

Break Out of the Bathroom Vanity Box

Think table when building this Shaker-inspired design

BY IAN INGERSOLL

Lately I've grown tired of vanity cabinets. Apparently I'm not alone, because in catalogs and showrooms, I see more and more bathroom furniture: table-like vanities, stand-alone cabinets, little stands for serving up towels. But I didn't arrive at my design from the ranks of the avant-garde; rather, this vanity, with its gently tapered and splayed legs, is an outgrowth of years of working in the Shaker tradition.



I see it as a forward-looking nod to the Shaker washstand. I've also grown tired of cherry, a wood I feel furniture makers have worked to death. I made this vanity out of walnut, and a cheap grade at that, oxidized a deep, mocha brown with potassium permanganate (see the box on p. 49). The vanity base fits comfortably under a solid-surface top and relies on a few simple design moves and the striking ebony-like finish. With this design, you won't need a fat wallet to make your bathroom look like a million bucks.

In designing the vanity, I had to consider a few issues particular to the genre. For height, I went with a fairly standard 33 in. For width, a 34-in. top felt right, and it allowed for two narrow drawers, one to either side of the bowl. The one caveat is that 34 in. is not a standard top size. You could adapt my design for either a 31-in. top or a 37-in. top, the two standard sizes closest to 34 in. Or you could have the top custom fabricated (see the box below), as I did. Regardless of the width you choose, you may need a custom top to get one without the standard-issue integral backsplash.

All vanity tops are 22 in. deep, so to determine the overhang and the ultimate width of the table, I had to work back from 22 in. The key is to allow enough overhang in the rear so that the backsplash will sit flush against the wall and the legs will leave room for baseboard molding (see the drawing on the facing page).

Even a vanity-as-table benefits from storage space. So I insisted on the two drawers, and I included a grate for a shelf. I'd used a similar floating grate on a kitchen island, and it seemed just right for this vanity.

To accommodate plumbing, I made the aprons deep enough to hide the sink bowl

THE FRONT APRON



Rip and reglue to craft a front apron with flush drawers. Rip the apron at the top and bottom of the drawers (top left). After jointing the ripped edges, cut the middle piece to make two drawer fronts; then glue and clamp the apron pieces together again (top right). Cut the apron to length after glue-up. With a saw set to cut at 2°, mark the length at the top of the apron (center). After the apron is glued in place, mark the upper outside corner of the drawer fronts, and cut them to length with the saw set at 2° (bottom).



and most of the trap; a little chrome plumbing showing underneath keeps the vanity honest. You or your plumber can relocate the supply lines to run through or just below the rear apron. Either way, you won't see them from the front. As for moisture, a few coats of polyurethane over the permanganate finish should protect the wood surfaces for years. And compared with a closed-in cabinet, the open design of the legs and grate allow plenty of air circulation.

Constructing the vanity requires a trick or two, but it isn't difficult or especially time-

Choosing a solid-surface vanity top



Solid-surface tops, such as Corian, are seamless, nonporous and highly stain-resistant, but the reason I like them is that they look and feel good. You can order solid-surface tops from local hardware stores, building supply centers or kitchen and bath shops. Corian is probably

the best-known solid-surface top; others, all roughly the same, include Swanstone, Fountainhead and Pionite.

For the vanity, I chose a Pionite solid-surface top in ice white, with an integral 16-in. oval bowl. Pionite sheets are nominally ½ in. thick; I specified double-thick edges. Most fabricators will drill

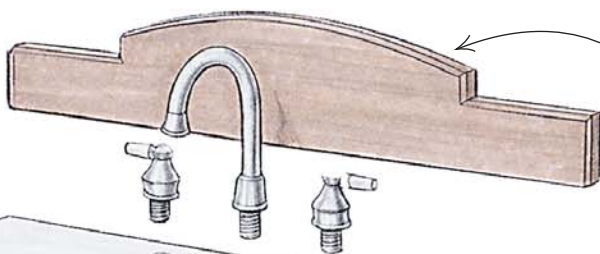
holes for the faucet and handles free of charge. I selected a Kohler Coralais polished chrome faucet (model no. K15886KPC) and Kohler Coralais polished chrome lever handles with white porcelain inserts (model no. K158504PPC), which together cost roughly \$200. The Pionite top (standard 22 in. depth, custom cut to 34 in.) cost roughly \$550. For more information on Pionite, contact the manufacturer, Pioneer Plastics Corp., at (800) 746-6483 or at www.pionitesolid.com.

Regardless of the top you choose, be sure to have it on hand or know its dimensions with absolute certainty before you determine the exact dimensions of your base. —J.I.

BATHROOM VANITY WITH LEGS

The walnut base is designed for a 34-in. solid-surface top. To accommodate a wider top, you could stretch the distance between the legs and widen the drawers.

Solid-surface top with 16-in.-dia. oval bowl, 7/8 in. thick x 22 in. wide x 34 in. long



Backsplash, 3/4 in. thick x 7 3/4 in. high x 34 in. long is chamfered 45° and adhered to top with silicone.

