Arts & Crafts with an English Accent

Desk and wall cabinet make an elegant matched set

BY NANCY HILLER

For several years around the turn of the 20th century, an English manufacturing firm, Harris Lebus, produced classically styled English Arts and Crafts furniture that is highly collectible in Britain today, but not well known in the United States.

Lebus was one of very few Arts and Crafts manufacturers to combine the movement's ideal of making beautiful, useful, yet affordable objects with running a profitable business. It did so with striking examples of British Arts and Crafts design, featuring elements that set it apart from American Arts and Crafts furniture by Stickley, Hubbard, Greene and Greene, and others.

For today's furniture makers seeking a fresh take on Arts and Crafts, these designs are a great resource. Best of all, in my view, they are drop-dead gorgeous.

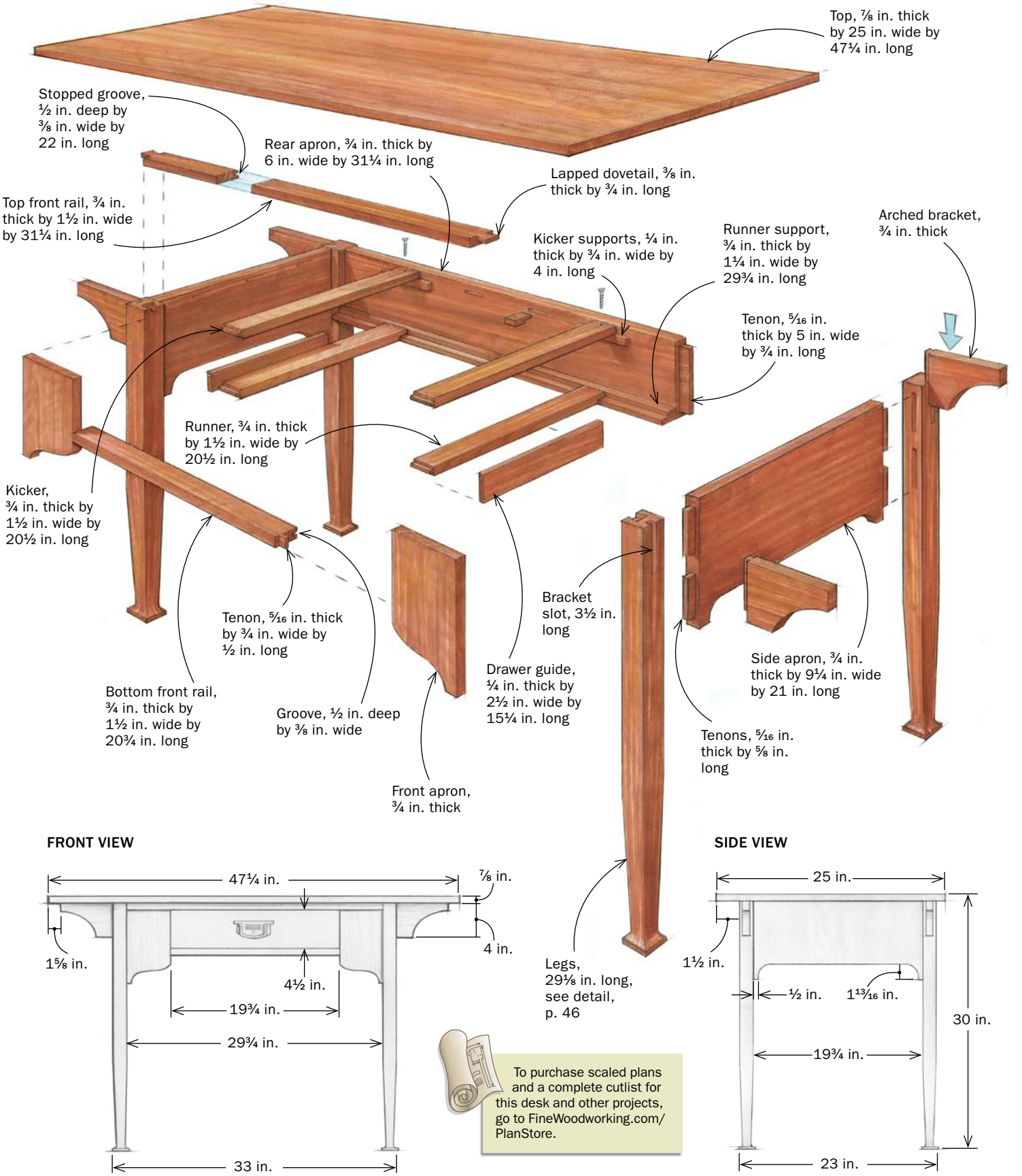
In designing this desk, I closely followed a set of the company's drawings for bedroom furniture, incorporating the square, flared feet and curved front aprons. The wall-mounted gallery is a perfect complement, combining Lebus's signature crown, with its dramatic bevels and exaggerated overhangs, with a simple inlay. The cabinet was originally designed to sit on the desk, but I raised it to the wall to keep needed items handy while freeing up space on the work surface.

