

Arts and Crafts

74 FINE WOODWORKING

Dress Up Any Window with Period Trim

Arts-and-Crafts, Federal and Victorian treatments made in the shop

BY MARIO RODRIGUEZ

hen it comes to windows, most homeowners, even woodworkers, don't put much thought or effort into the window trim. Trimwork is usually the final phase of construction and renovation projects, so it often bears the brunt of last-minute cost cutting. Workers settle for a bland 3-in. clamshell molding from the lumberyard. But once the job is completed, the trim actually comes under the closest scrutiny. As the focal point of a room, windows offer the perfect opportunity to showcase your woodworking skills. A distinctive period trim made in the shop begs to be noticed, not overlooked.

When I'm lucky enough to find old homes with original window trim in place, I'm always impressed with the unique design and quality. A few years ago, I worked on several New York City homes that were constructed in the early 1900s. The windows were trimmed with impressive Victorian designs that demanded your attention. Although the designs were intricate and seemed like difficult work, a closer look showed me that all the components were easily made in the shop and just as easily attached.

By exploring various techniques and compositions combining shopmade moldings with manufactured pat-





ANATOMY OF A WINDOW





TRIMMING OUT A WINDOW

The first step in trimming out a window is to install the stool. When in place, the ends of the stool typically project ${}^{3}\!/_{4}$ in. past the edge of the casing. The next step is to scribe and cut notches on the ends of the stool so that it fits snug within the opening and against the sash. After cutting the stool, check it for level and fasten it to the sill of the window jamb with 6d finishing nails.



Now cut one end of your casing square and rest it on the stool. Then measure for the intersecting cut at the corner of the window unit. I like a good, visible reveal—about $\frac{1}{6}$ in.—where the edge of the casing meets the window jamb. This reveal provides a nice accent and also disguises any wood movement. When cutting the piece to final length, remember to leave it $\frac{1}{6}$ in. long at the top to allow for a reveal once the casing header goes into place. Tack the casing in place with a single nail toward the top. Then repeat the process on the other side.



The last piece to be measured and cut is the casing header. By simply tacking the pieces in place, you can make small adjustments in the position of the casing parts to close any gaps and to better align the molding patterns. When you're satisfied with the corner joints, nail everything down with finish nails spaced about 10 in. apart. The last piece to go up is the apron. Although purely decorative, the apron gives the window visual weight and balance. The apron's length should extend at least to the outside edges of the casing. terns, employing simple appliqués or using a biscuit joiner—a wide range of distinctive trim designs can be achieved. Each of the designs in this article exemplifies a particular period by using characteristic details to create a distinct look.

The purpose of window trim

The primary and most practical purpose of window trim is to keep out air and dampness by closing gaps between the wall opening and the window. But window trim does more than seal off a house from the outside—it also dresses up a window and integrates it into the room's decor.

Historically, interior trim designated the importance of a particular room. Fancy mantels and high baseboards were used in the front rooms reserved for business or entertaining guests. Simple trim and plain moldings were relegated to the back rooms of a house.

Different periods, different woods-

When trimming out a window, be careful to select a wood that fits the design. Not only is there a cost difference between species, but to be historically authentic, certain designs also call for certain types of wood. During the Federal period (1790-1830), pine was exclusively used for trim. In this preindustrial era, every stick of molding had to be tediously handmade with molding planes. Pine was readily available in large, clear slabs, and it was easy to work with hand tools.

In the 1860s, when mills mass-produced moldings, oak most often was the wood of choice. It was plentiful and posed no problems to the large industrial shapers and molders of the day.

In the 20th century, as the Arts-and-Crafts movement flourished, designers such as Greene and Greene turned to dark woods for their trimwork. They still employed the traditional Arts-and-Crafts oak, but for formal rooms, they chose mahogany and teak for their exotic, almost Oriental appearance. Designers also chose these rich and dark woods for the avant-garde structures of the time.

The wood you select must fit the style you're trying to create. However, with modern shops and tools, strict adherence to period wood selection isn't always necessary. If the trim is destined to be painted, for instance, the choice of wood is almost arbitrary. When you choose, keep your budget, the wood's workability and the period style in mind.

Linear moldings for casings and stools—One advantage of designing your own window trim is that you can customize your own linear moldings. Whether you mill them yourself with a molding plane or router or buy them ready-made from the lumberyard, there are few limitations to what you can achieve.

Because windows are rectangular, linear moldings are the simplest and quickest way to trim an opening. For the past century, most builders have purchased readymade moldings instead of milling them in the shop. These moldings, priced by the running foot, are available in a variety of woods and dimensions, but the selection is limited to a few popular patterns. These patterns are sufficient for trimwork, but for a truly unique look, ready-made moldings can be altered or augmented with shopmade additions. For example, you can add back bands to increase the width of a window casing, as in the Federal window on p. 78, or gang up smaller moldings to create an altogether new pattern.

Another option is to have molding custom milled. If you need a specific profile in quantity, a millwork shop can produce the molding at a surprisingly reasonable price.

