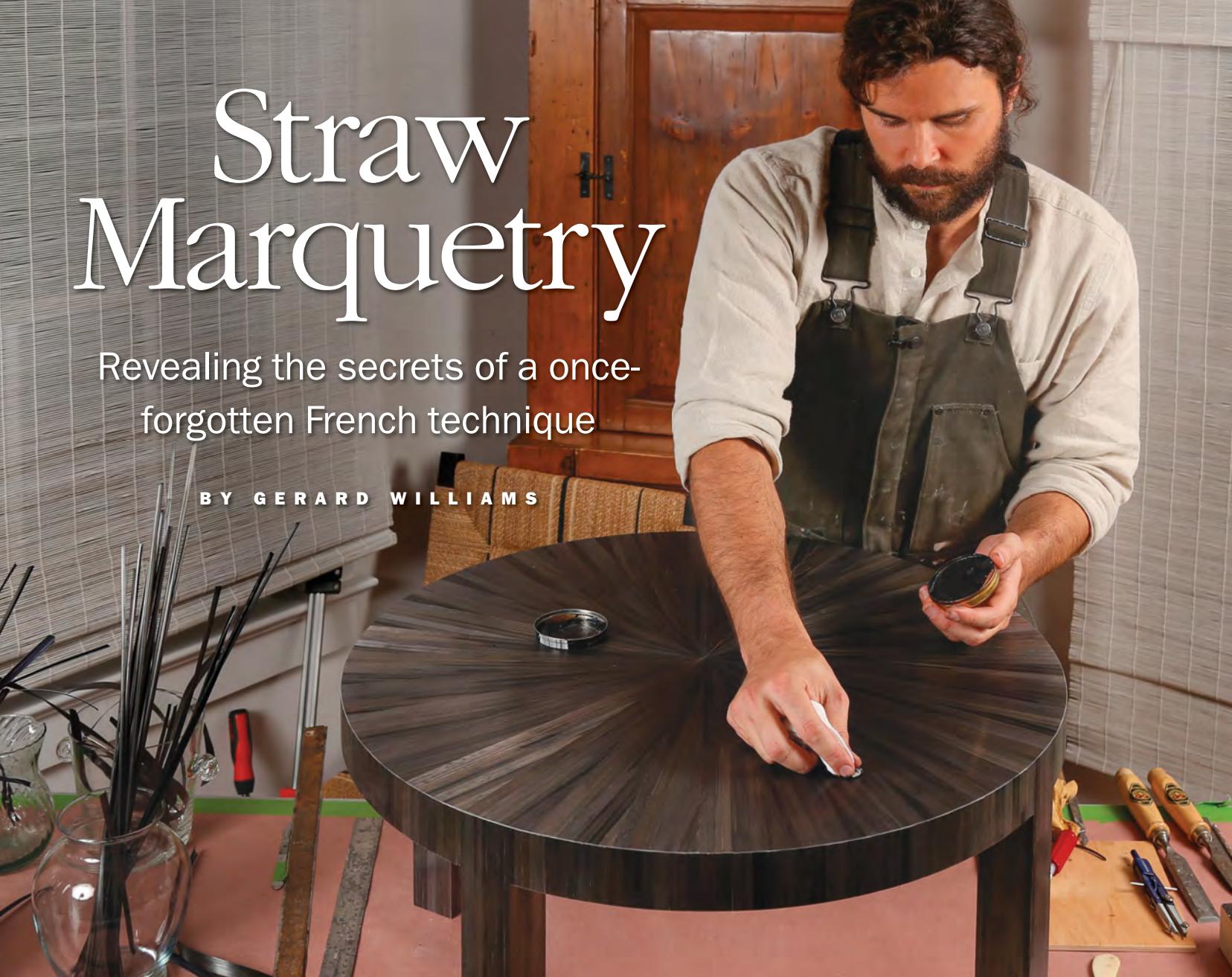


Straw Marquetry

Revealing the secrets of a once-forgotten French technique

BY GERARD WILLIAMS



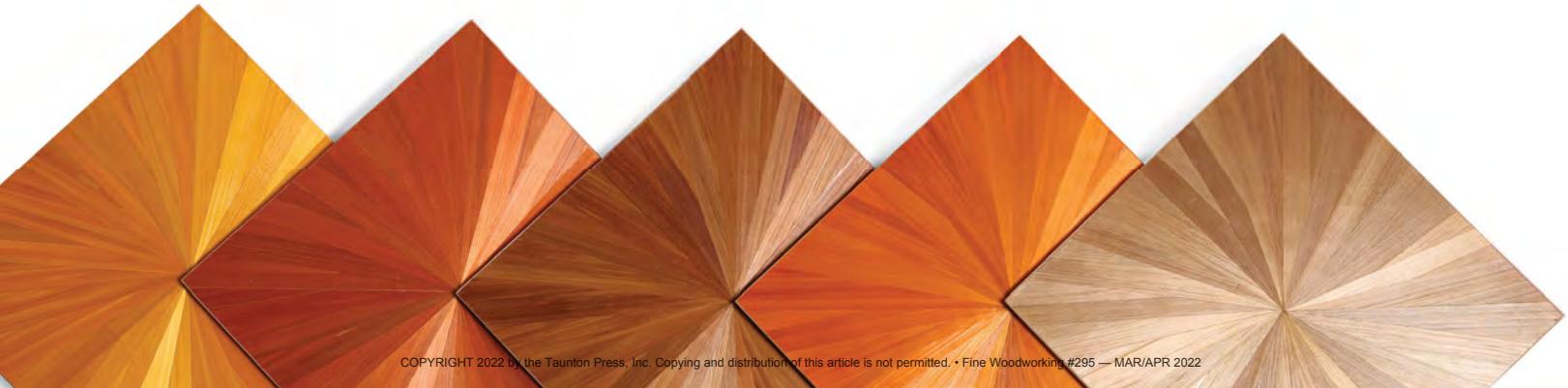
Straw marquetry is an ancient technique that has come in and out of fashion over the past few centuries. It is traditional marquetry that uses rye or wheat straw in place of wood veneers. Jean-Michel Frank's historic "Round Marquetry Table" is an excellent introduction to basic straw marquetry techniques.

The first straw line sets the stage

Before working with the straw you must split it, soak it, and flatten it. As the straw dries, it unfolds just enough to