Bandsawn legs have flair

The striking feature of this leg is the flared square foot, which is slightly wider than the leg itself. Take care when making the legs and assembling the piece; there is some fragile short grain

Start with the desk

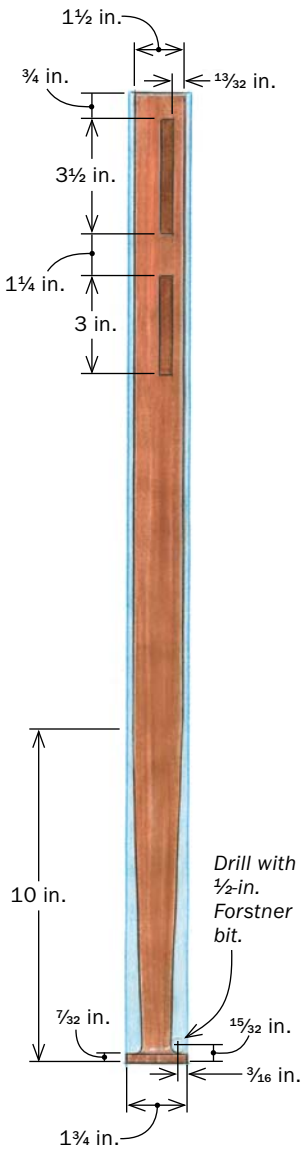
It's a smart marriage of eye-catching curves and straightforward joinery. The challenge is shaping the flared, square feet, but there are tricks for that.



Photos: Steve Scott; drawings: Bob La Pointe

Make the leg from the bottom up

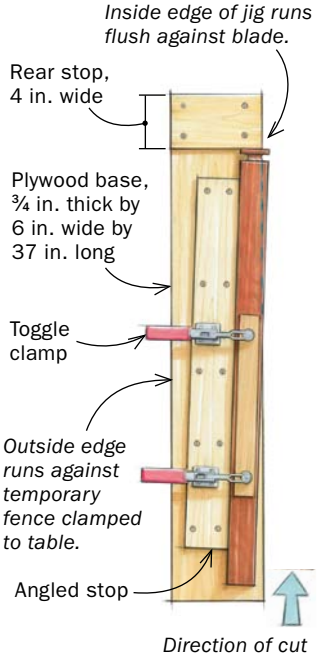
The feet look better if they are flared wider than the leg post itself. So you need to start with stock thick enough to make the foot, trimming it back afterward to create the slimmer post.



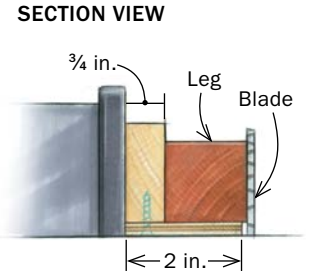
Shape the foot first. *Hiller creates the sharp curve at the top of the foot by drilling out the cuff on all four sides with a ½-in. Forstner bit buried only partially in the wood.*

Taper the ankles with a bandsaw jig. *Align the workpiece so the bottom of the taper transitions smoothly into the tight curve of the foot.*

BANDSAW JIG FOR STOPPED TAPERS



TABLESAW JIG FOR REDUCING WIDTH



Trim the top afterward. *Remove ⅛ in. from each face to make the post more slender than the foot that supports it. After the first two cuts, use a sled as shown to keep the foot off the table and fence, and the workpiece straight and stable. Adjust the rip fence as needed.*

in those feet. Mill the leg stock to 1¾ in. square and leave the blanks a little long so they can be cut off and reused if you make a mistake on the feet.

