

SLICK SURFACES

Eric Englander • Manos Creative Designs

NEW ENGLAND WOODWORKER ‘SPECIALIZES’ IN A VARIETY OF STYLES

■ WHILE ERIC ENGLANDER PREFERS TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT STYLES INSTEAD OF FOCUSING ON ONE PARTICULAR AREA, HIS PIECES ALL SHARE AN ATTENTION TO DETAIL THAT INCLUDES INTRICATE INLAY WORK AND UNUSUAL VENEER EFFECTS.

By Jo-Ann Kaiser

Eric Englander’s woodworking career has evolved in an interesting, round-about way. The Racine, WI, native earned a Master’s Degree in Fine Art from New York University in 1990, majoring in theatrical lighting and scenic design. He then put his carpentry and craftsman skills to work building Broadway sets, trade show installations and televisions and film sets. He worked in various New York shops creating scenery for TV programs, such as Saturday Night Live and “big-time” industrial shows.

But Englander said he became disenchanted with theater work, and by 1993 he decided to go back to school to study the art of fine furniture making in earnest. “Creating scenery can be exciting, but in the end, your work gets thrown in the garbage. I wanted to be part of something more permanent,” he said.

Englander, who had always been “good with his hands,” combined his carpentry experience with his design degree. He moved to Massachusetts to study at the North Bennet Street School in Boston, which was established more than a century ago and is the oldest trade school in the country devoted to furniture production. At North Bennet, he honed his woodworking skills under

This Biedermeier-style television cabinet was done in European walnut veneer. Although Englander likes to work in a variety of styles, he said that Biedermeier is very popular with his clients right now and that he likes its simple, yet elegant, lines.





This Arts & Crafts chest of drawers is an example of the inlay work that has become Englander's "signature" on several pieces. It combines walnut, curly cherry and a variety of exotic woods with copper and pewter. The hand-crafted hardware is bronze.

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the guidance of "some of the masters of American and European 18th and 19th century joinery, veneering and carving," he said. On his own, he experimented with the best ways to do various types of furniture construction which appealed to him, including Chinese and Austrian Biedermeier styles.

Englander, 34, left Bennet four years ago and started a co-op with other custom furniture makers. "We pooled our resources and machinery to start the co-op," he said. "We were all fairly new to the business and we couldn't afford to outfit the kind of shop we wanted individually." The co-op is located in a spacious old loft in Allston, a Boston neighborhood, and is home to four woodworkers.

While many custom woodworkers chose to specialize in one area, Englander prefers to "play the field." His bio says that his hand-crafted furniture ranges in style from 18th Century Chinese, Biedermeier, Queen Anne, Chippendale, Art Nouveau and Arts & Crafts reproductions to innovative original designs.

"Stylistically, I am all over the place," he said. "That makes it fun for me. I get to deviate. I have no niche, design-wise, and I like it that way. At one point I could have easily seen myself only doing period reproductions. But now that I have done so many original designs, I am glad I didn't limit my perspective. I find it far more challenging to include original designs as well as reproductions."

That said, he still does many repro-

ductions, however. Most recently, he sees Biedermeier as enjoying popularity with clients who opt for custom, hand-made furniture.

"Biedermeier is, as they say, 'hot at the moment,'" he said. "Personally, it is a style I really like — simple lines, but elegant too. The form appeals to me on many levels. I don't think Biedermeier antiques have held up well, mostly because of the way they were produced. The original pieces were made, for the most part, for an emerging middle class, and it appears to me that the builders cut some corners with some of the manufacturing steps. I don't have a particular niche in the way some furniture makers only make Art Nouveau, but I am doing more Biedermeier pieces than before."

Englander said he particularly enjoys



This photo shows details of the 18th century Chinese Dynasties Histories Case featured on the cover of this month's issue. The piece was done in butternut with an oil stain and lacquer. The case is a reproduction and is comprised of 15 boxes, each giving the history of a particular dynasty. The 59 carved characters are clerical Chinese. They were finished with copper patina paint to replicate the look of the original case.

the research involved in doing period reproductions. "If the client is looking for an exact reproduction of the period, I often end up in museums and libraries, doing research. As an example, a client might request a Queen Anne chair like those done by Goddard and Townsend in the 1760s," he said.

