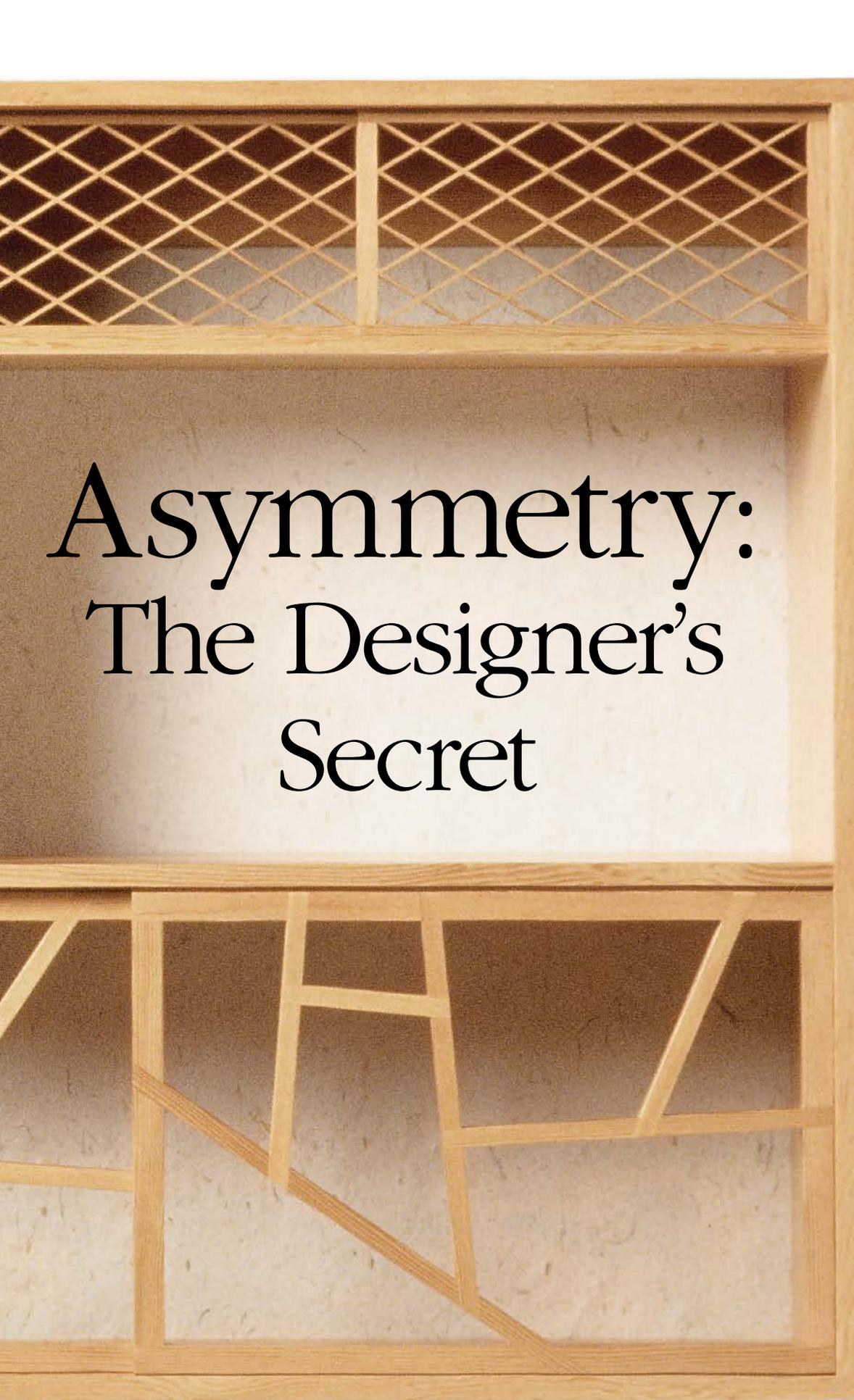
A photograph of a wooden cabinet. The cabinet door is on the left, featuring a complex, repeating lattice pattern made of curved wooden strips. The interior of the cabinet is visible, showing a light-colored wall and a shelf. On the right side of the cabinet, there is a side panel with a geometric pattern of straight wooden strips. The overall design is modern and artistic.

Use this dynamic effect to  
add life to your furniture

**BY JONATHAN BINZEN**



# Asymmetry: The Designer's Secret

If you open a history of world furniture and leaf all the way through from Ancient Egypt to the present day, you'll find examples of perfect symmetry on nearly every page. In furniture—as well as in buildings and cars, toasters and tweezers—we almost always create designs based on bilateral symmetry: If you draw a line down the center of the object, everything to one side of the line is mirrored on the other side.

