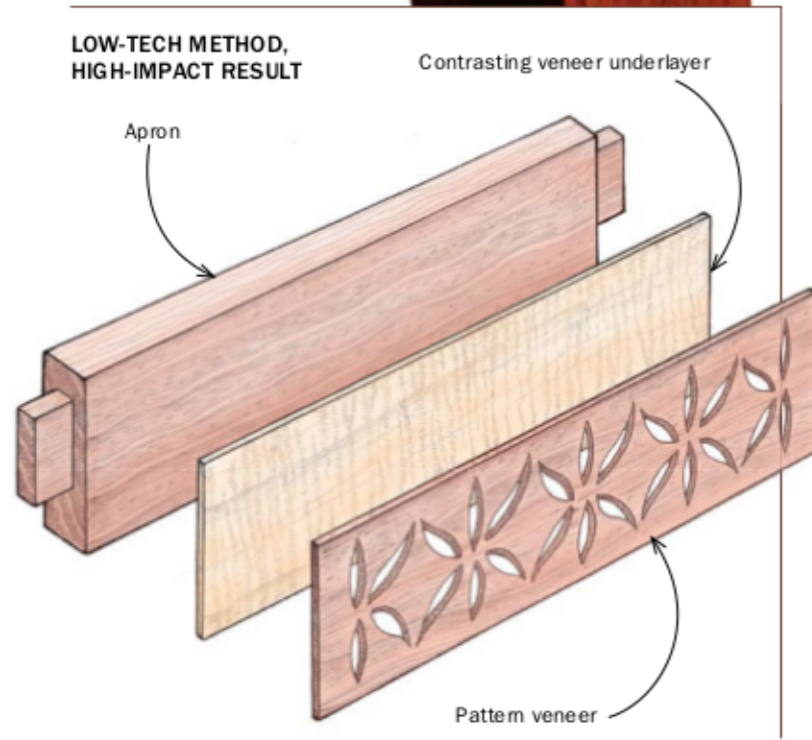
Where the contrast comes from

For the best effect, you want the surface under the pattern veneer to be a contrasting wood. I typically use two layers of veneer (an underlayer and the pattern) to create the contrast. However, you can eliminate the underlayer of veneer and apply the pattern directly to the apron if the apron wood is a contrasting color.

For stability, you should orient the grain of the veneer(s) with the grain of the apron. Using a thick apron (1 in.) will eliminate the need for a



Photos: Thomas McKenna; drawings: John Tetreault



LOW-TECH METHOD, HIGH-IMPACT RESULT

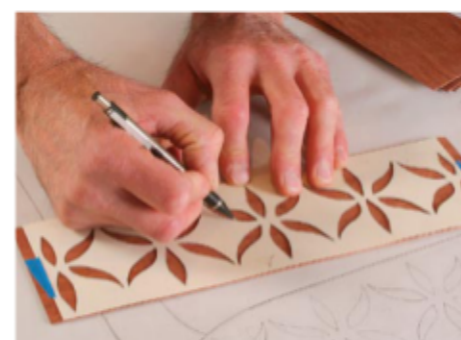
Make the fretwork

RESAW THICK VENEER



Veneers should be just over 1/16 in. thick. Resaw both the underlayer and pattern veneers (left). Clean up the material with a cabinet scraper and sandpaper, holding each piece in place with double-stick tape (above).

CUT AWAY THE WASTE



Use a stencil. Cut the pattern into card stock and trace it on the veneer. Make the veneer (and the pattern) oversize to allow the veneer to be trimmed after it's applied to the apron.



Make the cutouts. Drill holes through the cutout areas to make way for the scrollsaw blade. Cut slowly and carefully on the line. To create a repetitive pattern on multiple pieces, tape the layers of veneer together, and cut them all at once.

backer veneer, which is usually applied to prevent a veneered panel from warping. If the apron you're using is 3/4 in. thick or under, it couldn't hurt to add the backer. One other note: I cut all the joinery in the apron before applying the pattern.