"I guess if I have to declare a 'niche' it would include my veneer work," he added. "I do all sorts of veneering, including vacuum veneering. My specialty is hammered veneers, a technique that is particularly useful for curved pieces. Hammered veneer requires the use of hide glue and an electric glue pot or a means of heating the glue, such as a double boiler. You also use a toothing plane, veneering hammer and a veneer saw," he said.

Englander explained his version of the hammered veneer process, where one uses a veneer hammer which, for the layman, resembles a metal squeegee. Essentially, hot hide or animal glue is brushed onto the substrate and the back of the veneer. The veneer already has been slightly moistened and pressed to discourage the splitting or edge curling that sometimes happens with dry veneers. The substrate and pliable

veneer are joined and the "hammering" takes place when the squeegee-like piece is moved back and forth over the veneer. Englander said the glue sets and tightens in a matter of minutes. Humidity, temperature, and time of year that the process is done determine the consistency of the glue used, he added.

"Two hundred years ago, this process was being done in hot rooms, with temperatures set at 90 degrees or more, or in boiler rooms. Today, keeping temperatures that high isn't feasible. But weather conditions do play a role in the way the process is done," he said.

Veneer work is an important aspect of his work, given the fact that not every wood is available in solids. "I think that some of the best trees nowadays are being cut into veneers. So to get those beautiful woods and grains and colors, one must learn to work with veneers," he said.

Englander also is adept at inlay work. One of his designs, an Arts & Crafts chest of drawers made from walnut and curly cherry, features marquetry and inlay work with a variety of exotic woods, copper and pewter. It is outfitted with hand-crafted bronze hardware. The inlay work has become something of a signature piece for Englander, he said. The intricate oval picture made of exotic woods shows a road and trees. Englander laughs when he recalls the time-consuming nature of the delicate work.

Englander, like many custom furniture makers, keeps a portfolio of his work. While thumbing through his impressive photographic "archives," he offered information about the genesis of a few of the pieces.

One piece was commissioned by a couple from Boston, clients of his from his earliest days in business. They came to him to get a sideboard for a very formal Federal-style dining room table. Englander said they wanted something that would go well with the table and other elements of the room, but that would deformalize the setting slightly.

"The clients told me they wanted something original and different, and I knew they were great fans of Frank Lloyd Wright's designs. I had to come up with a design that would complement their very formal Federal dining table,



Englander designed this tambour television cabinet in association with Marianne Andersen and Stuart Narofsky. The piece is maple, bird's-eye maple veneer and rosewood. The inlay work on the tambour doors is in pewter.

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which is a classic American design. I took elements of the table's design, researched the period and came up with a design for a sideboard using pearwood and Ceylonese satinwood with rosewood inlay," said Englander.

The design is contemporary and reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright with its rosewood detailing surrounding satinwood inlaid in pearwood, echoing Wright's stained glass designs. This decorative theme is present in the door fronts of the sideboard and modified on the drawer fronts and top of the piece. The cabinet of the sideboard offers further visual impact with a design that seems to float apart from the gracefully tapered legs.

"I call it the floating box, because it looks like nothing is attaching it to the floor," said Englander. The clients were so thrilled with the sideboard that they ordered ten chairs to match it and the table.

The chairs were done in German Biedermeier style of solid pearwood, satinwood and rosewood. "I love making chairs," said Englander. "It is fun and a welcome change from more intricate work. You get immediate gratification, because the work can be accomplished in an ideal amount of time. There are times when I am in the midst of a particularly involved project where I almost hate the piece by week six. But with a chair, there are so few elements (10 to 12 usually), that I can accomplish an element in a day and I can go home and say I finished something."

Englander delivered the chairs to the delight of his clients, who called him a while later and said, "We love the sideboard, we love the chairs, we are giving the table to one of our children, and we want you to design a table to go with the sideboard and chairs."

While Englander works with a fair amount of clients who come to him with only sketchy ideas of what they want, others have very definite ideas in mind. One of his earliest commissions came from a friend who wanted a piece of art for his home in the form of an 18th century Chinese dynastic histories case. The project was a wonderfully challenging assignment for Englander who set out to do research in a museum



This trestle table combines red oak and walnut. There are Spanish tiles inset into the top, with four chip-caved drawers underneath.

at Yale University in New Haven, CT. "I visited the Yale Gallery in New Haven to study a piece in its Chinese section," he said.

Englander studied the piece, took photos and measurements and armed with this information, he began. "I wanted to do rubbings of the 59 carved characters, but I had to be content to work from photos. The original featured carvings of 59 characters done in clerical Chinese, which is unlike traditionally written Chinese. The case is comprised of 15 boxes and each box gives the history of a particular dynasty. There were actually 16 Chinese dynasties, but the Communists took over in the midst of the 16th dynasty and its history was never written," said Englander.

