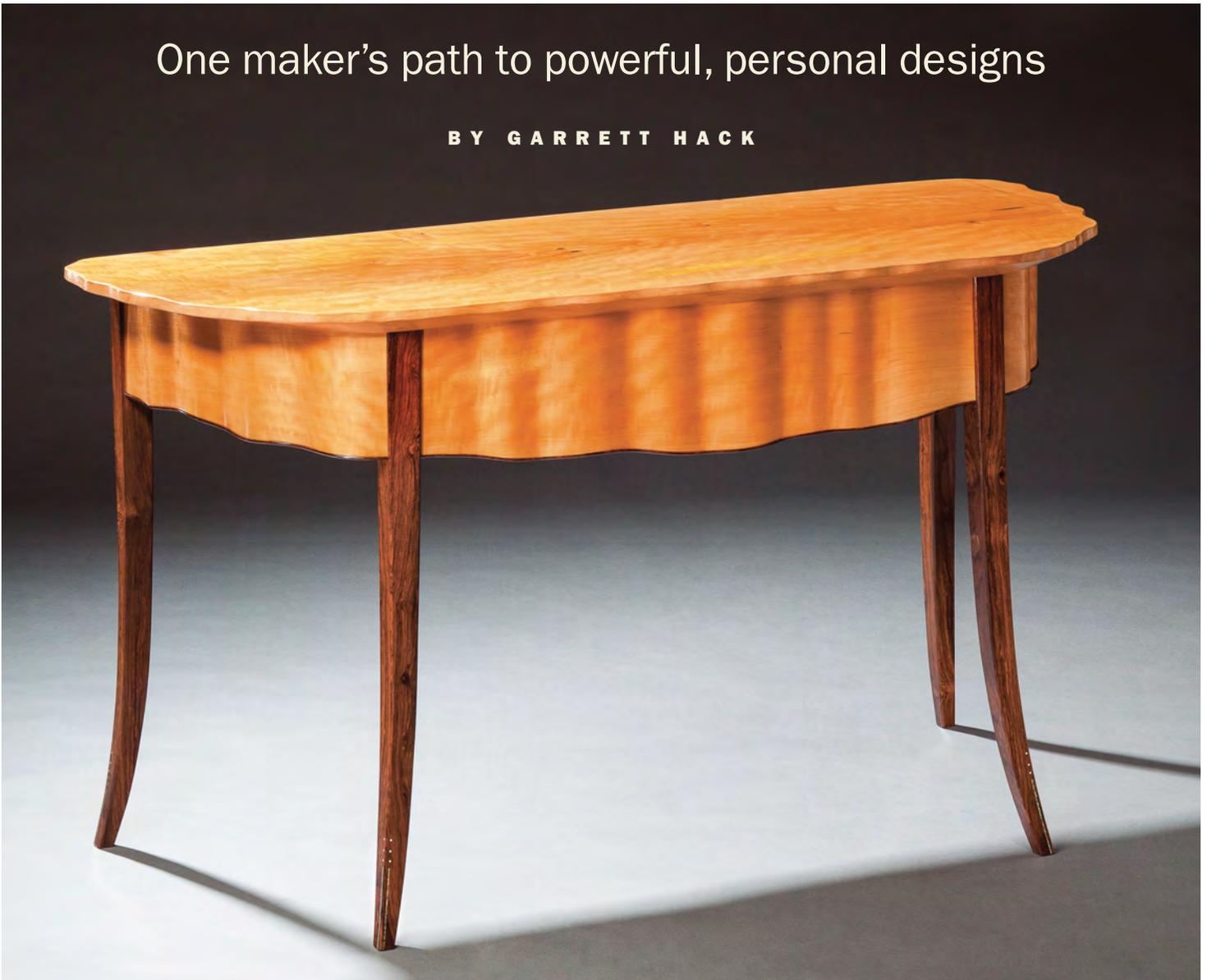


Developing a Furniture Style

One maker's path to powerful, personal designs

BY GARRETT HACK



Every aspect of building furniture involves design, from first sketches to choosing materials, proportioning the parts, fashioning details, even deciding on the right finish. It will always be a challenge. As I have evolved as a designer I've developed a personal style, a visual vocabulary of design ideas that I am constantly exploring, refining, and adding to.

Educate your eye

Design is about looking—really looking—and making sense of what you see. Why does one thing appeal to you strongly and something else less so? Stimulating ideas can come from nature, architecture, a painting, anything that attracts your attention. I have always been a strongly visual person, no doubt influenced by



Look, then leap. For Garrett Hack, observation is the root of furniture design. The catalyst for a new piece might be found anywhere: buildings, bridges, period furniture, or natural forms, like the shells that inspired the rippled top and apron on the pear and rosewood desk above.

a mother who believed that every museum was worth visiting, and travel was always a rich source of new ideas. My visual curiosity nurtured at an early age is even greater today, as I more easily connect ideas and see patterns that inspire future work. This deep well is my strongest asset as a designer.

