

# Give Legs a Kick With Dazzling Inlay

A figured panel with border adds interest, and it's fun to do

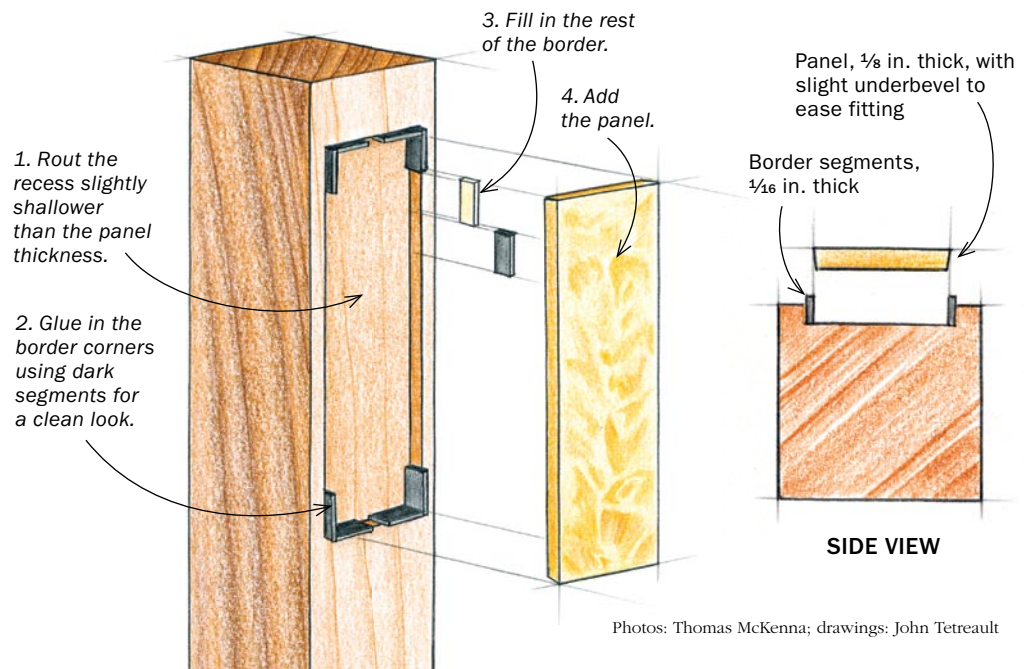
BY GARRETT HACK

Learning to design furniture means building your own visual vocabulary. You can glean these tidbits from nature and your surroundings, but also by studying furniture of the past. I love details in furniture, and I enjoy seeing how past designers used small details to draw a viewer's eye around a piece. The exuberance of inlay on many Federal-style pieces always caught my eye, especially the inlaid panels at the tops of legs or prominent on front aprons.

Inspired by those inlay forms, I've played with panels of many sizes and shapes over the years. These inlaid panels—some with simple borders, others outlined with fun dots and dashes, surrounding highly figured birch crotch harvested from my Vermont woodlot—have become an active part of my woodworking repertoire.

I'll show how you can add spark to your own designs by inlaying a simple rectangular panel in the top of a leg. With the dashed border, this design works well

## 4 STEPS TO A FLAWLESS INLAY



Photos: Thomas McKenna; drawings: John Tetreault



## HOW TO MAKE A PERFECT POCKET

The recess is roughed out freehand with a router and cleaned up with careful chisel work.



**Knife in the outline.** The knifed lines will help prevent tearout at the top of the recess and will serve as a guide for the chisel work. Use a cutting or marking gauge for the long sides (left), and a knife and square or bevel gauge for the ends (above).

with the fan inlay and matching stringing I illustrated in “New Spin on Fan Inlays” (FWW #204). The design is not that hard to make and can be resized to fit almost any location. What’s more, it looks at home on many different styles of furniture. Let’s take a look at the layout and materials first.

### Tips on design: location and material

You always want the orientation of the wood inlays to be face grain—never weak end grain—so they will be especially strong and show the brightest colors. Aligning the grain of the panel with the leg helps ensure that wood movement won’t be a problem.

I try to align the panel with a detail on the apron, say the quirk of a bead, the bottom of a drawer, or even the bottom of the apron itself. Sometimes, though, simply centering it vertically on the apron turns out to be the most visually pleasing option.

I also like to center the panel horizontally on the leg, leaving at least 1/8 in. of material on both sides of the panel. If the leg tapers in this area, the panel should, too.

**Make the panel pop**—You don’t need a large panel to make an impression. The color combination is critical, though, because you want to create contrast; otherwise, the inlay will simply blend into the background. I prefer to use wildly figured



**Line it in red.** Use a colored pencil to mark lines just inside the panel outline.



**Rout to the red.** Use a 3/16-in. straight bit, set to a depth just under the panel’s thickness, and stay within the red lines. Use a spare leg to help support the router base.



**Use chisels for the fine work.** Chop up to the knifed lines with chisels. Be sure to keep the walls of the recess vertical as you chop; otherwise, you may have trouble fitting the parts.



## SLICE AND DICE

Rip the border strips on the tablesaw or bandsaw to just over  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. thick. Then trim them to size with hand tools.