The quickest and most versatile method for producing small to medium quantities of molding is to mill the material in your own shop. Using router bits or shaper cutters enables you to create an endless variety of molding patterns on any wood.

Ornaments to suit your style

The use of architectural components is a good way to achieve a distinct period effect. Instead of simply running the molding around the window, the addition of ornaments, rosettes and fretwork turns an ordinary design into a period one. You can use ready-made ornaments as is, such as rosettes (or decorative corner blocks), plinth blocks, finials, corbels (or brackets) and cast fiberglass architraves. Or you can modify them to suit a particular purpose. For the Victorian window on p. 79, I bought ready-made rosettes, but I used a backing block to make them stand farther off the wall. I also framed the rosettes out in a simple mitered box. These additions draw attention to the woodwork and supply a focal point on the trim.





into recess cut into apron.



A strong and simple joint. Biscuits not only align the casing header to the left and right members, but they also offer plenty of strength to the basic butt joint.

FEDERAL PERIOD (1790-1830)

This was the first truly national style of the United States. While it employed symmetry and a classical vocabulary, it rejected the elaborate Georgian style that was popular in England. Some regional expressions of this style possess an energy that was characteristic of the American spirit. Woods were often painted bright, vivid colors mustards and mossy greens.



Decorative appliqués are another simple and commercially available option. But you can easily cut them in your own shop on a bandsaw or on site with a jigsaw. For the apron on the Federal window, I cut the scalloped drapery out of ¹/₈-in.-thick pine and simply glued it to a solid board. On the Arts-and-Crafts window, I cut out stepped brackets to echo the stepped apron. These are small and quick touches that add texture to the work and create shadow lines that draw your eye to the trim.

Options for casing joinery

The most common method of handling the connections between the casing members is to miter the intersecting joints (see the Federal window above). The mitered joint is attractive and quick to execute. But when you use wide moldings (over 3 in.),



A beaded trim. After one edge is cut with a beading bit, the second pass on an adjacent side completes the bead. This bead covers the ¹/₈-in. reveal once it goes on the wall.



A shopmade touch. An appliqué that matches a period design is cut from ¹/₈-in.-thick stock on the bandsaw and glued to the apron.



Tight miters. The first miter is cut on the casing header. Then the opposite end is marked to ensure a perfect mitered joint when the final side is cut.

miters are problematic. In dry conditions, as the wood shrinks, the mitered joint tends to open up. Often, no amount of caulk or filler shoved into the void can conceal the gap. The most reliable way to keep your miters tight is to season your material on site for several weeks, allowing it to acclimate before installation.

Another quick method is simply to butt your pieces together (placing the end of one piece against the edge of another). If the cuts are clean and square, a butt joint gives a nice look.

The use of corner blocks is another way to add substance and weight to the intersection and to avoid miters. Using readymade rosettes or making your own imparts a traditional feeling to the trim without a lot of work (see the Victorian trim at right). As with the butt joint, the ends of the linear stock are cut square and then placed against the corner block. It's a simple method with a powerful effect.

Methods of fastening

Traditionally, carpenters use finish nails to fasten interior trim. Workers countersink the nails and fill the small holes with putty or wax. It's often a good idea to predrill a hole for the nail to avoid splitting the work, especially if the wood is particularly hard or the piece is small.

These days, most carpenters use pneumatic nailers. Pneumatic nails look and function like wire nails, but they are much easier and faster to use.

Screws can add extra strength to parts that come under stress. Whenever possible, I locate screws where they will be covered later by another layer of molding. On the Federal trim, I used screws to secure the edge of the casing to the stool. On the Arts-and-Crafts trim, I drove a hidden screw from the back of the apron through the corbel to ensure that this cross-grain intersection doesn't fail.

Prefinishing saves time

Most window trim is quickly finished in place. But your working time can be shortened and your results dramatically improved by prefinishing your trim in the shop. Molding and trim can be laid out horizontally, stained or painted—without any drips or runs—then easily can be rubbed out, touched up or matched for color.

With a little work, you can replace a bland clamshell molding with an impressive period-style trim. You can even give the trim a tabletop finish before it goes on the wall. Then choose an abbreviated drapery, or even leave the window bare, for a clean, light look. There's no need to hide the trim.

Mario Rodriguez is a woodworker living in Haddonfield, N.J. He is a contributing editor to Fine Woodworking.



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VICTORIAN PERIOD (1860-1900)

This energetic architecture freely borrowed from other periods to create an eclectic style. When this freedom was coupled with the availability of mass-produced ornaments and regional expressions, Victorian homes typically sprouted an abundance of gingerbread decoration, as well as a vibrant color scheme.



Typical of the period, window casing extends all the way to the floor. A beadboard panel, basic moldings and routed bevels create interesting shadow lines a rich color only accentuates.



Wainscoting to the floor. With the base and one side of the casing affixed to the wall, the panel is let into grooves.





A final touch. Biscuits are used to attach the scroll to the rosette, then the whole unit to the casing.