I remember one instance many years ago of really looking at and trying to understand a complex Philadelphia highboy at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I was studying furniture at Boston University's Program in Artistry and, through museums and reading, I was learning about the foundational styles of our craft. This highboy was not that appealing to me, but as I forced myself to study it I began to appreciate its shapes, proportions, the organization of its many elements and



Shaker study

Building on a Shaker foundation. Early in his career, Hack closely studied the forms of Shaker furniture, like the chest above, attracted to their directness, simplicity, and clarity. His own pieces, like the cherry and maple table at left, clearly reflect their Shaker roots but have a crispness and lightness of their own. In his *Lil Shaker table* (below), he used some brilliant curly birch and an asymmetrical arrangement of drawers, pushing the design to a more distinctly personal place.



details. It was considered to be a sophisticated masterpiece by many; what could it teach me about design? That I can still reconstruct that piece in my mind says that some design influence lasted, but maybe just as important was the lesson that there are useful ideas everywhere if you look for them.

Trust your ear

My design sense and furniture making skills were really propelled by my years at Program in Artistry—far further and faster than if I had been working alone. It was a small shop with a group of dynamic makers with different experiences, where design and technique was a daily discussion and a huge amount of cross-pollination went on. I was challenged to design



Sequential demilunes

Exploring a Federal form.

If Shaker was Hack's first love in furniture, Federal was his second. He was drawn to its lightness, its lightness, its formal lines, and its often exuberant detailing. He has designed variations on the Federal demilune table form repeatedly over the years, each time exploring new details. His cherry and bird's-eye maple Demi Demi table, above, features a small demilune box fixed to the top. In X-Ray, below, the form is familiar but the vibrant curly birch primary wood and the central panel in rosewood, with an inlaid abalone accent, give the piece an almost electric effect. Hack flipped the script altogether with *Takin a Shine*, at right, whose shape is a demilune in reverse. The Macassar ebony case, amboyna burl top, bird's-eye maple drawers, and rosewood legs with silver feet elevate the piece to a rarefied realm.



and build piece after piece, with immensely useful critiques of each by my teacher Jere Osgood and peers.

Critical feedback is key to moving forward and developing a style, especially working alone as I do. Which ideas are worth exploring, and which ones should be rejected or reworked? The confidence to be self-critical is a good start. For the 20-plus years I have been a member of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters, I have gotten valuable criticism from my peers. But there has been no more humbling or honest feedback than our annual auction, where for many years I have presented my best work to an educated marketplace. Finally, I am lucky to be married to an artist whose judgment can be keen.

I followed the Shakers

My path into designing and making furniture was through Shaker work, simply because it was so clear and accessible. Their use of beautiful native woods, pleasing proportions, small but significant details, and occasional asymmetry have been lasting influences.

Understanding how every wood has different qualities and an optimal use is essential to building furniture. Shaker work taught me about maple for strong chair legs, tough oak for thin spindles, butternut for



large door panels, stable pine for drawer bottoms and case backs, and cherry or bird's-eye maple for beautiful drawer faces. Shaker chests of drawers, and built-in cases of drawers and doors, were lessons in proportion and occasionally asymmetry, a design idea new to me. I could see how the few but lively details they favored contributed to the whole—case tops with rounded molded edges, table aprons outlined with beads, and drawers with delicate “thumbnail” edges. Attention was paid to every surface, edge, and joint.

Federal furniture offered a second pathway

Another leap for me was discovering the Federal style, with its exuberant inlays and sensuous shapes, rich imported woods, and complex design ideas. I reimagined classic demilune tables and serpentine chests in my own voice and taught myself how to fashion the details. I even went into the woods in search of wildly figured crotch or other woods for panel and oval inlays. Once I understood the basic techniques—fine

Design from a distance



Levels of attraction. Hack wants his furniture to be visually striking from across the room, but also engaging from a few paces away, and still more fascinating when you are close enough to touch it. He makes sure that at each level there is much to explore.



Put delight in the details. The main drawers in Hack's butternut chest are outlined with ebony cock beads; the two small, stacked walnut drawers at the center feature wavy lines of abalone inlay. Another pair of Lilliputian drawers awaiting examination has migrated toward the back of the chest.

line inlays, for example—it was natural to try lines of black and white dots and dashes signing my name in Morse code, or rippling lines of silver or shell.

Diving into details

Through studying and making Federal-inspired work I developed a love and appreciation for the importance of details to my furniture. I want to make pieces rich with visual interest, with details sometimes visually bold and other times far more subtle and only discovered by living with my work for a long time. As my furniture has evolved, my favorite details have become more complex. Today they are easily the most fun part of designing and building furniture, where each new detail spawns many others.

You can almost trace my evolution as a designer by how I've used beads. Initially I copied the Shakers



Serpentinism



Find a vein of ore and mine it. Hack was attracted to the serpentine forms he saw in some period furniture, and employed them in this early chest of drawers in cherry as well as in a Federal-inspired hall table. Building these pieces, he learned techniques he would later use to make more distinctly personal designs.



Riding the wave. As Hack continued to explore curved casework using bent lamination, more traditionally inspired work gave way to innovative pieces like his Wavy Cabinet in butternut and walnut (left), built to hold violins, and Weikewa Shimmering in ebony and curly birch.