Perfect symmetry is the most direct way to achieve a gratifying visual balance in a design. Its appeal is likely wired into us—our faces and bodies, after all, are examples of bilateral symmetry, as are the plants and animals that surround us.

Because we're so conditioned to see symmetry, anything asymmetrical immediately commands our attention. In furniture, too, asymmetry can draw the eye. Too much, though, can make a piece simply look a mess.

The trick is to use asymmetry sparingly, and to find ways of establishing a visual balance without complete symmetry. This might be done by containing an asymmetrical pattern within a symmetrical frame; by creating a strongly symmetrical piece with just one or two asymmetrical elements; or by balancing the visual weight of asymmetrical elements. Here we'll show you a variety of successful strategies furniture makers use to elevate their designs through asymmetry.

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**Leaving symmetry behind.**  
*With its irregular partitions, variety of lattice patterns, and organic rice-paper back, Michael Hurwitz's wall cabinet illustrates the power of asymmetry.*

## Form

Some furniture makers apply asymmetry to the entire shape of a piece. Beware: These unconventional structures often require innovative solutions to joinery as well as to door and drawer installations.



Photo: George Erml

Soon after **George Nakashima** set up shop as a furniture maker in Pennsylvania in the early 1940s, he began using live-edged planks in his pieces. In tables and chests he would pair the often wildly asymmetrical slabs with simple turned legs or with understated, rectilinear bases and carcasses. Trained as an architect, Nakashima had worked for several years in Japan, and his live-edge furniture designs echo the sparing use of raw branches among planed timbers in traditional Japanese interiors. This extraordinary Windsor settee blends Nakashima's Japanese heritage with his reverence for a traditional Western furniture style.

**Timothy Philbrick** designed this two-drawer hall table, he says, "by taking the forms of a very curvy Louis XV desk and pulling them around" until he found a pleasing asymmetry. Philbrick achieves a visual balance by pairing a long, shallowly bowed drawer with a shorter drawer that has a rapid S-curved shape. Philbrick made swelling, S-curved side and back aprons as well, though none of the curves are quite the same. By keeping the curves and contrasts balanced and subtle, Philbrick created a piece that feels both classical and slightly subversive.



Photo: Courtesy of Timothy Philbrick

**Japanese tansu cabinets.** Although the layout of doors and drawers was generally uniform, Japanese makers strayed from symmetry when function required it.



## Asymmetry through the ages

Asymmetrical furniture designs appear occasionally in many cultures, but most notably in Japan, where asymmetry is an essential element of the national aesthetic. The masterful balancing of asymmetrical components has been a hallmark of Japanese gardens, buildings, graphic arts, and furniture for many centuries. Whenever a vogue for asymmetry has arisen in Western furniture, the influence can often be traced back to the East.

Japanese tansu—portable storage cabinets—sometimes have an asymmetrical array of doors and drawers, which is both functional and pleasing to the eye (see photo, left).

**Peter Shepard** is typically drawn to symmetry and classical proportioning in his furniture. But when a customer asked him to design a buffet and said he wanted it to be asymmetrical, Shepard agreed to try. Shepard's design, based on the classic golden rectangle, balances a stack of four bow-front drawers with a pair of doors below two flat-front drawers. The four drawer fronts bow outward, adding more visual weight. To help tie the composition together, Shepard echoed the bowed fronts with an outward curve in the front edge of the top. He also cock-beaded all the drawer fronts, establishing a visual link between the curved drawers and the flat ones. By the way, the inlay in the top is marble.



Photo: Dean Powell



Photo: Michael Fortune

**Michael Fortune's** asymmetrical nightstands were built to flank a bed. Fortune says he frequently combines playful asymmetrical shapes to produce a balanced, symmetrical-feeling design. In these nightstands, to provide a visual counterweight to the asymmetrically rising arc of the back, Fortune curved the lower edge of the door so it sweeps in the other direction.

Most Chinese furniture is symmetrical in overall shape, but one prominent exception is root furniture, the practice of fashioning stools, chairs, and tables from the branches, trunks, or roots of trees (see photo, right), showing a reverence for nature. Echoes of such rustic pieces can be glimpsed in the work of Western designers from Thomas Chippendale to George Nakashima.

Cracked ice is another influential instance of asymmetry in Chinese design. A fractured pattern often found in Chinese ceramic glazes, it is also seen in furniture as wooden latticework filling window and door frames (see photo, next page). Western furniture makers adopted cracked-ice patterns as early as the



**Deep roots in Asia.** Furniture made from gnarled tree roots—symbolizing the asymmetry and unruliness of nature—has been coveted for centuries by Chinese scholars and intellectuals.

