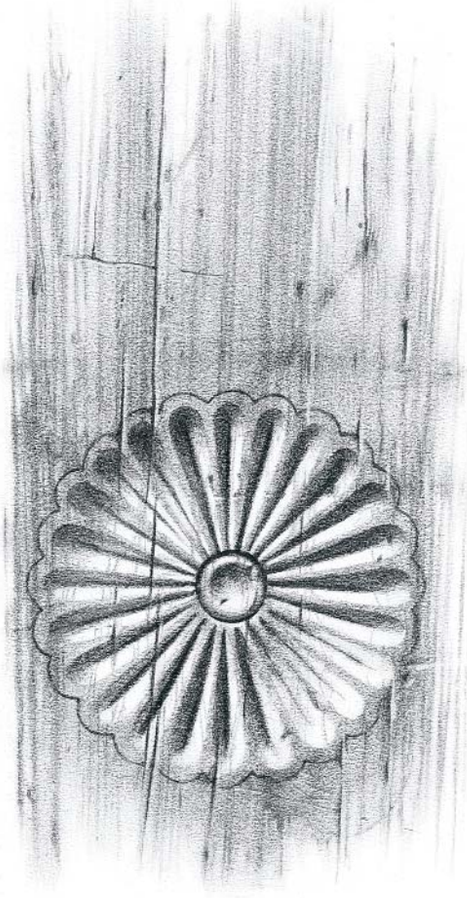
Making Furniture, New Mexican Style

Traditional details influence current work in Southwestern American shops

by Sven Hanson



ROSETTE

The splendid isolation of northern New Mexico has created and preserved a style of furniture that, in its most authentic form, is called Spanish-colonial. In its Indianized, Anglicized and modernized versions, it's tempting to call it Southwestern. But what I'm referring to is the distinct Rio Grande style of furniture developed specifically in New Mexico.

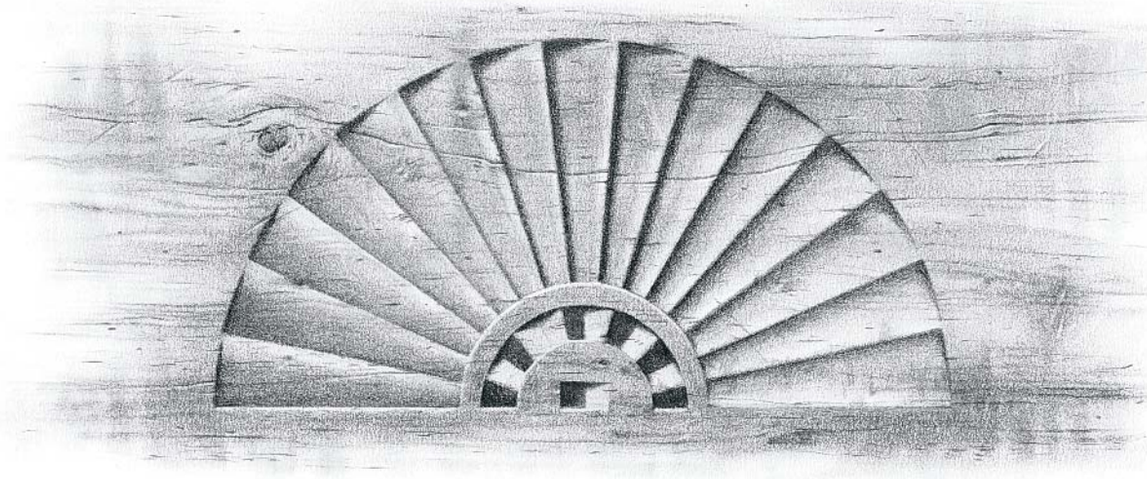
New Mexico's early colonists made beautiful and comfortable furniture, even though they lacked many tools, materials and time. That sounds like many woodworkers' lives today. Because significant historical and cultural influences are at the root of this furniture style (see the box on p. 70), its sturdy components, traditional joinery and painted and carved decoration continue to be used by cabinetmakers in the region (see the photo above). And craftsmen outside the area borrow and refine its details, techniques and finishes (see the story on p. 72). Today's New Mexican style of furniture still relies on a traditional hand-crafted look. And you can build this type of furniture using whatever tools and materials you have on hand.