prevent it from cracking under the pressure of your veneer hammer or flattening tool.

You'll glue down the straw strip by narrow strip. To begin, apply just enough glue to the substrate to fully cover the area where the first piece of straw will go. On this table, we're starting with the legs. Apply glue and a long piece of straw along one edge of a leg's side face. Lay the piece so it overhangs the edge a fraction of an inch; you'll remove that later. Press the piece down firmly with a bone folder.



The tools

My go-to arsenal of tools for straw marquetry includes the following.

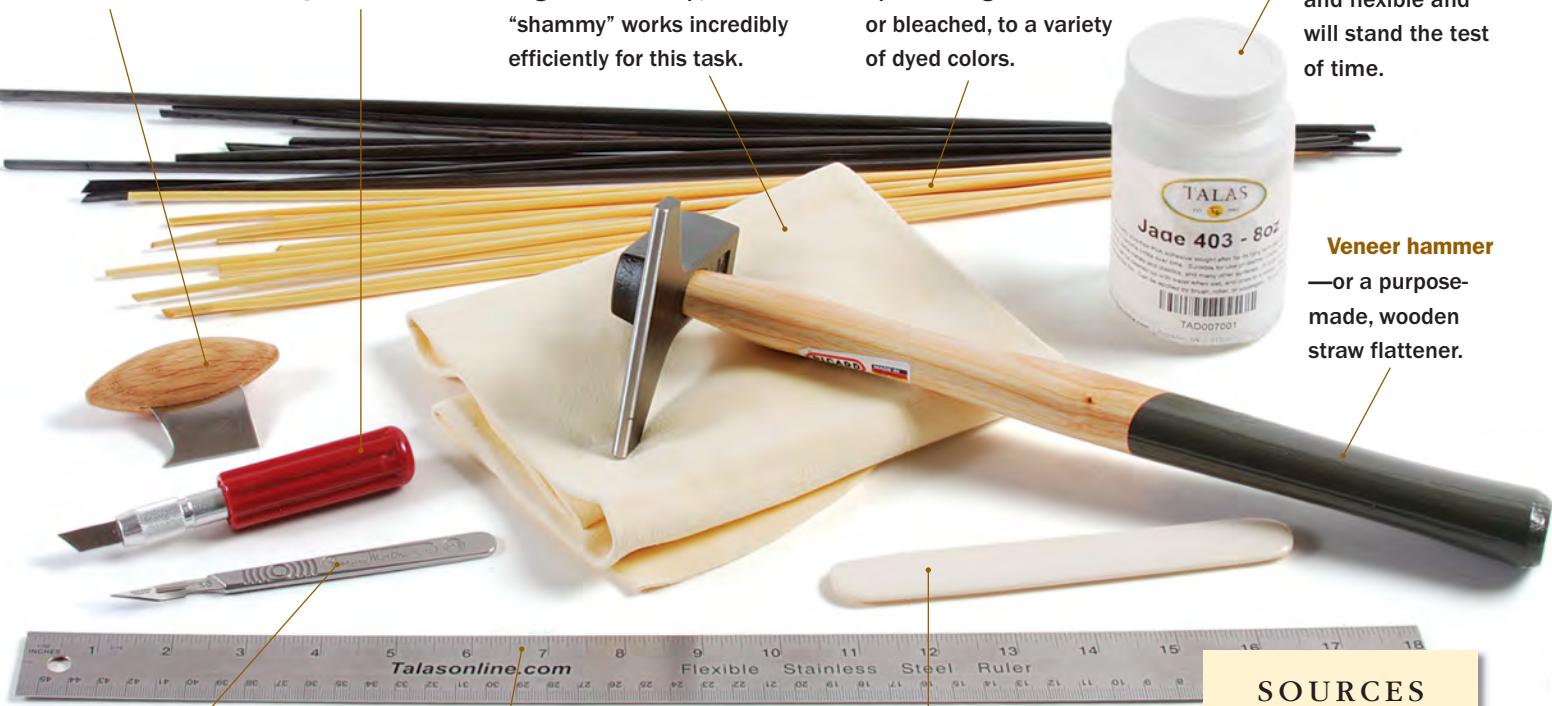
Hindenburg—used to split straw lengthwise and to smooth and flatten it.