"I finished building the case after I started the carving, I realized I was missing 13 of the 59 characters because the photos I had were not clear enough to decipher all the details," he added. "I went to the public library in Boston and tried to find a dictionary which featured clerical Chinese, but they only had conventional Chinese. I talked to a librarian there and she recommended that I find someone who teaches Chinese. I finally located a woman who teaches Szechuan Chinese at Harvard and she was able to supply all the information I needed to complete the piece. She actu-



Englander poses beside a work-in-progress in the co-op shop he shares with three other custom woodworkers.

ally found two characters that were done incorrectly on the original case."

The teacher, Stacy Woo, first provided all 59 characters handwritten. Then, at Englander's urging, she typed them on her computer and provided him with a printout of the characters in a clerical Chinese font. Englander was able to take the printouts, enlarge them as needed and use the copies, cut and pasted onto the pieces, as guides for carving each character. Once the characters were carved, he applied a copper patina



Englander's co-op shop houses a variety of woodworking equipment, including this Bini CM72 horizontal boring machine. Englander uses it for mortise and tenon joints.

over each. Englander said he doesn't know what the original piece used as far as paint, but copper patina paint gave the same effect.

Hardware for the piece was made of copper. Two pins at the bottom of each lid hold the removable carved panels. The original piece in the Yale gallery was made from European walnut, but Englander had trouble finding what he needed in solid stock European walnut. He used butternut from the United

States instead, which is sometimes referred to as white walnut. The butternut was more pale than the European walnut, but gave him the grain configurations of the European wood. He achieved the correct color with an oil stain and lacquer, he said. "This was a very successful color job. I am not usually a colorist — I like the wood to speak for itself. But for this project, it worked and gave me the look I wanted."

Talking with Englander about his various commissions provides a unique perspective on the nature of custom woodworking at his level. Englander feels one of the keys to his success is constant communication with the client, making him a part of an ongoing process. With him, the client's input doesn't stop with giving an "okay" to the plans.

"My creative process often involves an ongoing dialogue," he said. "For example, with one client, I had come up with a design for a table and gone through a series of back-and-forth meetings to get a design approved. Yet once I had their approval, I decided I didn't like the piece. I called and told them I couldn't make it, it didn't feel right. We sat down for one more short conference and with a few modifications, we found a design that satisfied them, but was much more workable."

Englander makes pieces that are museum quality in some ways, but fully functional as well. He customizes period pieces to fit today's lifestyles. A Biedermeier cabinet might be modified

to hold a TV and other electronics, or an Arts & Crafts piece might be designed to hold a fax machine, computer and printer for a contemporary office.

In addition to doing reproductions and his shown original designs, Englander does work for other designers. His wife, Nancy Lawson, an artist and landscape designer, often contributes to the design process. "We sometimes do a kind of 'tag team' approach. I provide the initial design, she takes it and makes some refinements, I work on her ideas, she makes further adjustments and then I fine tune the whole thing. We collaborate and work well with one another," he said.

At the co-op, each of the four members has his own work and office space, but they share a variety of machinery in the airy loft. The co-op is equipped with standard woodworking equipment. Included are: a Whitney 77 5-hp 14-inch table saw; a Newman 60 jointer; a Powermatic thickness planer; a Powermatic 27 1/4-inch spindle shaper; a Powermatic hollow chisel mortiser; a Rockwell table saw; a Powermatic band saw; a BMI horizontal boring machine; a Delta lathe and a 3-hp dust collector.

Englander has built a strong clientele for his work and said that annual sales have averaged \$100,000 for the past several years. In addition to referrals, he exhibits some of his work at shows. His first exhibit was at the 1994 New England Interior Design Show, and his work has been featured in a group exhibition at Boston's Rugg Road Artist's Studios in the fall of 1995 and 1996. He also has exhibited his furniture at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair at the Jacob Javets Center in New York.

His work is currently being shown (Jan 21 through March 13) at the Mystic Art Association's second annual juried furniture show, "A Celebration of the Individual Craftsman." There, he is displaying two Biedermeier tables and a set of four Biedermeier chairs. The tables won first prize.

Englander has also been asked to write articles or contribute information on various woodworking techniques including most recently, a book on gluing by Taunton Press. ♦