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Notes on Care

A primary decision in the making of wood pieces is the question of solids versus veneers. They both have advantages and disadvantages. Basically, veneers are dimensionally more stable than solids and lend themselves to almost exact bookmatching. A whole room can be veneered with several inches of lumber. Veneers can be cut from the thickness of a thin board to such a thickness that light can pass through the pores of the wood.

Solid wood is a challenge. It is continually "alive" and "moves", depending on weather conditions, moisture content of the air and temperature. Each board of each species is individual and must be understood, the good characteristics exploited. It is not a "dead" object like veneer trussed to a core, which is often not even wood, but particles of wood embedded in plastic.

Lumber grade in solids often has little meaning except in the amount of "clear" lumber. Clear lumber from a tree whose fibers grow in a spiral can be almost worthless, with limited use, since it twists badly. Young trees, like people, are relatively unstable but strong. A young hickory makes a better axe handle than an old one, but the best furniture wood comes from mature trees or even trees beyond maturity. The great old trees, the monuments and landmarks, often have extraordinary character when standing which remains when cut into lumber.

Lumber with the most interest sometimes poses the most difficult problems, as so often the best figuring is accompanied by knots, areas of wormholes, deep openings, checks, cracks and other so-called defects. Occasionally, these defects are so numerous that the lumber is hopeless and can only be used in very small sections. But just short of being worthless, a board often has the most potential and can be almost human in that respect. Weighing all these factors, the decision between veneers and solids is made. From a personal point of view, the decision is easy. Veneers cannot be considered anything but veneers. It is the use of wood in its most unnatural state and, in a sense, cannot be considered wood at all.

After the first decision is made, the hard practical problem is posed of obtaining the finest wood available. It is a question of going to all sources to collect this lumber:

Black Walnut from trees that were of considerable size during the Revolution which now produce boards up to five feet in width; English Walnut and Oak cut from trees that were part of the reforestation program of the Elizabethan Period, great burls that seem only to grow in the soil and climate of Britain; a limited supply of Persian Walnut; Figured Bubinga from Africa fifteen feet in girth; Oregon Myrtle and Maple Burls from the Pacific Northwest, Redwood, Madrona Burl and Claro Walnut roots from California which are extremely irregular and lend themselves to extraordinary coffee tables with great variation in coloring.

A characteristic of solid wood is variation. Panels glued up have a random quality that distinguishes them from veneers, even though

the center and outside boards are usually bookmatched. Some of the most interesting lumber is often cracked or split. It is sometimes these very characteristics that mark a fine antique, distinguishing the real from the artificial. We do have a special category whereby table tops and other pieces can be made of one or two boards. Two boards can be bookmatched up to five feet in width, each side consisting of a board thirty inches wide. Even this way, there is a feeling of solid wood irregularity, as almost half an inch of wood is taken out between the boards in the process of sawing and finishing. A natural or flitch-cut board which we designate as having a "free" edge is characteristic of our work.

For construction, we use the very best joinery possible. Corners are customarily dovetailed; butterflies of contrasting wood are often placed as connections of two panels with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch space between them. Joints are mortised and tenoned, often with the tenons showing.

People are often indoctrinated with the fragility of wood. This is true of veneers where the actual surface is only $\frac{1}{28}$ to $\frac{1}{40}$ of an inch thick—sometimes thinner. Unless they are treated with care, their surface will be destroyed. Because of this fragility, a thick, heavy, "protective" coating, usually polished to an unnatural degree, must be applied. No weathering or improvement with age is possible. If this surface begins to deteriorate, it must be refinished. Good solid wood, with a penetrating oil finish, on the other hand, is a very different material—it is an actual surface, and not merely a protective skin.

The philosophy of solid wood is hard usage. Naturally, wood can be destroyed, especially if it is pressed beyond what it is meant to do; but in a sense, the harder a piece is used, the better the surface becomes. Furniture should be lived with and not considered something overly precious. A certain amount of scratching and denting adds character to a piece—in the trade called "distressing" (in our family, "Kevinizing", after the personal treatment by our son when young). There is nothing so quite uninteresting as a shining unmarred surface that looks as if it were never used.

An oil finish is one that is built up over the years, and there is a certain "breaking in" period when spotting occurs. Cleaning with a damp cloth is important. Spots can be removed by rubbing with 4/0 steel wool with the grain—but rubbing hard and blending off the edges. In certain cases where steel wool is not effective, a 280 grit garnet paper can be used in the same way. For ordinary care, a light oil, such as lemon or mineral should then be applied, allowed to remain on the surface for several hours or overnight, and then wiped off. If the light oil is not sufficient, tung oil varnish (we use Cabot brand) may be applied after the steel wool or sanding, and allowed to remain for about twenty minutes or until slightly heavy. It should be wiped off so that no film remains and allowed to dry at least 24 hours. Care should be used in destroying an oily rag or spreading it out to dry, as spontaneous combustion can take place, resulting in a fire.

For repairs: small dents and scratches, if objectionable, can be removed by soaking with water a piece of paper towel and leaving it overnight on the damaged area until the fibers swell to more or less the original state. The spot remaining can be treated as above.