

Six Steps to a Perfect

Inlay

A little glue, a sharp knife and a minirouter make inlaying easy

BY ROLAND JOHNSON

Several years ago I was commissioned to restore an antique pool table with rosewood rails inlaid with ivory. The high quality of the original craftsmanship demanded that the repairs be of a similar level, a fact underlined by the \$30,000 value of the table. After trying several methods I finally hit on a process that makes perfect inlays every time, whether for pool tables or Federal tables.

Start by gluing the premade inlay to the tabletop using rubber cement, the kind found in office-supply stores and hobby shops. Once the glue has set, carefully cut around the inlay with an X-Acto knife. I use the type of knife that has the snap-off blade sections so I can always have a dead-sharp point to follow the edge of the inlay. The first couple of times around the inlay, take light cuts to avoid following the grain of the wood rather than the edge of the inlay. Once a groove has been established, harder pressure can be applied.

Because inlays are not always perfectly symmetrical, and because you are cutting the outline by hand, mark one corner of the inlay and its corresponding place on the table with an X to maintain the correct orientation when you permanently glue the inlay in place.

Carefully remove the inlay from the tabletop using a thin-bladed putty knife. I rounded one corner of my knife to lessen the risk of cutting into either the inlay or the table while I am lifting. A bit of acetone on a cotton cloth will remove the rubber cement from the inlay and the veneer, leaving a perfect outline of the inlay.

To remove the substrate, I use a Dremel tool with an added router base (see *FWW* #132, p. 36, for more information on

Dremel router bases). A laminate trimmer would work just as well, as long as the opening for the bit allows for a good view of what you are cutting. I use a 1/8-in. straight router bit extending past the base by the thickness of the inlay plus room for adhesive. Use a high-quality bit to ensure a clean cut.

Starting in the middle of the inlay area, rout in a somewhat circular motion, removing the material quickly. If the inlay covers a large area, I set up a small router with a 1/2-in. straight bit to remove most of the material, then I switch back to the Dremel tool as I get close to the line. Rout as close as possible to the scribed line, ideally to within about 1/16 in.

Use the X-Acto knife and chisels to finish the job. Rather than using the scribe line to guide the chisel or knife, cut through the bottom of the waste to break it free. The scribed line acts as a stop cut and allows only the waste to be lifted out. The result is an absolutely accurate outline of the inlay. A skew chisel is useful for removing the waste from corners.

Apply a light coat of yellow or hide glue to the tabletop, carefully apply the inlay, cover with wax paper, position a caul and clamp it down. I usually remove the clamps immediately to check whether the inlay is flush, then I replace the caul and clamps and allow the glue to set. When scraping away the backing paper and any dried glue, move from center to the outside to lessen the risk of catching a high edge. I find a chisel easier to control than a cabinet scraper. The final step is to sand the area with 150-grit, or higher, paper and a block, and the perfect inlay is done. □

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1 Cement the inlay to the tabletop. Apply a thin layer of rubber cement to the exposed side of the inlay. Then align the inlay carefully in the desired location and push it down.



2 Cut around the inlay. Using a very sharp hobby knife, cut into the tabletop using the edge of the inlay as a guide. Keep the blade at a right angle to the tabletop to achieve a straight incision.



3 Rout away the waste. With a Dremel attached to a router-type base and a 1/8-in. straight bit, cut as close to the knife cut as you are comfortable with.



4 Clean up the cut with a chisel. Cut from the routed area into the waste using the knife cut as a stop cut.



5 Glue the inlay. A generous coating of yellow glue lessens the chance of the inlay blistering. An X marked on the inlay and the veneer ensures consistent orientation.



6 Clamp the inlay. A layer of wax paper between a sturdy caul and the inlay prevents squeezed-out glue from bonding the two together. Leave the clamps on overnight to ensure a tight bond.