Thick veneer works best

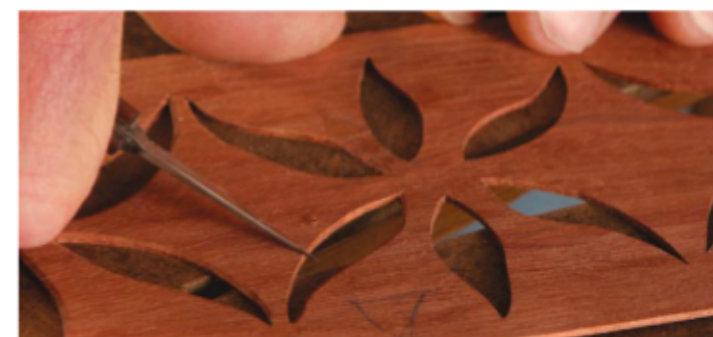
For this technique, the pattern veneer should be 1/16 in. thick to emphasize the layered effect and create a strong shadow. The thick veneer is also easier to cut with the scrollsaw.

You also could glue together multiple layers of thin veneer to create thicker material. Some woodworkers would recommend orienting the plies cross-grain for stability. But I keep the grain running in the same direction and have had success. When glued and pressed between pieces of 3/4-in.-thick MDF, the assembly comes out quite flat. Cut the veneer slightly wider and longer than the exposed face of the apron. You'll trim it flush after it's applied to the apron.

Lay out the pattern

For some people, patterns are not always easy to see, but you just need to look around; they are everywhere. Wonderful

CLEAN UP



Fine cuts need fine tools. Clean up the sawcuts in each pattern using a knife and needle files. Coleman likes to bevel the edges of the cutouts with the knife and do the final smoothing with fine needle files.

Assemble the veneers

CONTRASTING LAYER FIRST



Glue and clamp the underlayer to the apron. Apply an even layer of glue to the underlayer veneer and the apron. Use MDF cauls and lots of clamps to apply even pressure across the surface. Wrapping the top caul in newspaper prevents the caul from sticking to the veneer.



NOW GLUE ON THE PATTERN



Don't be sloppy here. Because it will be hard to clean up squeeze-out on the interior of the pattern, apply glue so the squeeze-out occurs on the outside. Place little dabs on interior elements of the pattern, and finish with a heavier coat around the perimeter (left). Use a small paintbrush to spread the glue (below).



Tape and clamp. Put the pattern veneer on the apron and tape it in place so it won't move when it's clamped up (above). Use cauls to protect the pattern and plenty of clamps to spread pressure evenly across the surface (right).



patterns can be manmade, such as those seen in fabrics or in architecture, or natural, like leaves or plants. If you need inspiration, check out *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones (The Ivy Press Limited, 2001; available at Amazon.com). If you're doing this for the first time, I would suggest a simple pattern that does not have any delicate or thin elements that could break easily.

If you are using a repetitive pattern—one that will appear more than once on a piece, which often happens on table aprons—draw it on card stock, cut it out with an X-Acto knife, and use the card as a stencil on the veneer. Sometimes I make a scrollsawn sample of the pattern as practice, and this can serve the same purpose as the paper cutout. If the pattern is not repetitive, I draw it directly on the veneer, or use graphite paper to transfer it from my sketchbook to the veneer.

The right blade ensures clean cuts

I have used a fretsaw and a homemade scrollsaw to cut patterns, but an electric scrollsaw is fast and easy.

The key to a good cut is using the right blade. When cutting individual patterns, I use a fine, 28-tpi skip-tooth blade; for stacked cuts, I use a coarser 20-tpi blade. The skip-tooth arrangement helps clear the chips from the thicker workpiece.

I aim to saw the pattern right on the line, but any deviations

can be cleaned up afterward using a carving knife and fine files.

Use care when gluing the pattern to the substrate

Take a deep breath and approach this step carefully. I use Titebond II as the adhesive or Titebond Extend for a bit longer open time. Before applying the underlayer of veneer, sand the apron surface smooth.

I use a vacuum veneer press for much of my veneer work, but clamps and cauls work fine for a small surface. Apply a uniform coat of glue on the underlayer veneer, place it on the apron, and put the sandwich between two 3/4-in.-thick MDF cauls. After the glue dries, lightly sand the underlayer, then glue the pattern veneer *carefully* onto the apron, using blue tape to keep it in place. Put the sandwich between the cauls and clamp it up.

Once the assembly comes out of the clamps, trim the veneer layers flush to the apron, and refine the surface with a light scraping and sanding with P220- and P320-grit paper.

When applying a finish, put on light coats to prevent pooling inside the cutouts. To reach tight spots, use a fine, narrow brush.

Tim Coleman makes furniture in western Massachusetts.

Trim everything flush



Scrape the top and bottom. Coleman uses a cabinet scraper to bring the veneer edges flush with the apron edges (above), and a sharp chisel to trim the ends of the veneer (right).

