

Repetitive-Motif Marquetry

by Silas Kopf

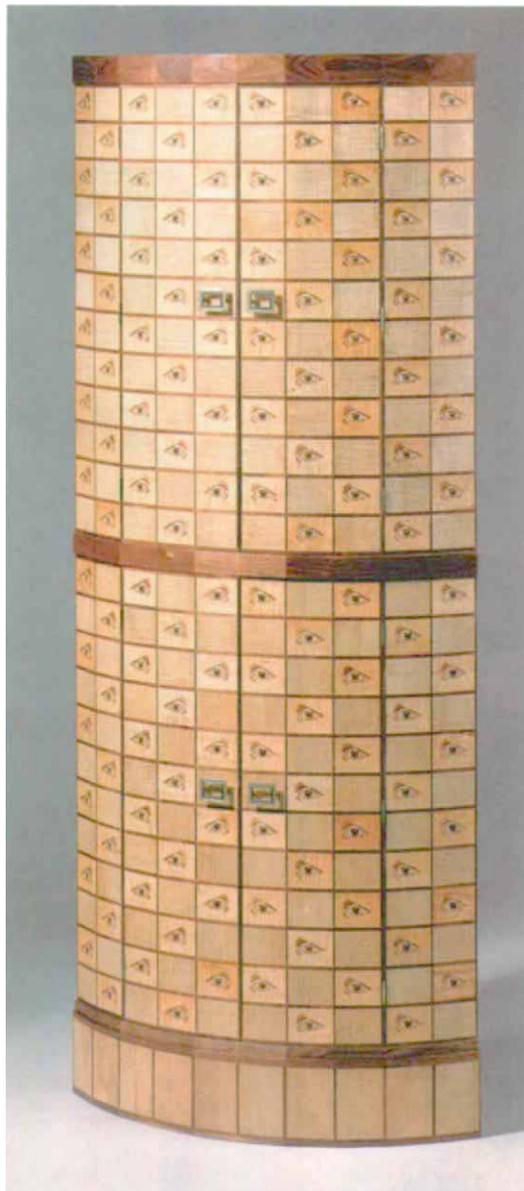
French technique permits multiple identical images

I first encountered Pierre Ramond's book on marquetry about 10 years ago. It was the French edition, and even though my high-school foreign language skills weren't up to the task of translation, I was able to make enough sense of the book to become acutely aware of a world of traditional marquetry technique virtually unknown in America. From the time of Louis XIV (early 18th century) to the Art Deco furniture of Jacques Ruhlmann in the 1920s, French furniture has always made use of exquisite marquetry. For much of that time, the skills for this traditional work were kept alive in the workshops of Paris and at the Ecole Boulle where Pierre Ramond teaches. I was fortunate enough to spend two months in Professor Ramond's workshop at the Ecole Boulle in 1988.

In the 18 years I've been using marquetry in my furniture, I relied almost exclusively on the double-bevel cutting method I wrote about in *Fine Woodworking* #38. With this method, two mating parts for a picture are held together, cut simultaneously and then taped together. This process is repeated until the whole picture is completed. The advantage of this method is that the joints between pieces come out almost effortlessly flawless. The disadvantage is that only one picture can be made at a time (see the photo on the back cover).

One of the techniques taught at the Ecole Boulle that intrigued me most was the traditional method of cutting a number of stacked pieces of an individual species of veneer all at the same time. Then those pieces, along with many others cut in the same way, are used to produce multiple copies of a given picture. Because pieces are cut all together and in a stack, the number of identical copies of a marquetry motif that can be made is nearly limitless. I thought that if I could gain the skill to cut numerous identical copies, I would design furniture around that technique (see the photo above).

To prepare the veneers, I stack a number of the same species into a packet. First I use hot hide glue to affix a sheet of newsprint to



The one hundred and twenty eyes on Silas Kopf's Argus cabinet, made up in batches of a dozen at a time from the same master drawing, create an interesting, almost eerie, effect.

the back of each piece of veneer. The newspaper helps to hold the wood fibers together during cutting. Then I slip a few pieces of waxed paper in between the layers of veneer to lubricate the sawblade, and I add a piece of thicker veneer to either side of the stack to stiffen the packet. Last I wrap the edges of the whole packet with veneer tape to keep it all together.

I take my drawing and make as many photocopies of it as I'll need for all the various parts in the marquetry picture. I cut the pieces carefully from the photocopies and glue the pieces to the appropriate packets of veneers, orienting the grain as desired. To hold the packets together when cutting, I drill pilot holes for brads in the waste near the cut line but out of the saw's way. Then I drive brads flush with the top surface, flip the packet over, clip the brads off slightly proud and peen them flush.

I cut much of my marquetry on a chevalet, the traditional tool for the job, which dates from the 18th century. The beauty of the machine is that it will keep the sawblade in exactly the same axis throughout the length of the stroke. Also, its stroke is about 4 in.; a modern scroll saw's stroke is only ½ in. or so. When I'm cutting the picture pieces out, I just "erase" the line around the piece, taking care not to cut into the piece, which would create a gap, and not cutting wide of the line, which would cause the picture to be too tight, perhaps not fitting at all.

After cutting out all the picture parts, I cut out the background, making sure the sawkerf stays on the inside. Then I use hide glue to attach a piece of paper to what will be the front of the marquetry picture. I spread hot hide glue against this paper background and begin to place the picture parts into this "frame," working from the outside in. Once the glue dries, I sand any excess off the back side. The marquetry is now ready for gluing to the groundwork. □

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