X-Acto knife with a flat head—to remove excess straw and assist with glue cleanup.

Chamois leather—Works wonderfully to clean up excess glue. Like it or not, you will have quite a bit of glue to clean up, and a “shammy” works incredibly efficiently for this task.

Rye Straw—Straw comes in $\frac{1}{4}$ -lb. packages (about 200 stalks ranging in length from 9 to 21 in.) that cost around \$30. Color options range from natural or bleached, to a variety of dyed colors.

Museum-quality PVA glue—This PVA glue is a pH neutral and acid-free adhesive that will dry clear and flexible and will stand the test of time.



Swann-Morton scalpel with #10 blades—The low angle of cut helps prevent tearout when cutting across straw.

6-in. and 18-in. very thin ruler—A standard-thickness ruler will cast a small shadow that makes precise alignment very difficult.

1-in.-wide bone folder—These traditional book-binding tools are made from real bone and are excellent for applying straw to a substrate. Some people prefer to use Teflon bone folders instead.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

talasonline.com

leevalley.com

thestrawshop.com

amazon.com

Prepare the straw



Splitting straws. Using your thumbnail to split the straw is the fastest method; however, Williams has also filed down a crabmeat fork for this purpose. Another option is to purchase a tool called a Hindenburg.



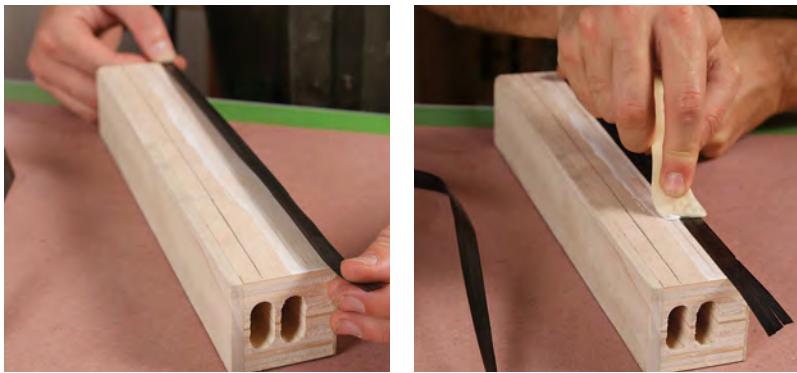
Soaking it up. Once all the pieces are split from one end to the other, soak them in water until the insides of the straw have been fully soaked. A couple dunks in a bath of water will work fine. Let the straw dry overnight.



Flatten it out. With the inside face of the straw faceup, press down with a veneer hammer and pull the straw out from under it. Flip the piece to get the other side. Repeat two to three times until you have a ribbon.

One piece at a time

You will be joining multiple thin strips of straw, gluing as you go. Once you get the rhythm of applying the glue, pressing the straw in place, and laying the next line, you can move more efficiently.



First line first. Spread just enough glue on the leg for the first line of straw. Place the straw down so it barely overhangs the side of the leg and use a bone folder to press it in place.

Establish a parallel line. The flattened straw can be tapered, so you must cut the inside of the first line of straw parallel to the edge of the leg. Use your scalpel, leave the ruler in place, and use a flat X-Acto knife to peel away the excess. To stay parallel to the leg's edge, do this with the far side of each subsequent line of straw.



