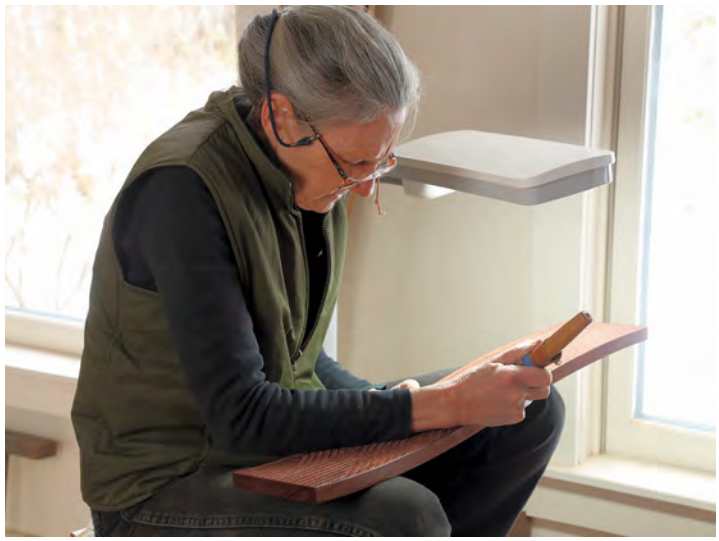
A life spent carving

BY KRISTINA MADSEN



A new carving pattern never just pops into my head. A vague and general impression floats around while pages of my well-worn library offer small suggestions. I leaf through my collection of old sample boards and then leaf through them again.

Textiles are my primary source of inspiration. The design components of these woven, dyed, and printed patterns—their layouts, their combinations of motifs and colors—are a vast and rich material resource. All types of patterns intrigue me: repetitive, non-repetitive, monochromatic, polychromatic, representational, abstract. I move from one to another as furniture form and whim dictate.

The patterns I design are usually multi-layered, with a foreground, a background, and often a middle ground. Once the combination of marks has been worked out on samples, I fully develop the foreground pattern on paper and transfer it to the furniture surface. After this primary pattern has been carved, I cut the secondary and infill patterns freehand.

New projects come about in different ways. Sometimes I have a piece of furniture in mind and want to design a complementary pattern for it. Sometimes I have a particular type of pattern that I want to try and I must dream up a furniture form to suit it. Either way, the furniture and the pattern are developed simultaneously. The work is rhythmic and highly focused, and I am completely absorbed by it for weeks or months at a time. Because so many of the marks are cut freehand, there is always an element of surprise in the finished surfaces; some unanticipated outcome that could not be seen in the smaller-scale sample boards. This is what keeps me interested, and slightly on edge, throughout the carving process. The full effect of the pattern only becomes evident after the two finish coats of oil/varnish have been applied and the light catches the facets.

Beyond the influence of my distinguished mentors, my work also draws from a much older and broader tradition. Decorative pattern is universal. Abundant in all its complexities within the natural world, its use has been adopted throughout time and by all cultures to enliven and visually enhance plain surfaces. As I seek to capture light in the facets of my carvings, I am a link in this ever-lengthening chain of tradition, and I hope that my combinations of furniture and pattern will, in their turn, inspire and energize others as the lives and work of my predecessors have inspired and energized me.

Kristina Madsen creates furniture and carvings in Massachusetts.

The generosity of mentors

As the finished carving reflects a cumulative process, so does my furniture reflect the accumulation of knowledge passed to me by three skilled mentors—Margaret Madsen, David Powell, and Makiti Koto—each of whom led lives committed to creating fine and beautiful work.

From an early age, my mother had me knitting, embroidering, and sewing. Her deft hands were never idle as she quietly knit our hats and mittens, sewed our clothes, crocheted potholders and lace edgings, and plaited miles of woolen braid for rugs. My now-gnarly hands are unmistakably hers.