Common pieces

Historians identify six main types of New Mexican furniture: chest (*caja*), cupboard/cabinet (*trastero*), shelf (*repisa*), chair (*silla*), bench (*banco*) and table (*mesa*).

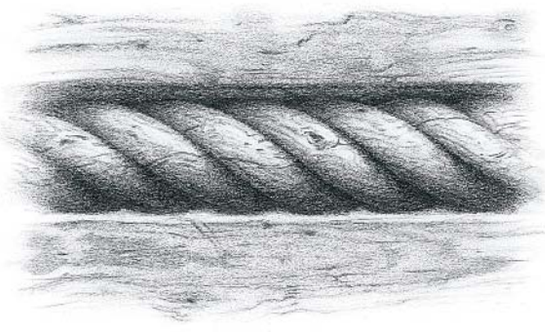
Chest—New Mexico's most universal and important furniture piece was the *caja*

Photos except where noted: Alec Waters



SUNBURST

Southwest cabinets can be big and bold *(left). This* trastero*, or cupboard, made by George Sandoval of Albuquerque, N.M., is modern but borrows elements from originals built in the mid 1800s. Spanish-colonial and Mexican furniture influences are evident in the heavy through-tenoned members, the door spindles and the carved panels.*



ROPE

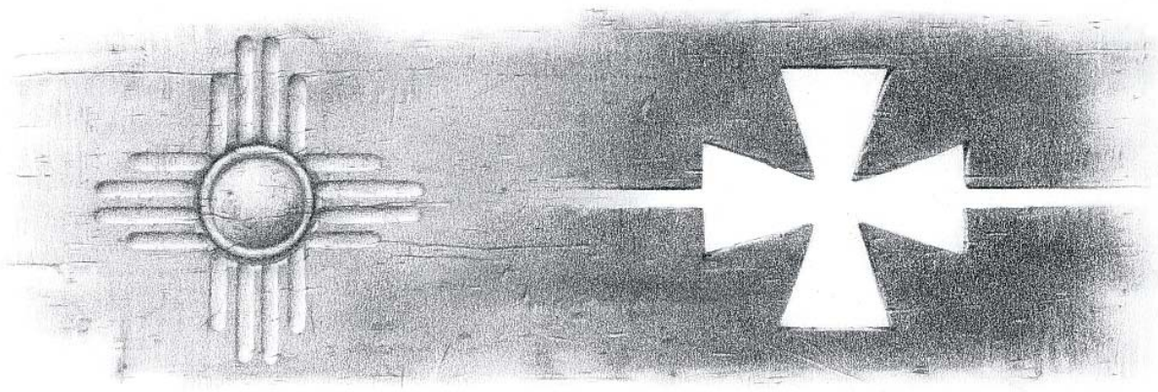
Embossed metal can be used as panels—*After Jim Power traces the template of a thunderbird onto a plywood-backed piece of galvanized sheet metal, he punches around the outline. He then dulls the panel with a Scotch-Brite pad. Power often makes his own pie-safe-like patterns by plotting designs with his computer.*

(pronounced KA-ha), which functioned as luggage, storage, seating and as sort of a billboard. Traditional chests were often brightly painted and/or relief-carved. Common decorative motifs include rosettes, crosses, lightning bolts and bullets. Visible corner dovetails added further ornamentation. For hardware, chests typically had simple hinges along the back and an offset hasp lock at the front. Chests had various names based on their purpose: an *harinero* held the family's grain supply; an *hembra* held a bride's trousseau. A variation is the *vargueño*, a portable desk, which has a trestle base and a fall-front lid.

Cupboard/cabinet—Next most common to chests were *trasteros* (trah-STAIR-os). Usually as tall as its owner, a *trastero* is commonly half that dimension in width (see the photo on the facing page). The doors can have raised panels or spindles in almost any combination. The through-tenon joinery can be wedged or pegged. A headpiece might have carved shells, always with an odd number of flutes.

Because hardware was scarce, doors were often hung on cotter-pin hinges that had interlocked eyelets (available from Dimestore Cowboys Inc., 4500 Hawkins N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87109; 505-345-3933). Door panels can also be made of metal. Early tin panels were made from salvaged food cans, which were flattened and punched out, not unlike the panel that's being made in the photo above.