I use a Forstner bit on the drill press to produce the sharp inside curve where the narrow leg transitions into the flared foot. Mark the workpiece indicating the height of the foot and the thickness of the leg at this transition, and use the marks to position the leg against the fence and under the bit. Clamp a stop block to the fence to keep the workpiece in this position as you rotate it for cuts on all four sides. Drill all the way down each of the four sides, keeping the leg firmly against the fence and the stop.

After drilling, you'll need to remove a small triangular nib of waste on each side. I do this at the bench with a tenon saw.

A short, gentle taper connects the leg's narrow point at the ankle to the broader portion a third of the way up. I cut this taper at the bandsaw, mounting the leg in a simple angled carriage jig that bears against a temporary fence. The cut starts at the top of the tapered section and stops at the hole cut earlier on the drill press.

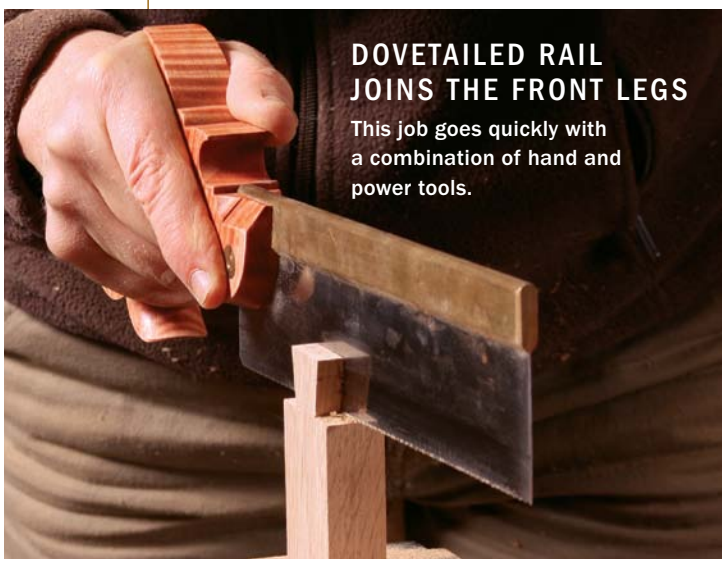
After smoothing these tapers and the transition to the curve of the foot with a sanding block, rip the portion above the taper down to 1½ in. square. Because the foot will end up protruding beyond this main part of each leg, you must use a jig to keep the leg level on the tablesaw. Take care to ensure that your sawcut is perfectly square, because this part of the leg will be mortised for the side and back rails and will determine the position of the aprons.

Curves accent the base

One of the things I really like about this piece is the light

Cut the desk joinery

There are plenty of standard mortises and tenons. Here are some tips for the rest.



DOVETAILED RAIL JOINS THE FRONT LEGS

This job goes quickly with a combination of hand and power tools.

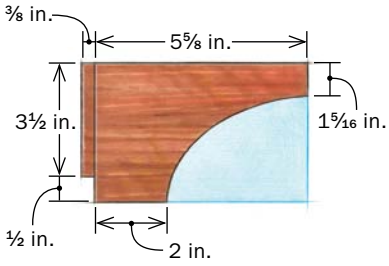
Tails by hand. *Saw and pare the tail, then saw away half the thickness to create a lap on the bottom side of the joint (left). The lapped dovetail rests securely on the mating piece (above), making it easy to transfer the layout.*

Saw and chop the socket. *Align the saw with the layout lines and angle the blade downward as shown to cut as far as you can. Then chop and pare with a chisel to finish the socket.*

SLIDING TAILS HOLD THE ARCHED BRACKETS

A traditional choice, this joint provides a strong connection where end grain meets long grain. It is also easy to assemble once the rest of the base is together.