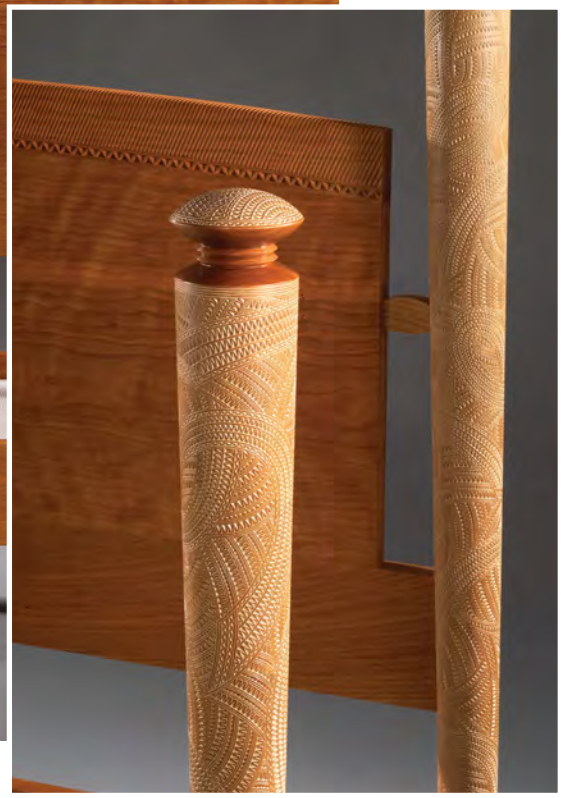
I met David Powell when I was 18 years old and convinced him to take me on as a student. I left the University of Maine after a single semester and entered his workshop in June 1975, not realizing at the time that I would be working with one of the finest (and most eccentric) furniture makers in the country. In 1977, David (right) joined John Tierney to found Leeds Design Workshops in Easthampton, Mass., where I studied for two more years and then taught part-time for four years. Our friendship was enduring, and I now have the honor of owning David's hand tools.

In 1988, after a residency at the University of Tasmania, I spent a week in the Fiji Islands. At the Government Handicraft Center in Suva I found two breathtaking paddle clubs (*kinikini*) by Makiti Koto (opposite page). I arranged to meet Makiti and

Top photo: Anissa Kapsales; photos in mentor section courtesy of Kristina Madsen

THE NATURAL LOOK

The intaglio carving technique that has become a signature of Madsen's work is characteristic of Oceania. She was first introduced to the carvings of this region through the Field Museum catalog, *The Fuller Collection of Pacific Artifacts* by R and M Force. Captivated by the intricate, faceted patterns that covered these traditional objects, Madsen began incorporating more texture and patterns into her furniture. Carving on clear-finished solid wood is the most straightforward of Madsen's techniques. After bringing a sample board or piece of furniture to a finished state, which means a first sealer coat of 2 parts oil to 1 part varnish, then four to five coats of a 50/50 oil/varnish mix, Madsen carves the pattern. Then she applies two light finish coats of the oil/varnish mix.



Different techniques in one piece. *While the headboard is only carved, the posts of this cherry bed are carved with a cream-tinted gesso scrubbed in. The two approaches to the carving provide harmony but make the posts the focal point.*

spend a day watching him work. His tools were hatchet, adze, spokeshave, and carving tools. Traditional forms flawlessly emerged from blocks of wood with an ease that seemed miraculous. With no measurements, no guiding marks other than a chalk outline on the rough board, his motions were powerful, fluid, and precise. Three years later, I traveled back on a Fulbright grant to study with him for nine months. He was unreserved in conveying his knowledge of carving, as well as in instructing me in *naivakarau vakaviti* (the Fijian way). In a culture where women don't carve, Makiti's willingness to accept me as a student and his wife Tunu's willingness to welcome me into their household bore testament to their exceptional magnanimity.

Photos: Stephen Petegorsky (top right and inset); Michael Pekovich (top left)

