



# An Inspired Tool Chest

## Duncan Phyfe's personal tool chest begets a handsome adaptation

BY BILL CROZIER

Between my freshman and sophomore years at the Rhode Island School of Design, I was looking ahead to the fall when I would begin studying woodworking under Tage Frid. That same summer, my father mounted a show of illustration at the New York Historical Society. The exhibition was a pretty big deal—but with precious little relevance, you might think, to woodworking. However, one evening as my father entered the Historical Society by the usual after-hours route—through a basement area stuffed with holdings in storage—he stumbled upon an extraordinary find: the tool chest of Duncan Phyfe, the New York

City cabinetmaker who gave his name to an elegant style of furniture in the first decades of the 19th century. My father said he'd try to get permission for me to see it. A week later, I got my chance.

If I had seen the chest closed, I might have walked right by it. Typical of Old-World style joiner's tool chests, it was essentially a ruggedly built blanket chest with drawers and compartments inside for tools. This box had the usual simple, scuffed exterior, but when the lid was lifted, I was in for a treat. The drawer box, or till, had rows of shallow, beautifully proportioned drawers veneered with crotch Cuban mahogany and filled with scores of exquisite tools, with handles of bone or ebony or rosewood, all well used but in superb condition. The drawers were joined with flawless, tiny dovetails and sported pulls turned from elephant ivory. Below the drawers, dozens of molding planes were nested in neat compartments.

I wasn't permitted to touch the chest or the tools, but the curator who agreed to let me see them said that if I wanted anything moved I could ask the guard on duty nearby. Well, I gave the poor guy a workout. I was there the better part of a day, absorbing and drawing every detail. After sketching the cabinet construction and layout, I noted which tools were contained in each of the drawers. I took particularly careful notes because I knew that the first project in Tage Frid's curriculum was to build a tool chest,

**One fine chest leads to another.** Bill Crozier (left) found an idea worth emulating when he came across Duncan Phyfe's tool chest (right) in a museum. Scottish-born Phyfe (1768-1854) established himself in New York as the pre-eminent cabinetmaker. Almost synonymous with the Federal style, Phyfe's furniture was typically made of mahogany and often finely carved with lyres, reeding and swags. Phyfe left an estate of a half-million dollars—a sum that testifies to his popularity, his craftsmanship and his business acumen.





and I figured I had found a pretty good starting place for the design of mine.

In the following weeks, I worked to design my own tool chest, using Duncan Phyfe's as inspiration. What appealed to me most about his chest was the drawer till, with its pleasingly slim and perfectly proportioned drawers. I decided to make a fairly direct copy of it, adding one row of drawers. But I didn't like the idea of having to bend over to fetch my tools, and I didn't want to have to root around in a dark box, moving one tool to get to another. So for my design, I essentially lifted Phyfe's drawer till out of the big blanket chest and put it on an open stand at a comfortable height.

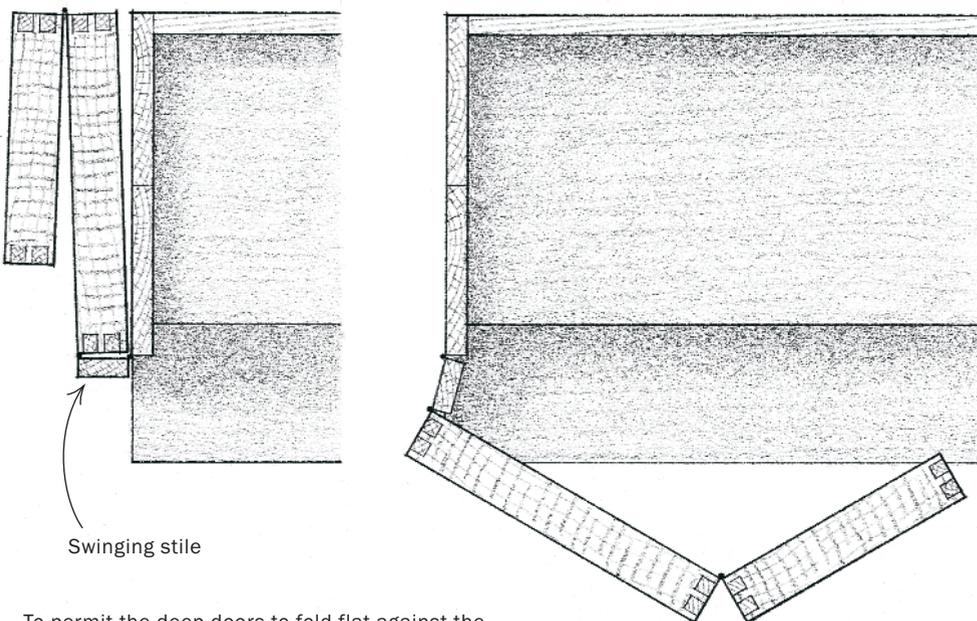
I followed Phyfe's lead again in turning drawer pulls in a range of sizes—larger ones for the bigger bottom drawers and smaller ones to suit the smaller drawers. I turned mine from rosewood instead of ivory. And although I loved the way the crotch mahogany looked on his drawer fronts, I chose to have solid fronts on my drawers and made them from a mixture of bird's-eye maple and tiger maple.