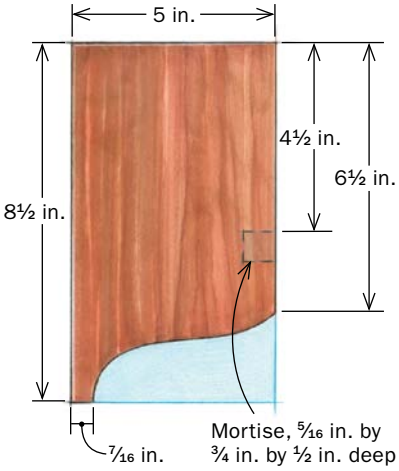
ARCHED BRACKET DETAIL



Tails by router. *The socket cuts are stopped by aligning registration marks on the leg and fence (above). After cutting the tail at the same bit height (right), saw away the bottom ½ in. to fit the socket.*

FINISH OFF THE FRONT

FRONT APRON DETAIL



After the bandsaw. *Use a bearing-guided router bit to trim the rough-cut curves on each apron flush with a plywood template (above). Hiller uses a hollow-chisel mortiser to make the mortise for the lower rail (right).*

Assemble the desk

Do it in sections. *Start with the sides, making sure the joints are square and the tops flush (1). When the glue has set, join the sides with the back rail and the dovetailed top rail in front (2).*

way it feels visually, in contrast to some of the massive, square designs often associated with Arts and Crafts furniture. This feeling comes partly from the curves, starting with the ones you just cut in the feet, and repeated in larger scale in the decorative aprons and arched brackets of the base. These curves are simple to create, but they tie the piece together visually and lend it a touch of grace.

Building the base starts with cutting the lapped dovetails on the top rail and the mating sockets in the tops of the two front legs.

Making the decorative front aprons is straightforward. Each one is mortised on its inside edge to accept the lower drawer rail, but there is no other joinery to cut. The aprons are glued to the legs and upper rail with simple butt joints. Be sure to mark out the decorative shape with the grain running vertically. This avoids short grain at the end of the curve and provides long grain for gluing the apron to the leg.

After bandsawing the aprons close to the layout lines, I rout

Set it in place. *With the aprons and lower rail already glued up, set the front assembly in place. The aprons are simply edge-glued to the legs and top rail. Use a spacer (above) to dial in the location.*

them into perfectly matching shapes using a pattern-cutting bit. The bit has a top-mounted bearing that rides a plywood template clamped to the workpiece. Afterward, I smooth the shapes with sandpaper.

When both aprons are shaped and mortised, dry-clamp them into position within the leg-and-top-rail assembly so you can fit the lower rail. To fit the rail, start by cutting a shoulder on one end of your rail stock. Now hold the shoulder against the inside edge of one apron while marking the location of the opposite shoulder where the piece meets the other apron. Now return to the tablesaw to finish cutting the shoulders and trimming the tenons to length. This is a good time to determine the length of the table's rear apron by measuring between the shoulders on the top front rail dovetails. Add ¾ in. at each end for a tenon. Now cut the side and rear aprons to length and cut the tenons.

Once this is done and the lower rail is in place, dry-clamp the entire front assembly and check for fit. The assembly should be the same length at the top of the legs and several inches down, level with the lower rail. If the lower measurement is too long, trim the tenon shoulders to fit.

The arched brackets are slightly more complicated than the decorative aprons. Each bracket is joined to the outside of its leg with a stopped sliding dovetail. I cut the joinery at the router table, first cutting the stopped socket into the outside of each leg. Next I cut the dovetails, making test cuts to position the fence correctly.

Before gluing up the base, dry-fit the assembly and measure for the runners and kickers that will support the drawer. These components are tenoned into grooves cut into the rear edge of the front rails.

Guides, then kickers. *Glued to the side of the drawer runners, the guides keep the drawer aligned in its opening (above). Install the kickers next; they keep the front of the drawer from tipping downward as it opens. They tenon into a groove in the top rail (left) and are screwed to a support block at the back (below).*