Then take your longer ruler and slice a straight line from top to bottom, parallel to the edge of the leg. Do not remove the ruler after slicing. Leave it in place and reach for the flat X-Acto knife. Referencing the edge of the ruler, peel away the excess straw with the knife. The next piece of straw will butt against this edge you've created. Finally, use the scalpel to remove the straw overhanging the edge of the leg.

Apply more glue and place the next piece of straw as close as possible to the line just cut. With your fingers barely overhanging the edge of the straw, pull it over and you will feel it butt up against the straw that's already been applied. This process is tactile, not visual. If you can't feel the straw sort of lock into place, it is unlikely to be accurate. Repeat this process until you've covered the rear and side faces of all four legs.

Assemble and cover the front of the legs and apron

Next you'll assemble the table, and use a handplane and sanding block to shape the square front of the legs to



Subsequent lines. Apply glue for the next piece of straw and lay it down, butting it against the piece before it. Use your fingertips to feel that the two pieces are joined with no gap or overlap. Repeat around the rear and side faces of all four legs.



Trim and clean up. Once the area you're working is covered in straw, use scissors to crosscut trim the overhangs close to flush, and then follow up with a scalpel. When cutting overhanging edges of straw flush with the substrate, focus your attention on slicing down to prevent tearout. Finally, lightly sand downward at a high angle to smooth the straw, and use the chamois to rub off excess glue.

Apply marquetry to outside faces

After covering the legs' side and back faces with straw, Williams attaches the legs to the table and shapes their front face to the curve of the top. Next he applies straw to the front face of each leg and the apron above it, and then fills in the apron sections between the legs.



Leg-to-apron marquetry. Williams starts on one side of the outside face of the leg and lays a piece of straw up the leg and over the apron (left). With all the strips in place, he uses his fingers to crack the overhanging straw against the edge of the tabletop, toward the center of the top, to score it. Then he uses a sanding block to free the straw flush to the tabletop.



The short straw. After all the leg faces and corresponding parts of the apron are covered in straw, you can lay straw on the sections between the legs. When working on this shorter surface, you don't have to slice a straight line once a piece of straw is applied. However, Williams marks a series of square lines on the edge to ensure that the work doesn't start to get out of square.



Cut and sand as you go. As you make your way around the apron work in manageable sections, removing overhanging straw as you go so that you don't accidentally tear it off. Crack the excess off over the edge, free it with a sanding block, and very lightly hit the edge with 220-grit sandpaper.

match the gentle curve of the circular top. Then apply straw to the outer face of each leg and the apron above it.

When you finish the legs, move on to the apron sections between the legs. When cutting overhanging ends of straw pieces flush with the substrate, focus on slicing down. If you just pull the scalpel across the straw it will tear out.

Once the legs and aprons are completely covered and the straw is all trimmed flush, do a final sanding with a sanding block, pushing toward the center of the table.

Lay out and begin the sunburst top

To lay out the sunburst motif, draw two perpendicular lines that span from one edge of the top to the other.



Behold the sunburst

Each ray of the sunburst top, except the last one, gets worked individually. As with the legs, you set a first piece of straw, cut a parallel line, and add another strip against that line. The difference here is that after laying the straw and cutting a parallel line, you angle cut its inner end to shape the ray.

Bisect these lines, and then bisect the subsequent ones, repeating until the sunburst is divided into 64 rays. Be accurate; you'll use these layout lines to guide the actual cuts.

Apply glue and lay the first piece of straw slightly overhanging one edge of a ray. Then line up your ruler precisely on the reference line and remove the overhang. Next slice a line parallel to the one you just cut; this makes a nice edge for joining the next piece of straw. Add the next piece, leaving it long at both ends. After laying down two or three pieces joined edge to edge, use the reference line to angle cut the inner end. Remember: when you make the cuts, make a slice and do not relieve pressure from the ruler until you remove the waste side of the straw.

The straw should overhang the top slightly. To bring the straw flush with the table's edge, use a 150- or 180-grit sanding block at a 45° angle, working until you just sand through the top. This prevents accidentally slicing through the straw on the edges.



First ray first.
Choose a ray to start with and apply glue. Lay down the first piece of straw barely overhanging your starting reference line. With the ruler perfectly on that line, cut off the excess. As you did with the legs, cut a line on the other side of the straw parallel to the reference line to butt the next piece of straw to; repeat through the ray.