Beadwork



A chronology of beading. In his early chests, following the lead of the Shakers, Hack often gave drawer fronts incised beads like those from a cherry huntboard (far left). Later, as he began favoring more emphatic details, he began applying cock beads to drawer fronts in contrasting woods, as with the ebony beads on a butternut chest (left). Later still, he started experimenting with applied beads that ripple, like the ebony one along the bottom edge of the apron on the pear and cherry demilune table below.

and cut them along an edge, to round and protect it. Besides being practical, I liked that the bead catches your eye as it outlines a part. Federal craftsmen made the bead a separate applied piece of wood, a cock bead, so I started making mine of strongly contrasting woods or from alternating pieces of black ebony and white holly. Sometimes they were not beaded at all, but just fun accents to an edge. Lately I have been adding sections of turquoise or recycled ivory, but it could be silver or brass next week. Sometimes the profile is round, sometimes oval, or two beads of different sizes. My latest cock beads are even more fun as they ripple along an edge. Why not?

Design for distance—and intimacy

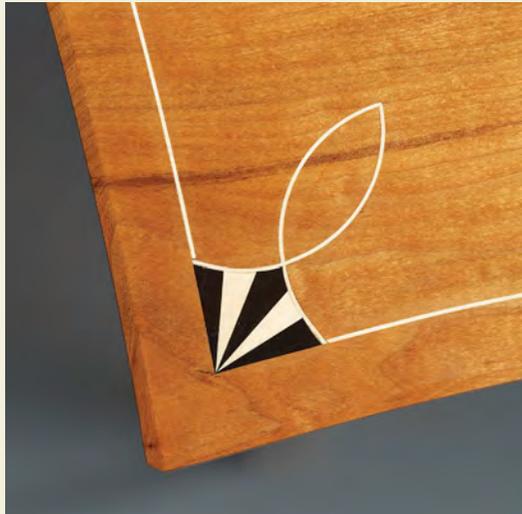
Really I want to build furniture that will attract your attention on many levels, not just in the details. I want the form and colors and shapes of the piece to attract your attention from across a room, and curiosity to draw you closer. At some distance more comes into focus—the proportions, the grain of the wood, the larger details, shapes of moldings, range of colors. But I still want you to come much closer, to have an intimate connection with my furniture by feeling a finely chamfered edge, the polished surfaces left by my planes, the shape of a fine ebony bead outlining



Playing with inlay

Pure pleasure in the details.

As soon as Hack learned the basics of string inlay, he began exploring and experimenting. Never content to make anything twice, he is constantly looking for new ways to provide pleasure and surprise—for the maker as well as the viewer.



a drawer. Some I want you to take much longer to discover, if you ever do.

A synergistic trio

What pushes what I design and build today is a strong aesthetic sense—knowing what appeals to me and why—filtered through my greater knowledge of materials and effective building techniques. The three have a synergistic relationship, where slight changes in one can have a dramatic effect on the others, leading to a visually stronger piece that's easier to build.

This can be as simple as knowing that by choosing to work with curly birch instead of curly maple—though the two look very similar—I'm in for a far more difficult time shaping and smoothing each part.

My technical knowledge is broader and more useful. On my first demilune table, the elliptical shape of the front apron where it joined the rear leg made for a tricky joint, an angled mortise and angled tenon that required careful paring to fit. By turning the back leg slightly to meet the apron more head on—a shift that actually looks better—only an angled tenon is needed and I can use a shoulder plane to fit the joint perfectly.

Progress is still additive. Once I understood how to laminate curved parts, I saw how much stronger they were (so parts could be thinner and more elegant) and more efficient, since I could get a nearly finished part off the bending form by polishing the inner and outer surfaces before bending. The next logical step was making tapered laminations for the back legs of chairs, or today, laminations that ripple. After making some large coopered water tubs, it wasn't much of a leap to making coopered curved furniture forms, and then highlighting the joint between the staves with those same beads I've loved since my Shaker days. Tapering the staves led to more interesting curved forms with changing shape. Curved coopered forms will keep me engaged for a long time.

Design and construction challenges have never gone away. When I am up against a new challenge, thinking about it can only help so much; a solution often comes more quickly from leaping in and trying something. Experience gives me a general direction. Working through each problem always opens up other paths worth exploring. And if I have learned anything, it's that there are always new paths to wander. □



The broken string. After developing a segmented straight line inlay in contrasting colors, Hack began using it on curves, such as those outlining the oval panel of curly birch veneer and running down the edge of a curved leg. He'll often inlay abalone (as above right), stone, or metals, and his inlaid lines sometimes drift off into dots. Innovation keeps things fresh.

Garrett Hack builds furniture in Thetford Center, Vt.

Cooperage



Barrel staves spark a style. After enjoying the process of building a couple of large water barrels for use on his farm, Hack began experimenting with stave-constructed casework. His Port and Starboard cabinets (above), built in Douglas fir and cherry, have rosewood beads between the Douglas fir staves. To keep things exciting, Hack later built Pleated (below), whose laminated curly birch staves are tapered and curved.