Build the base in stages

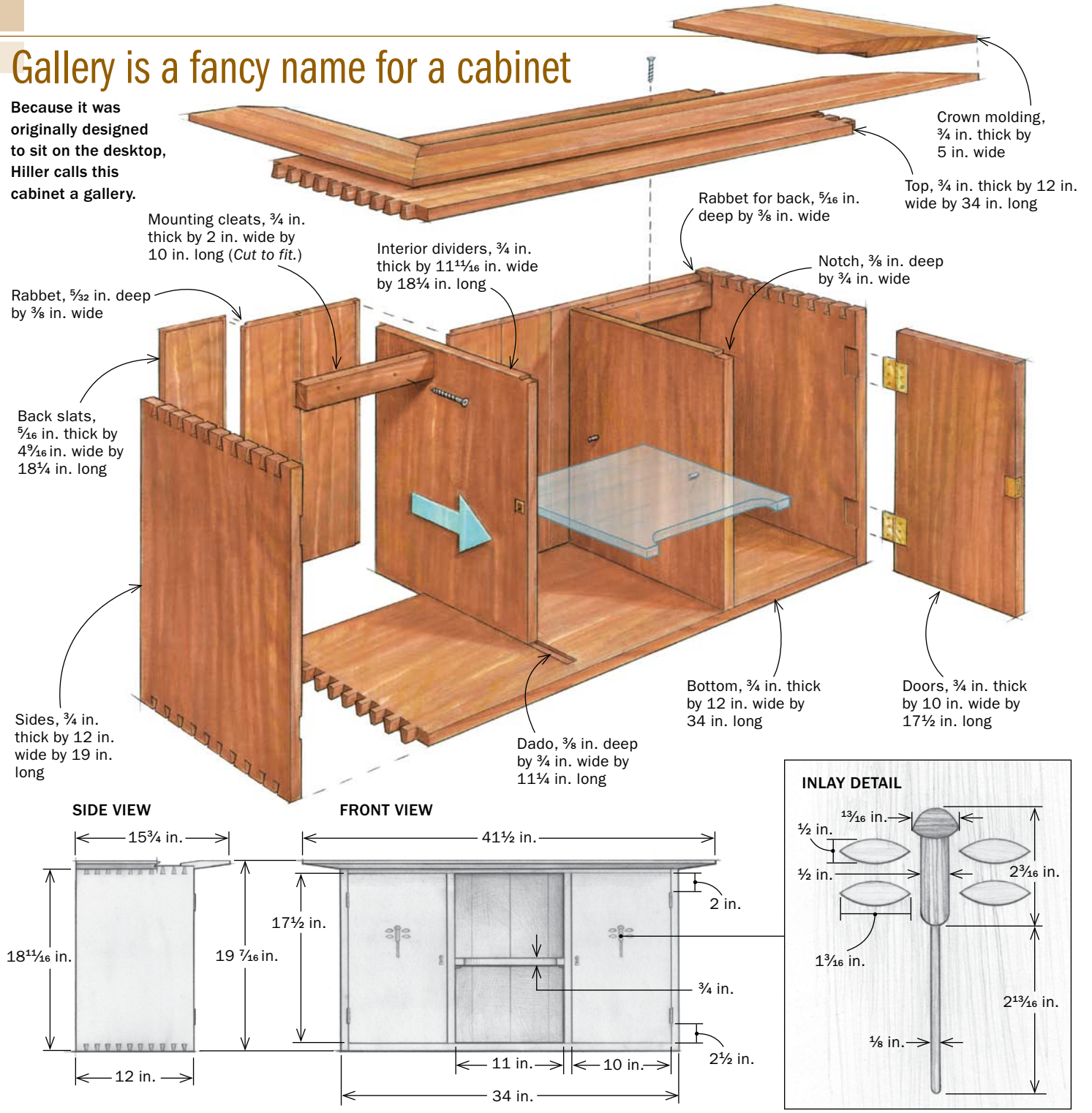
Start by gluing up the side assemblies and then joining them with the back apron, creating a three-sided assembly. Dry-fit the dovetailed top rail to help keep the base square.

The next day, assemble the front as follows: Glue the dovetailed top rail into the legs and tap home. Next, glue the bottom front rail into the aprons; add glue to the outer edges of the aprons, and lightly clamp this assembly in place between the front legs. Adjust the position from front to back as necessary, and when it is perfect, increase the clamping pressure. Once this is done, glue the runners and kickers in

Brush glue onto the dovetail only. *Then tap the bracket quickly into place, ensuring that its top is flush with the top of the leg.*

Gallery is a fancy name for a cabinet

Because it was originally designed to sit on the desktop, Hiller calls this cabinet a gallery.



place, ensuring they are parallel to each other and square to the front of the desk. After the assembly is out of clamps, give the upper section of each leg a light sanding to remove clamp marks and glue, and then glue in the arched brackets. Now cut the tabletop to size and dry-fit it.