I admired the way Phyfe used his chest as well as the way he made it. He arranged things so tools with similar functions were in adjacent drawers. I did the same thing: I keep layout and marking tools in the first row of drawers, with squares in one drawer, marking knives and pencils in another, compasses and dividers in a third. The second row is reserved for chisels, with paring chisels in one drawer, mortising chisels in the one beside it and Japanese chisels in the next. This has made it easy to remember where things are even in a bank of 20 drawers. To protect the tools, I lined the top two rows of drawers with upholstery velvet. For the bottom three rows, I glued sheet cork in the bottoms.

I still wanted to be able to lock the chest, so I gave it a lid and built accordion-style doors that fold out of the way at the ends of the drawer box, but can be pulled across to engage the lid and lock the whole thing shut. As it turns out, I never close them. But I suppose when you design something like this you are just guessing how the future will go, and you are not always right. I also left cavities below the bottom drawers for trays I envisioned as holding the day's tools. They would be easily removable so I could take them to the bench or wherever I was working. That still sounds like a good idea, but I've never made the trays. I also

## ARTICULATED DOORS FOLD QUIETLY AWAY

Triple-hinged accordion doors fold up at the ends of the case during use and can be pulled across to lock it shut. The author built deep doors to accommodate hanging tool storage, but hasn't used them that way.



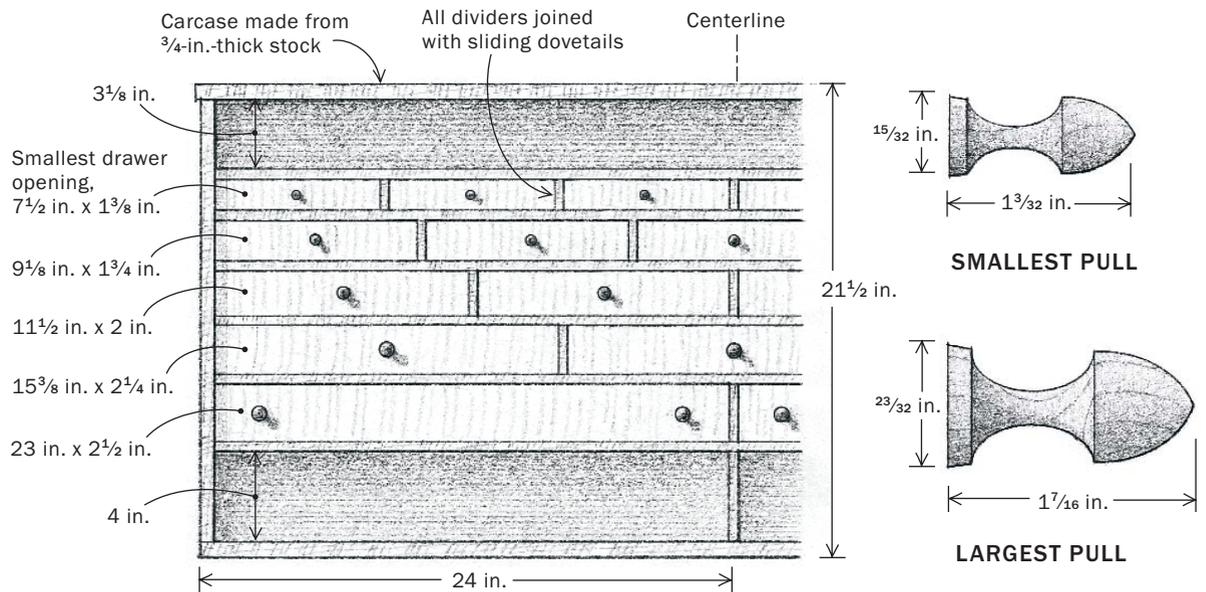
To permit the deep doors to fold flat against the cabinet, the author hinged a narrow strip of wood to the cabinet side, creating a swinging stile.



**Organizing your drawers.** The author noticed that Duncan Phyfe organized his tools by rows of drawers and followed suit. Having all the various chisels, for instance, in adjacent drawers makes it easier to keep track of them.

## HOW BIG ARE ELEGANT DRAWERS?

The author based the layout of drawers in his chest on Duncan Phyfe's, but added a fifth row of drawers. Phyfe jumped from six drawers in the top row to four in the second. The author made rows of six, five, four, three and two. As Phyfe did, the author turned pulls that graduate in size to suit the drawers.



left a space on the stand below the drawer box because I intended to build a case of larger drawers for power tools. Maybe I'll build it next year.

So far, I've gotten two decades of service from my tool chest. But it would have served me well even if I'd never used it, because making it was like a double apprenticeship—one in joinery and the other in

design—under a pair of masters. We were asked to build our boxes using either all mortise-and-tenon joinery or all dovetails. I chose dovetails because I'd never cut them and was eager to try. Cutting all the dovetails in the stand, the doors, the drawer box and the drawers themselves with Tage Frid's guidance was a real dovetail apprenticeship. And as I made my way through my

first attempt to design and build a major piece, I was also serving a design apprenticeship under the eye of Duncan Phyfe. □

*Bill Crozier designs and builds furniture in Providence, R.I. Carlyle Lynch's measured drawings of the Duncan Phyfe chest (FWW #53) are available from Garrett Wade (800-221-2942). Also, see our Web site ([www.taunton.com](http://www.taunton.com)).*