## Partitions

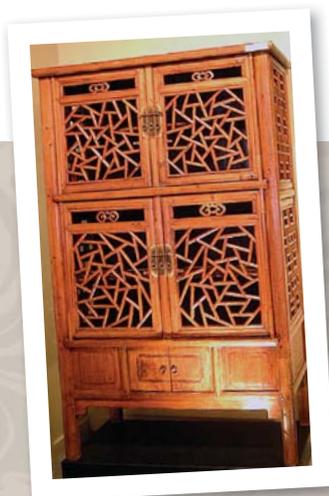
You can create asymmetry within the borders of an otherwise symmetrical piece by playing with drawers, doors, and shelves.



Photo: Tom Brummett

**Michael Hurwitz** says that any designer's aim is "to find a balanced composition that's at peace with itself—and symmetry will get you to that harmonious place faster and easier." Still, Hurwitz sometimes takes the slower, harder route, as he did in this tansu-inspired bureau. He began the design by drawing an overall shape he liked, and then experimented with various drawer arrangements within it. He settled on a pattern of one short and one long drawer in each row, their disparity emphasized by two styles of custom-made Damascus-steel pulls.

**Cracked ice.** The asymmetrical lattice pattern in this kitchen cabinet, traditional in Chinese furniture, has been adapted by a number of Western furniture designers.



Like almost all of **James Krenov's** cabinets, this one in Honduras rosewood and pear is symmetrical in overall form. But inside, Krenov divided the space unevenly, used dividers of different thicknesses and lengths, and reversed the usual graduation of drawers, placing the larger one on top. Casting aside convention, Krenov created a meditative composition from unmatched parts.



Photo: Seth Janofsky



Photo: Bill Truslow

**Garrett Hack** was inspired early by Shaker chests and built-ins, taking special note of their artful arrangement of drawers and doors and their occasional use of asymmetry. For his "Lil' Shaker" table, he decided to use an asymmetrical drawer arrangement to inject a bit of the unexpected in an otherwise restrained piece. Hack says that "asymmetry always draws your eye," but he thinks it should be used with care. "We want to see balance and quiet—not awkward and unresolved energy. The tipping point is very easy to cross."

## Asymmetry through the ages (continued)

18th century, and the distinctive pattern continues to crop up in contemporary work.

In the West, from the Renaissance on through the first part of the 19th century, most furniture—and architecture—was designed using the precepts of symmetry and proportioning embodied in ancient Greek and Roman buildings. Adherence to symmetry was so strict that the rococo style of the late 18th century was characterized as "asymmetrical" for its use of slightly asymmetrical moldings and embellishments.

Shaker cabinetmakers employed asymmetry as deftly as anyone ever has. Most Shaker cabinets, with their chaste detailing, finely calibrated proportions, and banks of rhythmically graduated drawers, observe bilateral symmetry. But like the makers of

## Decoration

Some furniture makers use their pieces as a canvas for asymmetrical decoration. Whether inlaid or carved, these playful details bring a piece to life.

**Craig Vandall Stevens** says that adding an asymmetrical pattern of marquetry or carving “can bring liveliness and tension to a symmetrical cabinet.” When a customer asked him for a cabinet with marquetry depicting a pair of Eastern phoebes—birds that mate for life—Stevens knew immediately that having just the two birds could lead to a design that felt flat-footed. He needed a third element to break up the symmetry and found it with the flowering dogwood branch. It gave the birds a place to perch and enabled Stevens to create an asymmetrical composition that sweeps down from the upper left, drawing the viewer’s eye with it.



Photo: Craig Vandall Stevens



Photo: Seth Janofsky

**Seth Janofsky** applied an asymmetrical marquetry pattern to this otherwise symmetrical cabinet. A shrewd observer of both Eastern and Western fine art and craft, Janofsky points out that furniture rooted in the symmetries of Greek and Roman architecture aims to attain “a sense of solid repose—a static quality. But the Japanese aesthetic entails a more complicated sense of balance.” Janofsky derived the radically asymmetrical pattern from Japanese graphic arts.



**Shaker asymmetry.** The maker of this Shaker piece struck a balance between four smaller drawers and three larger ones.

Japanese tansu, Shaker furniture makers felt no compunction in straying into asymmetry when function was better served by it (see photo, right). Working in cloistered communities largely removed from popular taste and demand, Shaker cabinetmakers built furniture with the user uppermost in mind. For example, Shaker sewing chests often feature banks of drawers that open from adjacent faces of the piece—presumably so that two people could work comfortably together.

As you can see here, contemporary makers tapped into historical precedents, taking the idea of asymmetry in all directions, from the overall form to the partitions and decorative patterns.