Wall-hung gallery is a crowning touch

With its wide beveled crown molding and inlaid doors, the case that hangs on a wall above the desk is a perfect counterpart in both function and style. The case construction is basic, with routed through-dovetails at the corners and stopped dadoes housing the vertical dividers.

After gluing up the case, cut the bevels for the crown on the tablesaw. Then cut a rabbet on the underside of the crown to fit over the upper case and hang down about ⅛ in. Mark the miters for one corner and cut them, leaving the parts overlong. Now predrill and countersink three mounting holes in the front section of crown. Be careful to position the holes near the center of the rabbet's width.

Next, position the front piece precisely on the case, using the mitered return piece to confirm the front's position and fit.

Make the dovetailed case

Quick, strong dovetails. *Hiller uses a two-piece aluminum jig from Keller to rout the long rows of dovetails quickly and accurately.*

Rout stopped dadoes for the vertical dividers. *Clamp the top and bottom pieces together at the back edges to rout both pieces at the same time. If your guide rail is square to the pieces, the dadoes housing the top and bottom of each divider will be perfectly aligned.*

Rout the rabbet for the back and install the dividers. *Hiller uses a ⅜-in. rabbeting bit, set for a cut that is 5/16 in. deep. When skipping past the divider dadoes (above), be careful to keep the bearing from diving in. Tap the uprights home until their front edges are flush with the front of the case (right).*

Drill a pilot hole for the center screw and fasten the front section temporarily so you can mark its opposite end for cutting to length. Now remove the front section to cut the miter on it and on the return piece.

When the miters are perfectly fitted, start installing the crown by fastening the front piece, securing it first with the center screw. Check to make sure the rabbet is pulled flush against the top edge of the case from left to right, then drill pilot holes for the other two screws and run them in.

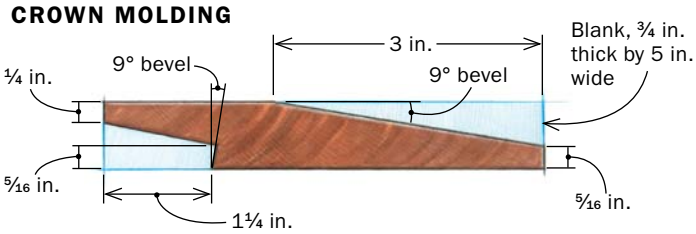
Now mark the back edge of each return section, flush with the back edge of the cabinet, and cut each to final length. Pre-drill and countersink two holes in each return section —one near the miter and one near the back of the cabinet. To install each return, brush glue on the miter and slide the return section into place, holding the joint with an Ulmia miter clamp (or by wrapping packing tape across the joint). Next, drill pilot holes and screw the return section of crown to the case. Reinforce the miter joints with brads, predrilling to avoid splitting. When dry, sand carefully.

Inlay enhances the doors

This design calls for simple slab doors with half-mortise locks

Wide molding is a crowning touch

CROWN MOLDING



Three angled cuts create the crown. *Hiller starts with a through-cut, running the stock on edge past the angled blade to create the crown's top rim (1). An angled cut along the opposite edge creates one side of the angled rabbet (2). And a shallow angled cut frees the waste (3).*

Fit and install the crown. *With all the miters cut, Hiller positions the front piece of crown and secures it with countersunk screws. Then she puts glue on the miters, putting the return pieces in place and clamping the corners with Ulmia miter clamps before securing the return pieces with screws.*

(paxtonhardware.com). For a good primer on installing them, see Lonnie Bird's article "Choosing and Installing a Lockset (*FWW* #162). The doors are simple, but the decorative dragonfly inlay elevates their appearance. Using quartersawn stock minimizes shrinking and expanding across the width, which is critical in this type of door.

I use gouges to cut the veneer for the head and wings. I cut the veneer for the straight body and tail from larger stock at the tablesaw, shaping the curved ends with gouges and sandpaper. The mortises are all cut with a router, except for the wings, which I can cut cleanly with a gouge at the same time I am cutting the veneer.

To begin, lightly mark the dragonflies' positions in pencil on both doors. To shape the head, simply pierce a sheet of veneer with mating cuts from two gouges, using a larger radius for the bottom. Trace around the workpiece to mark the door for routing the mortise. Fit the veneer using gouges to pare the mortise walls and sandpaper to trim the veneer.