Drawings: Michael Gellatly



CROSSES

Mortise-and-tenon joinery typifies New Mexican furniture— *After routing rail mortises in two chair posts, Sven Hanson squares the ends of the mortises by tapping an old hollow-chisel mortiser. Hanson cut pueblo steps in the top of the posts to add some simple detail.*

Shelf—The folksiest piece in New Mexico's furniture armada is the *repisa* (ray-PEE-sa), a wall-mounted shelf used to hold plates, books or knickknacks (see the drawing below). Some *repisas* have a row of coat pegs below the shelf and others have a bar for towels or quilts. It's a versatile piece that most *carpenteros* built in their own style. A *repisa* is a practical project that's easy to make. You can add carved elements, such as the ones shown throughout the article, or you can use paint to add color.

Chair—Though early New Mexican settlers owned few *sillas* (SEE-yas) and probably had little time to sit in them anyway, two basic kinds of these chairs graced the domestic landscape: armless and with arms. Neither of them had upholstery. Armless *sillas* were sized to suit a smaller person. The depth at the seat might be as little as 13 in. When enlarged to an 18-in. seat, though, the basic design makes a fine dining chair. The arm chair was rare. Early immigrants thought that only a priest sat in one, which is probably why such chairs were misnamed *padre* chairs.

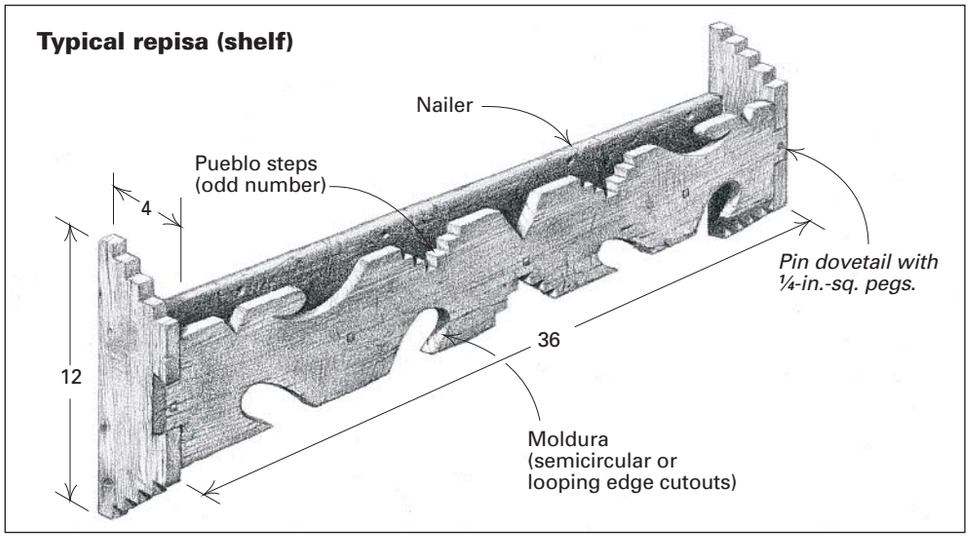
Bench—A *banco* (BAHN-ko) looks like a wide arm chair, and like a *silla*, a banco has a slab seat and no cushion. It has an odd number of spindles along the back and below the seat front (see the top photo on the facing page). Original *bancos* had cutout (*moldura*) or beaded rail edges. As evidenced by the number of benches being built today, the *banco* is arguably one of New Mexico's hallmark pieces.

Table—New Mexican *mesas* (MAY-sahs) were rarely used to sit at. Dining tables were not common. Even wealthy households didn't have enough chairs to go around. The aprons and stretchers found on museum tables would usually block a chair from sliding beneath. Legs and rails were invariably joined by through-tenons.

Tools

Anyone can build attractive New Mexican furniture pieces using readily available tools. Antique tools from the region date back to the late 1700s. Expedition manifests showed the colonists had modest tools: adze, saw, plane, chisel and drill.

