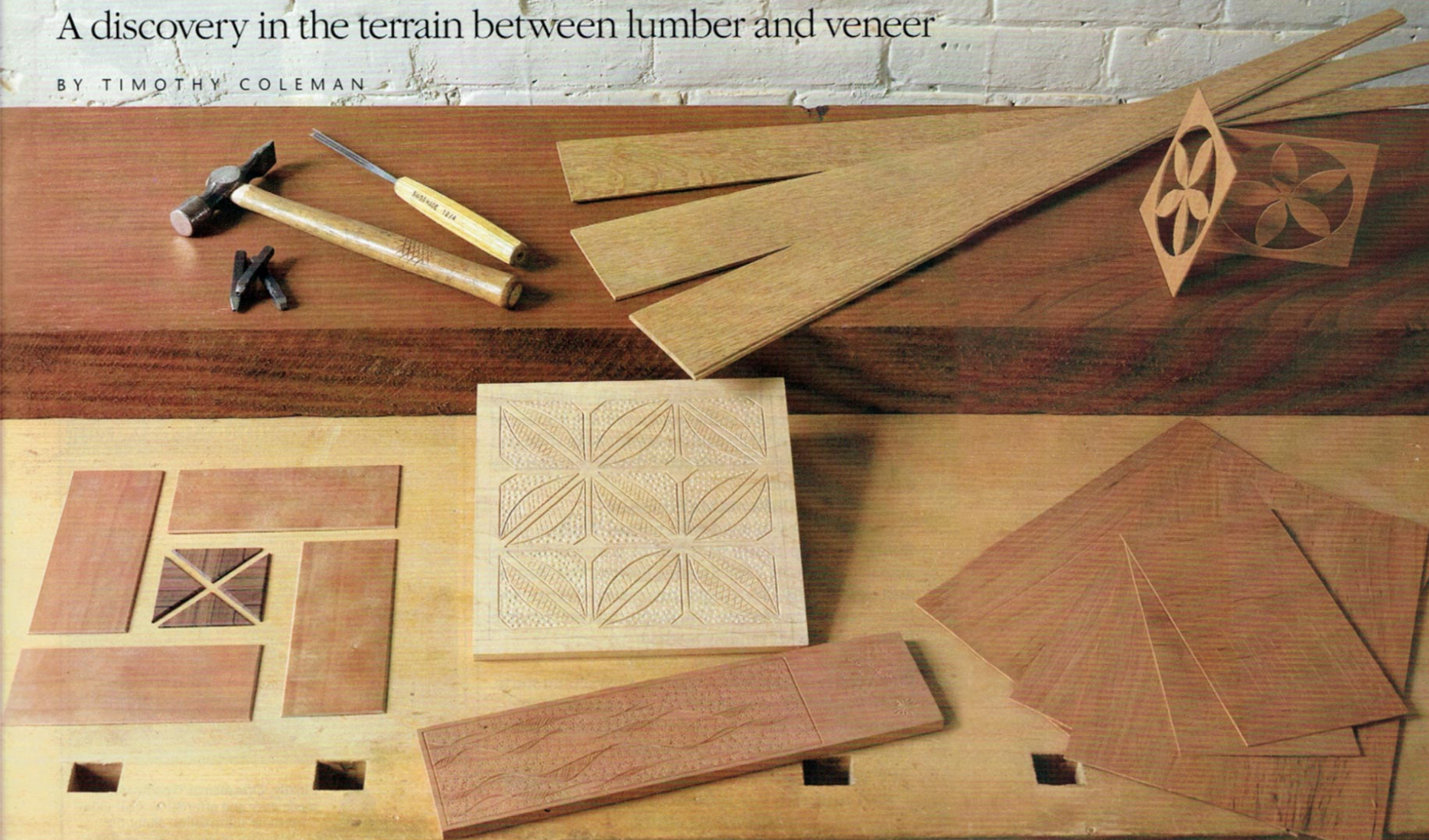


Thin Wood: Flexible Decoration

A discovery in the terrain between lumber and veneer

BY TIMOTHY COLEMAN



Breaking the veneer barrier. Seeking a substance with the stability of veneer and the texturing potential of solid wood, Tim Coleman bandsaws thick veneer and then carves it, stamps it, bevels its edges and builds it up in layers. He calls it thin wood. (The two carved pieces above are thicker practice boards.)

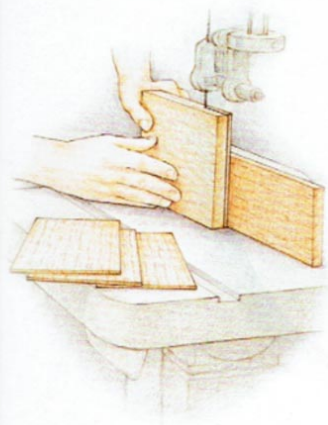
*f*or years I walked the border between veneer and solid wood. On one side there was veneer, with its decorative possibilities and its obedient stability, and on the other side there was solid wood, a bit unruly, but more substantial and willing to be shaped and carved. Like many other furniture makers both past and present, I found myself thinking of veneer and solid wood as completely different materials. I was increasingly frustrated by the limitations each imposed. It took a simple revelation for me to see that there was a strip of territory where these two met, where I could bend the rules of each to my advantage. I call it thin wood, and it enabled me to build and decorate the three cabinets on these pages in ways I couldn't have with either solid wood or commercial veneer.