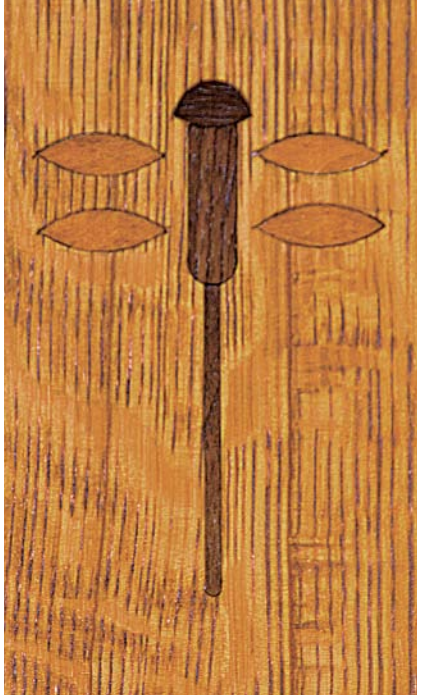
Next, rout the mortises for the body and tail. Cut the veneer from ¾-in.-thick solid stock, ripping it to fit the mortise width at the tablesaw before resawing it to approximately 3⁄16 in. Use gouges and sandpaper to shape the curves at each end of the body and tail sections. You can cut the inlay and the mortise for the wings at the same time. Tape the veneer stock over the mortise location and chop with a mallet-struck gouge until you have cut through on each side of the wing.

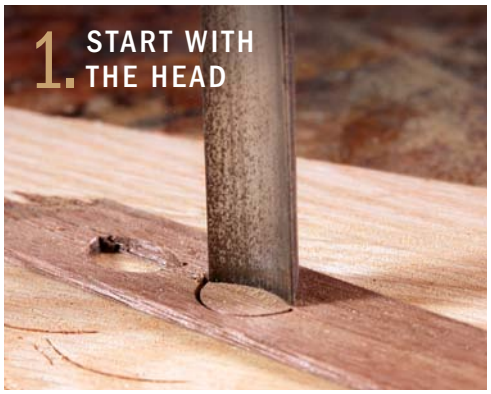
Glue the inlay stock in place, cover with paper, and clamp well with cauls until dry. When dry, scrape and sand flat. □

Nancy Hiller operates NR Hiller Design Inc. in Bloomington, Ind. (nrhillerdesign.com).

Inlay decorates the doors

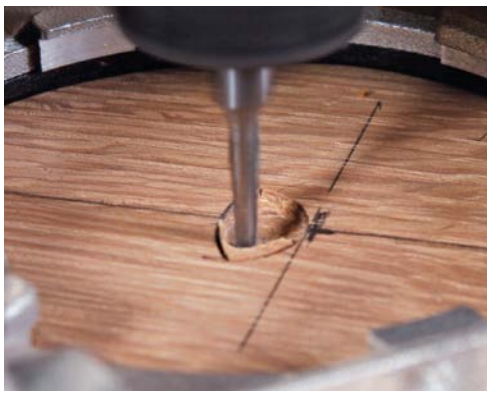
The inlay's dragonfly design is consistent with Arts and Crafts attention to natural forms, and it's easy to create.





Gouges give the head its shape. *Hiller uses a #9-15mm carving gouge to pierce the veneer for the top of the dragonfly's head. A mating cut with a #7-14mm gouge creates the bottom of the piece.*

Transfer the layout to the door. *After marking the location for the overall inlay, hold the workpiece in place to trace the outline of the head. Then tap with the gouges to incise the profile.*



Cut the mortise for the head. *Hiller uses a small router with a ⅛-in.-dia. bit, cleaning up the edges with the same gouges used to cut the veneer.*

Mortise for the body and tail. *Guide the router along a fence for a straight cut. Use a ½-in.-dia. bit for the body and ⅛-in.-dia. bit for the tail (above). Use the same gouge that created the bottom of the head to cut a matching curve in the top of the body veneer (left).*

Step saver. *With the veneer taped to the workpiece, chop through the veneer to create the inlay piece and mark its mortise at the same time (left). Then finish chopping the mortises. After the wings are in (below) and dry, plane and sand the veneer flush.*