GESSO EMBOLDENS THE PATTERN

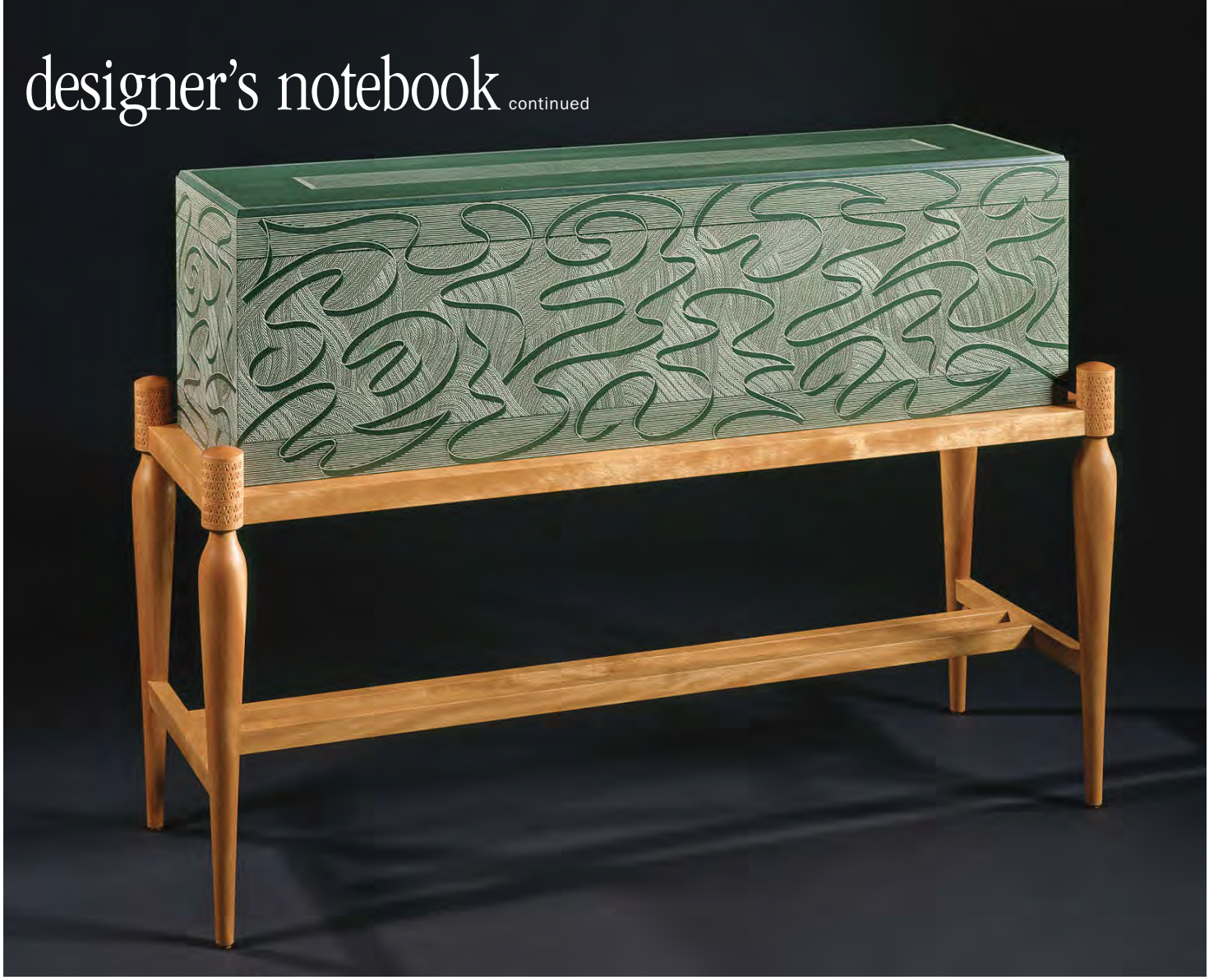
When Madsen began to carve patterns in furniture, she quickly learned that the fine marks that were brilliant on handheld Fijian objects were much less visible on stationary and larger-scale furniture. Though striking when light raked across the surfaces in just the right way, when viewed frontally and from a distance, they were often lost. She began to scrub tinted gesso into the facets of naturally finished or painted surfaces to create contrast.

Black or white gesso makes the carving pop. *After she brings the surface to a finished state with a sealer coat of 2 parts oil to 1 part varnish, then four to five coats of a 50/50 oil/varnish mix, Madsen begins carving. Working on small sections at a time, she uses a toothbrush to scrub either light or dark gesso into the carved pattern, then immediately wipes the film off the surface with a damp cloth. The surfaces with the finish on them resist the gesso. Then she finishes the piece with two coats of a thinned-down mixture of 2 parts oil to 1 part varnish.*

Madsen never uses straight gesso. *Instead she adds pigments, warming white gesso with ochre and black to get to an off white, and warming black gesso with red.*

Gesso enhances the look. *Gesso, very similar to acrylic paint, only thinner, is a combination of paint pigment, chalk, and binder. Historically, white gesso was made for oil painting and was traditionally used to prepare or prime a surface so oil paint would adhere to it. Madsen uses it to add another dimension to her carvings, whether paired with bare wood or wood that's been milk painted.*

Photos:, except where noted: David Stansbury; this page (bottom two): Michael Pekovich



GESSO OVER MILK PAINT

To create these vibrantly colored patterns, Madsen first applies milk paint, then seals it with the oil/varnish mixture, bringing the surfaces to a finished state. Then she carves the pattern. After scrubbing the tinted gesso into the finished carving, she wipes it off and applies the final coats of the thinned down oil/varnish mixture.

When you're tinting gesso to go on a milk-painted piece, you must experiment with tint to get the desired match with the particular milk paint color. Test the two colors together. The color of the gesso may look like one thing in the jar, but when it is paired with the milk paint it can take on a very different shade. Madsen does a lot of trial and error and testing.