THIN WOOD IS THICK VENEER

Working with solid wood can feel like sculpting. I can make variations in the thickness of adjoining parts, cut deeply into it, shape it with cutting tools. I can practically mold it into shape. But it certainly has limitations. Its expansion and contraction virtually requires frame-and-panel construction on



Some light tiling. With their beveled edges, the door tiles give the impression of solid-wood parquet work, yet they are veneer and are glued to a stable plywood substrate.



Slice mine thick, please. Using a bandsaw, Coleman cuts solid wood into the sheets of thick veneer that enable him to add textures to his cabinets that are unusual in veneered work.

broad surfaces, which can be a real problem when I am trying to give a cabinet a delicate, finely decorated appearance. Enter veneer. With veneer I can spread my wings. I can explore constructions and surface decorations that break the rules of solid wood. I can juxtapose parts to create a parquet, cut marquetry designs, inlay pieces. It is a very liberating way to work. But veneer has its own drawbacks, tying me down to two-dimensional surfaces and forfeiting the rich texturing obtainable with solid wood.

As a student I learned how to slice veneer from solid wood on the bandsaw. At $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch thick, this shop-sawn veneer is considerably heavier than paper-thin commercial veneer, yet, in most cases, still a very stable material. It was while handling some sheets of bandsawn veneer and feeling how substantial they were that I realized their extra thickness was all I needed to get the best of both solid wood and veneer. It occurred to me I might bevel the edges and work it like tiles, perhaps carve into it, even lay it over another surface, all this with the added advantage of stability. Seeing this material as thin wood rather than as veneer was the simple realization that opened up a whole new set of possibilities in my work.

BEVELING FOR EMPHASIS

Disappointment was the mother of invention in my three-tiered cabinet in cherry and morado (see photo at left). The disappointment was in response to an earlier cabinet whose surfaces I had decorated with veneered parquet work. I had cut a

A marriage of materials. Made of thick veneer and solid parts from the same planks, this cherry and morado cabinet lies between traditional veneered and solid-wood pieces.



Extra texture. Thick-sawn veneer on the cabinet's doors and side panels affords enough depth for a stamped and shallowly carved pattern. The veneer's stability made it possible to dispense with frame-and-panel construction on the upper case.



sheet of curly cherry veneer into rectangular pieces and laid them up on the cabinet so the grain of adjacent pieces ran perpendicularly to one another. My aim was to create a strong pattern of contrasting panels, but in the end the impact wasn't strong enough. If only I could have accentuated the separation between the pieces.

Several years passed before thin wood gave me the solution. In this three-tiered cabinet I realized I could treat the parquet-work pieces like tiles. By working each piece individually and beveling the edges, I created a mosaic of clearly defined geometric shapes. I used thick veneer in both cabinets, but in the later cabinet I treated it like thin wood, taking advantage of a bit of thickness in the material to create a play of lines and shadows that clearly differentiate the parts in the pattern. Shadows are generally the domain of solid wood pieces, while graphic patterns are more the realm of veneered pieces. With thin wood, I was able to create both shadows and a strong graphic pattern.

CARVING INTO VENEER

I liked the dramatic effect of lines in the three-tiered cabinet and I thought, why not more lines? How about a pattern made up entirely of carved lines? I could see that thin wood would give me just enough material to make shallow cuts and avoid going through to the substrate. The pattern I settled on, in the cabinet in the photo on p. 25, is made up of lines carved with a V-parting tool and a background which is stamped with thousands of tiny letter O's.

I have a pile of steel number and letter stamps which I found in the building where I have my studio. I discovered



Stripes that stand out. Coleman gave this cabinet a tactile and visual punch by applying tapered white oak strips that stand proud of the brown oak veneer.

that I could use these stamps to create shallow impressions in wood. I produced dozens of samples that combine the strong lines from the V-parting tool and the rich texturing that was possible with the stamps. From these samples emerged the pattern for the carved cabinet.

It is true that I could have built the cabinet with solid wood, but the delicate pattern seemed to call for a refined cabinet with unbroken surfaces, subtle details and the very precise tolerances that are possible only with the stability of veneer.

A WELCOME LAYOVER

I originally imagined the cabinet in the photo at left as a tall, narrow piece with doors made from a number of separate tapered panels. I thought the brown oak panels would be veneered and the white oak panels would be solid wood, made a bit thicker to stand proud of their brown oak neighbors. This would create a soft shadow and emphasize the separation of materials. In the narrow version this may have worked. But when the customer requested that the cabinet be made wider I saw a problem. Because the pieces are tapered, the wood movement across the width of the solid white oak parts would be greater at the bottom than the top, inviting distortion in the doors that would be both unsightly and unsound. Thin wood to the rescue. The solution was to make each door from one full-width plywood panel veneered with brown oak, then glue down tapered pieces of bandsawn white oak as an overlay (see drawing at left). This way I achieved the stability that was critical to the piece while still emphasizing the variation in the planes of the two materials.

Thin wood has opened up doors to areas that were off-limits to me before. Each use of this material leads me to another discovery. Wooden tiles, mosaics, carved veneer surfaces, thin overlays—I feel I'm at the very beginning of a long journey of possibilities. ■

ADDING VENEER UPON VENEER

Stepped white oak strips fit in dados in the door's brown oak face veneer.

