

Breaking with Convention

For a cutting-edge design, you sometimes have to bend the rules

BY LEONARD C. BECHLER



THE DESIGN EVOLUTION

Bechler sketched a multitude of different drawer configurations until he came upon an asymmetrical but balanced grouping of drawers and a door.

CONSTRUCTION TIP

DRAWER-FRAME ANATOMY



Three horizontal dividers and one vertical divider compose the internal structure of this bureau. Each divider was veneered on both sides with $\frac{3}{32}$ -in.-thick white

oak to achieve the desired thickness. With the dividers in place, all of the drawer frames were constructed with slip joints (open mortise and tenons). The frames use two different size stocks, depending on the overall drawer size.

Groove for spline

Spline, $\frac{1}{8}$ -in.-thick ash

Drawer guide, white ash

Drawer frame, $\frac{1}{2}$ -in.-thick white ash

End cap, black walnut

Vertical divider, plywood core and faced on both sides with oak veneer

End cap, black walnut

SPECIFICATIONS

DIMENSIONS

15 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. deep by 37 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. wide by 35 in. high

MATERIALS

Ash, black walnut, white oak, kwila

FINISH

Liberon finishing oil

While studying under James Krenov at the College of the Redwoods, I gained an appreciation for his flirtation with weights and balances. There are always four or five things going on with one of his cabinets that tend to keep the eyes moving and the mind involved. Thinking of this, I spent a day sifting through back issues of *Home Furniture* magazine and found the perfect starting point for my second project at the school: an apothecary's chest.

Having grown up with a traditional chest of drawers, I had come to detest the symmetry of it. I find the active jumble of drawers inherent in the tansu style appealing and decided to blend that into my design. Tansu chests are similar to apothecary chests in their organization of small compartments but also exhibit a playful form of proportion. Borrowing what I needed from both chest styles, I created a bureau design that was both active and calm.

Once I had worked out the drawer configuration on paper, it was time to make a full-size mock-up. I used large sheets of cardboard for the body and top of the piece and some scrap lumber for the legs. I chose dimensions by referring to other furniture but ultimately scaled them to what looked and felt right.

Next, I used some black-walnut scraps to mock up the drawer configuration on the face of the cardboard carcass. Double-faced tape allowed me to reposition the scraps until I was satisfied with

the proportions and balance of the drawers. Realizing that the dark tone of the walnut would drive the activity of the piece, I decided to use it as the face-frame material.

I wanted the drawer fronts to function as a calming field of color and grain. So my main concern in the wood choice was aesthetic. After laying many samples of wood next to the walnut for consideration, I chose a piece of white oak.

The tone of the pulls also would be a significant and playful element. I settled on kwila because it matched the walnut and had gorgeous end grain. Kwila also is easily shaped by machine.

The carcass was doweled at all four junctures, while the frames were joined with slip joints (open mortise and tenons). All of the frames were attached to the carcass with splines. The top was splined all around its frame, including its miters and pencil-roll edge. I chose traditional dovetail drawer construction with loose bottoms. The top, sides, back, door and any vertical element within the drawer/door configuration all were veneered with shop-sliced $\frac{3}{32}$ -in.-thick veneer. I finished the piece with Liberon oil.

I often heard Krenov emphasize that "furniture should be true and honest and yet catch one's attention." I hope that my bureau lives up to these Krenovian ideals. □

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