With the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, new tools entered the cabinetmaker's toolbox. Twenty-six years later, the Territory's U.S. Army built the first sawmill. Shortly after that, the power lathe was in-



Influences on New Mexican furniture

New Mexico's furniture story begins in 1590. A band of soldiers, civilians and clerics traveled north out of Mexico and settled in an Indian pueblo on the Rio Grande just north of what is now Santa Fe. The colonists adopted the Native American food and architecture, though they remained true to their Spanish language and traditions. They built buildings of adobe (earthen brick),

Bench is rich with Southwest details. *Guided by old New Mexican benches, the author used sturdy and boldly shaped members. Here he hammers in plugs (disguised as through-tenons) over long screws, which secure the arms. The bench can be brightly painted or left alone so the sun and rain weather the wood.*

troduced, allowing spindles to be turned instead of hand-shaped. Improved planes made working more accurate and efficient. Bowsaws made cutting curves and pierced work easy. In short, cabinetmakers became fully equipped. Woodworkers today can use the same basic list of tools, but power tools reduce the drudgery.

Materials

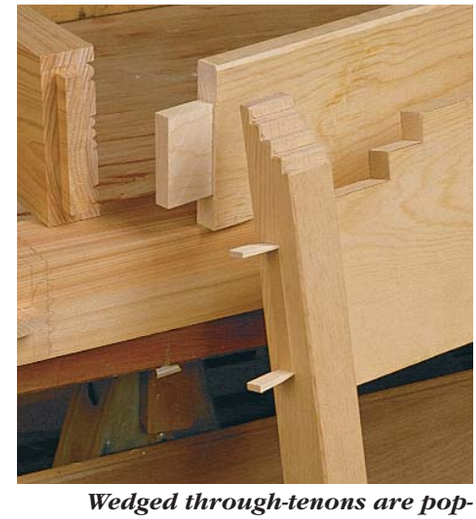
Pine was and still is the most common wood used in New Mexico's furniture. Early Spanish makers, who were used to modest-sized hardwood components and ordinary joinery, soon discovered native ponderosa pine required bigger dimensions and through-mortising to make the furniture sturdy (see the photo on the facing page). To counteract the tendency of the pine to splinter, hard edges and corners were often rounded over.

Today, you can use construction lumber or 1x pine to make New Mexican-style pieces. You can glue up pieces into thicker timbers or plane down the store-bought sizes to create the dimensional variety typical of old work. You don't have to hew the surfaces with an adze to make them look authentic. But consider removing millmarks with a plane or scraper.

Joinery

In early pieces, exposed dovetails and through-tenons were the most common ways to join components. Tenons were usually under-width so that they could be wedged in the ends, as shown in the photo at right. When a through-tenon joint began to wobble, the owner could drive a wedge into the joint, and then another wedge. The wedged through-tenon makes for a strong long-lasting joint.

Although modern adhesives make pinning a tenon to its mortise unnecessary if it fits well, many New Mexican antiques have pegged tenons similar to the ones shown in the photo on p. 72. To further strengthen the furniture, woodworkers built larger stretchers and moved them farther down the legs. You can find a very low front stretcher on virtually every chair and bench, similar to the one in the bench in the top photo. It probably also served as a foot rest, keeping the sitter's feet off the



Wedged through-tenons are popular. *Unlike common through-tenons that have wedges near the middle, end-wedged tenons are typical of New Mexican furniture.*

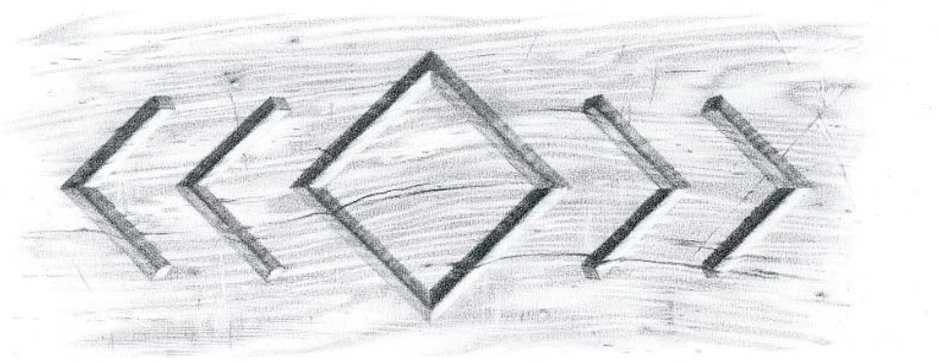
and they furnished these structures with modest 16th-century furniture.