Milk paint first. *Before she begins carving, Madsen applies two coats of milk paint followed by two coats of a sealer coat of 2 parts oil to 1 part varnish.*

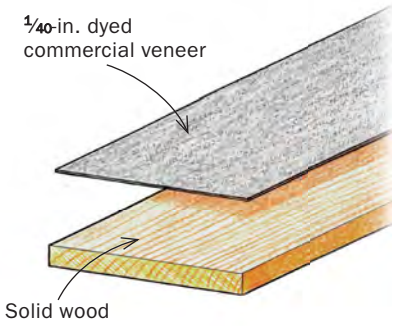
Photos, bottom four: Michael Pekovich

designer's notebook continued

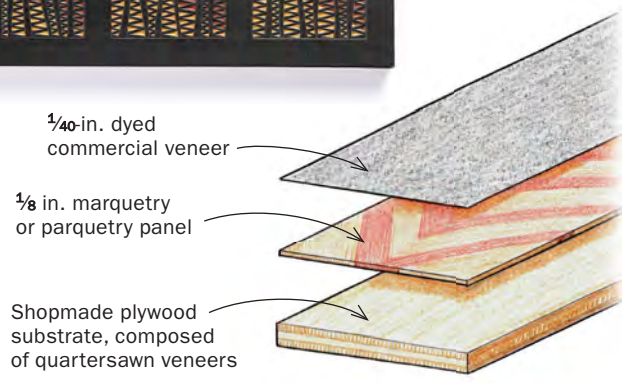
CREATIVE VENEERING

Another technique Madsen uses to make patterns more legible from a distance is to apply a commercially dyed (black) pearwood veneer over a lighter wood or over a marquetry or parquetry substrate.

Dyed veneer on solid wood. *Cutting through the veneer reveals the contrasting color beneath. As with the previous methods, before carving bring the top layer to a finished surface with five to six coats of oil/varnish, then carve. Finish up with two to three coats of a thinned-down mixture.*



Dyed veneer over marquetry or parquetry. *Apply black-dyed pearwood veneer over a marquetry or parquetry substrate. Cutting through the veneer exposes the contrasting color, and with marquetry or parquetry, a secondary pattern.*



Drawings: John Tetreault

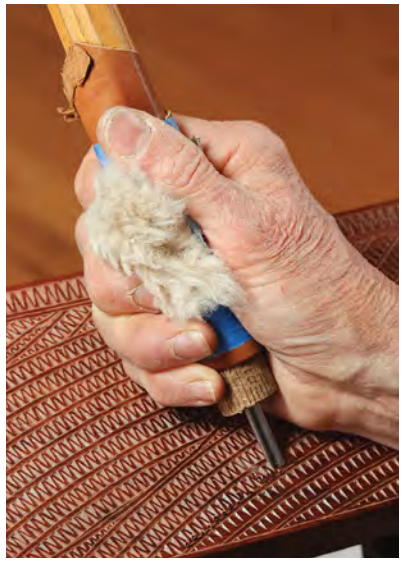
THE PROCESS

A handful of tools. *Madsen's basic carving kit is a minimal five tools. She uses Swiss-Made tools to cut the marks: two gouges, 8/3 and 8/4; two V-parting tools, 12/4 and 13/4; and a knife.*

By the light of day. *Good lighting is crucial. Madsen uses as much natural light as she can get, supplemented with an OttLite floor lamp designed to simulate natural light and reduce eye strain.*

Start on paper. *Madsen transfers the design to a clear sheet to see exactly where to place it on the practice panel. Then she transfers the design, through carbon paper, to the workpiece.*

Making the cuts. *All lines are cut with a parting tool, with each running cut being the length of the sweep of Madsen's wrist. Then she cuts the decorative V and gouge marks to these lines. Some of the more graphic painted patterns are cut with just a parting tool, used like a drawing implement. The years of gripping the tools have prompted Madsen to make comfort modifications using leather, sheep's wool, and cork.*



Photos, this page: Anissa Kapsales

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DEVELOPING THE DESIGN

When at length Madsen settles on one essential design element, she plots the idea on paper, just enough to determine a basic layout. Then she starts to cut sample boards (below), testing combinations of marks that will together create a visually interesting and dynamic pattern. Every change in the type, size, and arrangement of marks will alter the play of light across the surface of the wood. It takes numerous sample boards and often weeks of time to fully refine a new pattern. Even those patterns that suggest randomness or spontaneity are the result of extensive experimentation. It's a process of distilling what she liked and didn't like from each sample and bringing that to a finished product.

Photos, this page: Kathy Tarantola (top two); Michael Pekovich (bottom row)