**Thin slices, please.** Use a cutting gauge or a marking gauge to slice  $\frac{3}{16}$ -in.-wide strips of the border material. The strips will break away with ease along the kerf.



**Clean up with a block plane.** Hack planes the stock on a flat scrap board, with a hardwood dowel as a stop. Plane the strips to  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. thick, being sure to keep them all the same thickness so the border will have a uniform appearance.



**Saw segments to length.** Use a saw with a fine tooth pattern. To help hold the narrow, thin pieces steady, use a rabbeted block clamped in a bench vise. Sort the segments by size and keep them in separate containers.



crotch or burl, but even straight-grained wood will work.

**Dashed border is dynamic**—Whether solid or dashed, the border should contrast with both the panel and the primary wood in order to set the two off. In this example, nothing beats the pop of ebony and holly dashes against the light-colored cherry primary wood.

How you divide the border into segments depends on the level of contrast you're after. In general, increasing the number of contrasting segments increases the dazzle factor of the border. You also could add interest by using different-size segments.

### Easy steps to an elegant inlay

There's no "right" way to do an inlaid panel, but there are easier ways to accomplish certain designs. In general, you have two choices: Either you make the panel (complete with border), knife its shape on the work, and then excavate the recess; or you make the recess and fill it with pieces cut and shaped to fit, like a mosaic. I find the latter method to be easier. I rough out the recess with a router and clean up the edges with chisels (see photos, p. 71).

**Make the panel**—Once the recess is made, cut the panel to rough size. As I mentioned, the panel is just the place for some crotch or highly figured wood, the wilder the better. To get just the right look, cut out a "window" about the size of the panel in a piece of paper. Move it around the panel stock to help frame an area with dynamic figure. Mark the outline and use a bandsaw to cut the panel about  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. oversize both ways. Next, plane it flat.

**Cut and assemble the border**—To make the border, rip strips of ebony and holly just over  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. thick. Then use a cutting gauge to slice off  $\frac{3}{16}$ -in.-wide lengths of the material. Clean up the strips using a handplane and mark the top edge with a colored pencil. The marks will help you avoid placing the small pieces in the recess with the end grain up. Finally, cut the strips into segments with a handsaw.

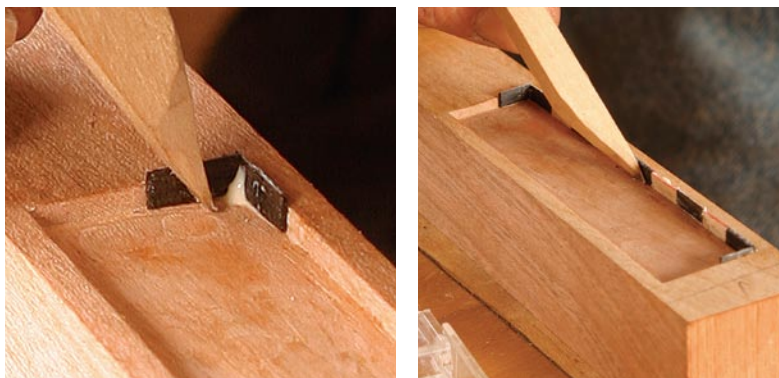
When gluing in the tiny segments, install two or three pieces at a time. Start in the corners and work inward (see photos, facing page). As you near the middle, dry-fit the last four or so pieces to check the spacing. If need be, chop the segments to fit. Small variations will hardly be noticed.

**Glue in the panel**—Once the border is in place, fit the panel with a block plane.



## INSTALL IT BIT BY BIT

Hack prefers to assemble the border piece by piece, in mosaic fashion. It's slow going but allows him to trim individual segments to ensure a uniform appearance. Placing the dark ebony in the corners allows him to use simple, easy-to-hide butt joints instead of miters.



**Start in the corners and work your way toward the middle.** Hack uses the tapered end of a stick to push the bottom of each segment into place (above). Then he uses the square end of the stick to press them against the wall of the recess (right).



**Perfect landing.** Trim the panel to fit using a block plane (left). Hold the panel flat on the bench and make a slight underbevel on all four edges, which will make the fitting process easier. Aim for a snug fit.



**Caul it a day.** When clamping in the panel, protect it and the fragile border with a caul that's a bit smaller than the panel. Leave the clamps on for about 30 minutes.

Plane the end grain first—the most fragile and trickiest cuts—then work the sides. As you plane, cut the very slightest underbevel at each edge to ease pressing the panel into place. Check the fit often.

**Plane things flush**—Once it fits, glue the panel into the recess and plane it flush after the glue dries. Work at a slight skew for the gentlest cut on the various grain directions of the border, panel, and leg.

If you plan to wipe on a penetrating finish, seal the inlay first with a thin washcoat of dewaxed shellac. This will prevent the color in the various pieces from migrating and discoloring the lighter woods or muting the contrast. □

Garrett Hack is a contributing editor.



**The last step.** When the glue is completely dry, bring the panel and border flush, skewing the plane to avoid tearout on any of the pieces, which are running in various directions. A scraper might be helpful for the last few passes.