The furniture ranged from Moorish to Baroque, spawned by trade with Europe (via Mexico). The Moorish influence was most prominent. Because the Moors came from arid lands lacking large timbers, their furniture was thin, light and versatile—appropriate for nomadic people. They also used surface ornamentation, inlaid metals, mosaics and intarsia. Their carving was shallow with complex detail. Artists, working to exalt God, used mostly geometric, alphabetic and nature-based designs.

Beginning in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail brought new goods and influences. The furniture began to show beefed-up components and overall proportions, which echoed the architecture of thick adobe walls and massive roof timbers. Even bigger changes in furnituremaking occurred in the 1880s when the railroads arrived. Mass-produced goods and immigrants from "back East" flooded the territory. It was no longer necessary to build furniture locally. Fortunately, tourism became the territory's salvation.

Easterners brought an appreciation of other cultures and news of the booming Arts-and-Crafts movement—Gustav Stickley and Mission-style furniture. The Stickley principles fit perfectly: local material, honest craftsmanship and durable joinery. Under the Mission influence, New Mexican pieces developed even heftier sections and exaggerated projecting tenons. Heavy and plain, this genre is popularly called Taos furniture.

As New Mexico's furniture progressed into the 20th century, it became known as Colonial Revival. It often used bright paints to accentuate more and deeper carving. Native American and Art Deco designs were adapted as well. Work featuring these combined elements is called Pueblo Deco. This style is most responsible for influencing today's New Mexican furniture. To learn more about the history of Southwestern design, see the further reading box on p. 72. —*S.H.*



DIAMOND & CHEVRONS

cold, damp earth floors. Many antique chairs show heavy wear in this area.

Carving and finishing

Early New Mexican furniture carvings were shallow and widely spaced. Later the carving became deeper and more stylized. The painted details followed similar lines. A carver's or painter's options tripled when Indian and Anglo-American motifs were included (see the drawings throughout the article).

For a finish, the colonists often used beeswax. Depending on how the pieces were cared for, early furniture ranges from looking finished to rustic. Today, you can stain, oil, varnish, pickle or paint to obtain a Southwest finish (see the box at right).

Current furniture trends

Recently, there have been three movements, or departures, in New Mexican furniture design: first, cowboy furniture, which has heavy construction and is decorated with the doodads of Western life, such as spurs and cattle horns; second, Native-American furniture, which uses classical Indian decoration and talismans, like those found on fine jewelry; and third, Mexican furniture, which has deeper, more ornate carving and is often done in finer woods such as mahogany. The detailing and joinery is usually more sophisticated than traditional New Mexican furniture as well. For a fine example of contemporary New Mexican furniture with stylized carvings, see the back cover of *FWW* #107.

Though New Mexico's furniture style will likely diverge, traditional joinery and hand-craftsmanship will continue to be its defining qualities. □

Sven (Skip) Hanson is a professional woodworker in Albuquerque, N.M.

A square peg can fit a round hole. *To complete the traditional joinery on this bed post, Hanson inserts wedge-shaped pegs. The beads on the rail were shaped with a handplane for authenticity.*

Further reading

Crafting New Mexican Furniture by Kingsley Hammett. Red Crane Books, 826 Camino de Monte Rey, Santa Fe, NM 87501; 1993

Furniture from the Hispanic Southwest by William Wroth. Ancient City Press, Inc. Distributed by Johnson Books, 1800 South 57th Court, Boulder, CO 80301; 1984

Furniture of Spanish New Mexico by Alan C. Vedder. The Sunstone Press, PO Box 2321, Santa Fe, NM 87504; 1993

New Mexican Furniture 1600-1940 by Lonn Taylor and Dessa Bokides. Museum of New Mexico Press, PO Box 2087, Santa Fe, NM 87504; 1987

New Mexico Home Furnishings (resource guide). Fine Additions, Inc., 2405 Maclovia Lane, Santa Fe, NM 87501; Summer 1993

"Southwestern Furniture" by Gary A. Zeff. *Fine Woodworking* #72, p. 90

Southwestern detailing

Routed, colored shapes accent a pickled-oak finish

by Andy Charron

Our client was looking for one piece of furniture that would play two roles: an entertainment center to contain a stereo and television and a glass-shelved display case to house an extensive collection of Southwestern pottery and art. The challenge was to integrate traditional Southwest elements into an airier, more modern piece.