Block, 3/4 in. x 3/4 in., secures drawer side guide, front and rear

Apron, 3/4 in. thick x 9 in. wide x 27 3/16 in. long at top, ends angled 2°

Leg, 1 3/4 in. x 1 3/4 in.

Apron, 3/4 in. thick x 9 in. wide x 15 in. long at top, ends angled 2°

Grate, 1 in. thick x 19 3/4 in. wide x 32 in. long

Slats, 3/4 in. wide, spaced 1 in. apart

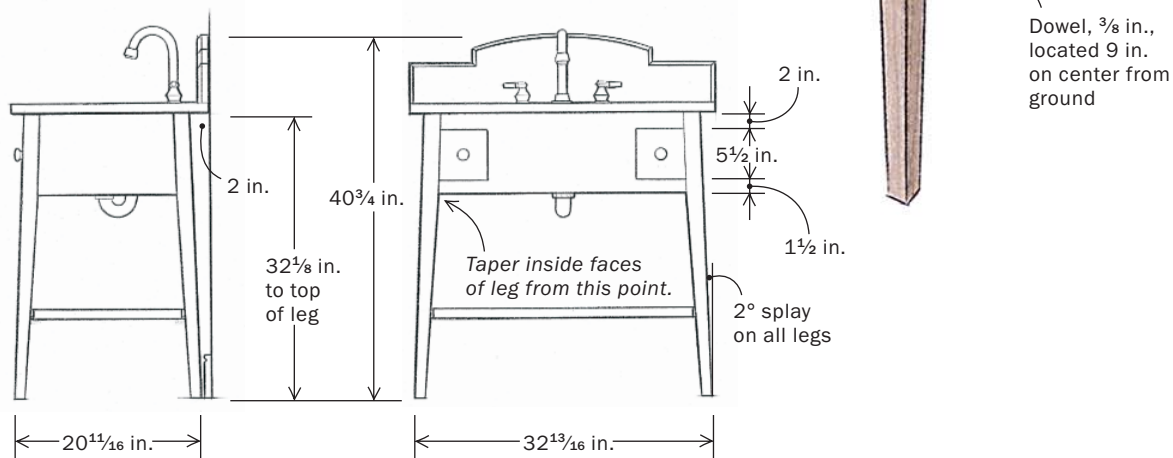
Leg is 1 1/8 in. sq. at bottom.

Mitered tenon, flush to inside face of apron, 3/8 in. thick x 1 3/8 in. long, pinned with 1/4-in. dowel

Drawer box, 4 3/4 in. high x 5 3/16 in. wide x 14 1/2 in. long

GETTING THE REAR OVERHANG RIGHT

The solid-surface vanity top needs to overhang the base at the rear by 2 in. to allow 3/4 in. between the leg and the wall for a baseboard.

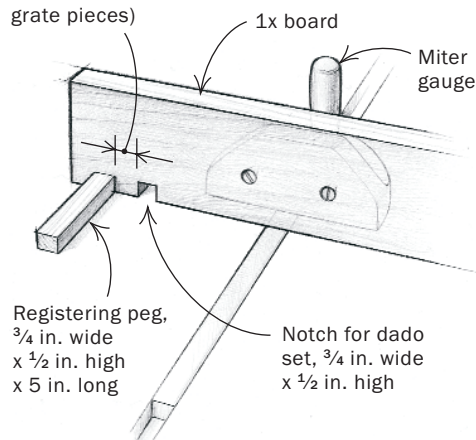


MAKING THE GRATE



First cross-dado a long blank using a simple jig. With this jig, you'll be able to index a series of consistent dados across a 1-in.-thick by 3-in.- or 4-in.-wide board.

Space, 1 in. (equal to distance between grate pieces)



consuming if you take it in stages. Easy for me to say, since Pieter Mulder, one of the craftsmen I employ, built the prototype for me. But I think Pieter would agree.

Vanity is a table

Not counting the floating grate (see the box below) or the backsplash, the essence of the vanity is four legs and four aprons, plus the two drawers. Make them in that order.

I needed to leave a full 16 in. for the sink bowl, which necessitated pushing the drawers against the tapered legs. An angled drawer front is scarcely harder to make than a straight-sided drawer front, and the slim line between the drawer front and the leg helps you read the legs as splayed,

even though the angle is a mere 2°. I had a guy working for me a while back, and his first run of supposedly vertical tables turned out splayed: He called it his fat-boy line of furniture, because it looked like someone heavy had sat on the tables. With the vanity, I intended the splay.

Mill the legs square, and then cut the tapers. The taper on both the inside faces of the legs runs straight from the bottom of the apron to the foot of the leg (see the drawing on p. 47). Save the scraps from your ripcuts, and use them later as clamping pads when gluing the aprons to the legs. Cut the mortises perpendicular to the inside faces of the legs.