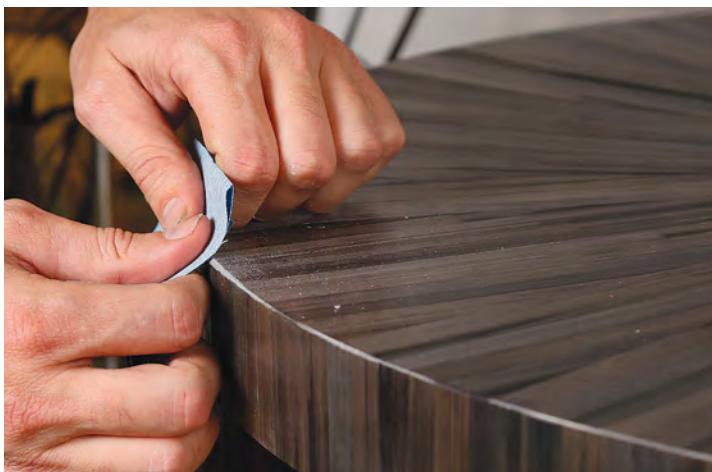
Establish the angle. The strips should be overlength at both ends. Once you've laid a straw and cut a parallel edge, place the ruler on the reference line for the angle on the far side of that ray, and slice off the excess. Before lifting the ruler, use the X-Acto knife to remove the waste. Continue through the ray, laying down two or three lines before cutting the excess and repeating.

WHERE THE LAST RAY MEETS THE FIRST

Working on the last ray is a little different than the rest because you must work into the first ray and use it as your reference line. As with the rest of the process, time and patience will yield beautiful results.



Work into the point at the top of the ray. Use scissors to trim an acute angle onto the end of every piece in the last ray. The angle doesn't matter, but the point should be able to sit in the apex of the last ray while the straw overlaps the first ray a bit. Apply a few lines of straw. Carefully use the first ray as a reference to make the cut. Then apply the remaining pieces.



Trim it flush. The straw should overhang the top. The table is nearly finished, so the stakes are high. Instead of using a scalpel to trim, hit the edge with a 150- or 180-grit sanding block at a 45° angle, until you just sand through the top, breaking the edge of the top and trimming the overhanging straw in one step. Then lightly hit the edge with 220-grit paper.

The final ray

The process is the same until you reach the last ray. With scissors, cut a point at the tip of the straw. Glue that piece into place with the point at the apex of the ray. Make the angle cut using your first ray as a reference. Repeat this, one piece of straw at a time, until you fill the ray. This is one of the hardest parts in the whole process, so be patient with yourself if it takes more than one attempt.

Sand away any overhanging straw. Clean up the final bits of glue with the chamois cloth, which works to burnish and clean at the same time. Straw has a natural coating of silicone, so it's not necessary to add a finish. However, I often apply paste wax for some extra protection.

Gerard Williams makes custom furniture in East Hampton, N.Y. You can find him on Instagram @_gerard_williams_.



Leave it unfinished. Because the straw has a natural coating of silicone, there is no need to apply finish. It's optional, but you can add paste wax for a little more protection. Here, Williams used black shoe polish to protect and enhance the color of the straw.

Endless possibilities

Straw marquetry is a graceful dance between a humble and unruly material and the artisan who works it. When the material's strengths and limitations are honored and understood, a designer can create a truly extraordinary piece of furniture that can last for generations.



LILIES CREDENZA

This credenza embodies the glamorous and dramatic spirit of the Art Deco period. The doors are adorned with meticulously handcrafted straw marquetry and brass, and the body is crafted from native ambrosia maple which is bleached and polished to a perfect finish. Its design is an homage to its European ancestors, Jean-Michel Frank and Jean Royère, the unparalleled masters of 20th-century texture and material.



L'AUBE COFFEE TABLE

This table brings light and intrigue into interior spaces. The tabletops are adorned with ornate straw marquetry and wrapped in solid brass. Williams harvested the rye straw from a farm in Amagansett, N.Y.



Photos: Homer Horowitz (Lilies); Daisy Johnson (Tramp, Pavlova, L'Aube)



TRAMP MIRROR

The Tramp Mirror was inspired by the intricate woodcarvings of 19th-century American tramps. Through its minimalist lines and harmonious combination of materials, the mirror holds both strength and grace.



'FLAQUE' LOW TABLE

This is an exact replica of Jean Royère's playful and sophisticated "Flaque" table. The stars—precisely inlaid with alternating grain directions—bring a wild vibrance to the motif of the sky at dusk.



PAVLOVA SIDE TABLES

Named after the famous Russian ballet dancer Anna Pavlova, the side tables embody the delicate grace of ballet and the beauty of the ancient craft of straw marquetry. An intricate yet unpretentious pattern, inspired by the earliest examples of straw work, adorns the aprons, which then draw the eye to the polished legs that taper into solid brass ferrules.