Although Southwest furniture often appears heavy and bold, my partner, Bob Grause, and I were dealing with a small room, so we had to think along lighter, simpler lines. Our client wanted a pickled finish that wouldn't get lost against the bleached-out oak floors. To counteract this, we used accent shapes and colors to add visual interest, to define the style of the piece and to tie the lower and upper cabinet together (see the top left photo on the facing page).

Routing the headpiece groove: The ½-in. groove along the headpiece makes the teal accent strip sharp and frames the upper limit of the case. Routing the groove was a matter of cutting a ¼-in. plywood template with angled steps, clamping it to the wood and guiding the router along. A collar on the router follows the template, so the bit cuts a parallel groove. We cleaned up the groove with a chisel and then sanded it smooth.

Getting the pickled look: Preparing the oak for the finish was a three-step process that began with planing. Next we used a scraper to clean the wood, removing planer marks and tearout. We then used 220-grit paper to sand away scratches and blemishes.

Because red oak has large, deep pores, we leveled the surfaces using paste filler, as described in the story on p. 57. The off-white filler actually started the pickling process because it helped tint the oak to a pale white.

After letting the filler dry overnight, we applied Behlen's white pickling stain, which is not only easy to use but offers a depth of color lacking in some other brands we tried. We wiped the stain on, let it sit for a few minutes and then rubbed it off. The key is deciding when to wipe. The longer you wait, the more opaque the color. But if you wait

***Accents tie this piece together**—To unify the upper and lower part of the cabinet, the author used accent colors and shapes.*

***Making the pulls standout**—Andy Charron made the pulls out of two pieces, so the raised, stained part has more impact.*

too long, you can end up with a sticky mess that's hard to remove and uneven in tone.

We applied two coats of stain, letting the first one dry for five minutes before wiping it off. After 24 hours, a heavier coat was left on the surface for no more than a minute. This way, the second coat provided depth and uniformity of color without hiding the grain or giving a thick, painted look (see the inset photo above).

Adding color: The teal accents on the door and drawer pulls and along the headpiece add a colorful touch, drawing your eyes to the design elements. But applying the contrasting teal and pickled stains without letting them run together required a little patience and a lot of masking tape.

Masking off the groove for gel stain: We began by masking off the area on both sides of the headpiece groove, being careful to completely cover all of the edges and pointed corners. We then used a small foam brush to apply two thick coats of Minwax Frosted Jade gel-stain, as shown in the photo at right. (The stains come in several other pastel colors as well.) Rather than wiping off excess stain, we let each coat sit until fully dry to make the accent

***Staining a groove makes an instant accent strip**—After Charron template-routed a Southwest-style groove in the headpiece, he used a foam applicator to dab on a coat of Minwax Frosted Jade gel stain. Vinyl masking tape keeps stain off the top.*

strip stand out against the white-washed background. We sealed the groove by wiping on Watco oil.

To finish the rest of the headpiece, we simply reversed the position of the masking tape by rolling small lengths of it into tubes and placing them in the groove. Pressing down on the tubes expanded them to close off the bottom and edges of the groove. We applied the pickled finish to the body of the headpiece the same way as the rest of the cabinet. Removing the tape after the finish was dry revealed a crisp line of color.

Accenting the drawer pulls: Finishing the two-piece pulls for the doors and drawers offered another challenge. Again we had to prevent the light and dark colors from running into each other (see the inset photo at left), but we couldn't admit stain into the areas that would be glued together. To accomplish this, we first placed some tape, sticky side up, on the workbench. Next we set each of the thin top pieces of the pulls face-up on the tape. This allowed us to stain and oil the front and edges just as we had done the groove. The tape enabled us to move the pieces without touching them.

Once the pulls were dry, we peeled them off the tape and glued them to the handles. We wiped pickling stain on the body of the pulls to finish them like the case. We didn't bother masking off the accent pieces; we just wiped off excess stain with a clean cloth before it was dry.

The final finish: To get the hand-crafted look common to Southwest furniture, we rubbed several coats of Watco oil over the carcase, drawers and doors. A topcoat of paste wax gives the cabinet a soft glow. □

Andy Charron writes about woodworking and runs a cabinetmaking shop in Red Bank, N.J.

Inset photo: courtesy of Einrosia Photography