Mill the aprons long, and cut them to

length with a chop saw set at 2° off vertical. To figure the finished length of each apron, determine the distance between the legs at the top, and add 1³/₈ in. on each side for tenons; for instance, Pieter cut the side aprons 17³/₄ in. long.

Before cutting the tenons, you need to rip and reglue the front apron for the two flush drawers. The front apron needs to begin a bit wider and longer than the other aprons because you'll lose two sawkerfs when you cut out the drawer fronts (see the photos on p. 46). Rip the apron proud of your lines, so you can joint the fresh edges before glue-up. The reglued apron will have a very close grain match despite the missing kerfs. Once the front apron has



A clever way to float a wood grate

I considered several ways of attaching the grate to the legs, but settled on resting the grate on four dowels, one protruding from each leg (see the photo at left). With a 1/2-in. reveal between the grate and the legs and with the dowels half-hidden in notches in the underside of the grate, anyone walking up to the vanity will perceive the grate as floating.

(Those who get down on their hands and knees and crawl around on your bathroom floor will have earned the right to know how the grate is attached.) Use 3/8-in. wood or metal dowels, set 5/8 in. into the leg and protruding 1 in. Be sure to drill the hole for the dowel parallel to the vanity top, not perpendicular to the splayed and tapered leg. —J.J.



Rip the blank into notched strips. When you rip a really wide board into narrow strips, you have many chances to kick the board off square as you pass it through the saw, resulting in tapered strips that don't fit well together. You're better off ripping boards that are 3 in. or 4 in. wide.

been glued together again, you can joint all four aprons at the same time.

Now you can cut all the tenons. Use a tablesaw with a dado set, cutting the shoulders first with the board flat over the dado set. Then cut the cheeks using a miter gauge, with the boards standing on edge. Because the shoulders are cut 2° off vertical, cutting the cheeks on edge will leave a triangle that must be pared out by hand.

Once you've cut the legs and aprons, you're ready to glue up the table. Leave the aprons a touch proud of the legs, and scrape and sand them flush. If, instead, the leg is proud of the apron, you'll run into trouble because you'll lose the crisp line of the leg as you sand it down. The 2° taper on the aprons will transfer to the legs, so you may want to beltsand or plane the tops of the legs flush with the top edges of the aprons. Sanding the legs flush with the apron will help the vanity top to sit flat. One thing nice about the splayed legs and the floating grate is that you don't have to include the grate in the glue-up.

You can build the two drawer boxes any way you like; just be sure the inner sides avoid the sink bowl. Wait until the table is

glued up to cut the drawer front to length. Mark the length of the top edge against the drawer opening, and use this mark to make a 2° cut.

Making the wood grate takes less time than you might think, as long as you don't attempt to cut and notch each piece individually. The trick is to cut a series of dados, half the thickness of the board, across a wide 1-in.-thick board. Then rip the board, which results in several identically notched strips indexed to fit together when arranged in a grid.

For a grate that appears to float around the legs, first make a full rectangular grid and then cut away the corners with a jigsaw. Chisel the inside faces clean. The assembled grate can be sanded with a belt sander or sent through a thickness sander.

Putting a lid on it

Once you've assembled the legs and aprons, fitted the drawers and built the grate, you're almost done. The next-to-last step is to install the solid-surface top onto the wood table. It's almost a non-event, a task best left undone until you're actually plumbing the vanity. A solid-surface top is quite heavy—it tends to stay where you put it—and the wood table needs to move under it, so the barest of connections is required. Simply run a bead of silicone along the top edge of the front apron, and lay the solid-surface top in place.

The backsplash is shaped from a 7¾-in.-wide piece of walnut. Cut it with a bandsaw, clean it up and then use a chamfer bit on your router to bevel the edge.

The final step, I promise, is to attach the backsplash to the solid-surface top. With the vanity in place, affix the backsplash to the rear wall with silicone, and run a bead of caulk between the backsplash and vanity top. Now you can admire your work, and then wash your hands. □

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A rich finish for poor wood

There are any number of disaster stories associated with the use of potassium permanganate as a finish, most having to do with turning something black that wasn't supposed to be.

A chemical that oxidizes wood to change its color, potassium permanganate is sold in water-soluble salt form. It is considered a toxin, though it is neither volatile, flammable nor listed as a carcinogen. You should wear a res-

pirator when mixing the salts and gloves when applying the finish. You may have luck purchasing potassium permanganate from a local water conditioning company, such as Culligan. One mail-order supplier of potassium permanganate is Olde Mill Cabinet Shoppe (717-755-8884). Ask for a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS), and expect to pay a hazardous-materials shipping charge.

Potassium permanganate reacts differently to different woods and at different dilutions, so always test it on some scrap. It dries in one to two hours, and it is

very forgiving and uniform in darker shades, making it a good choice for inexpensive, poor quality woods, such as sappy walnut.

For the vanity, David Blakey, one of the finishers at my shop, applied three coats of potassium permanganate (1 tablespoon mixed with 1 quart of water) and then two coats of Minwax Polyshade, a urethane with a tint to prevent UV damage to the oxidized finish. —I.I.

