

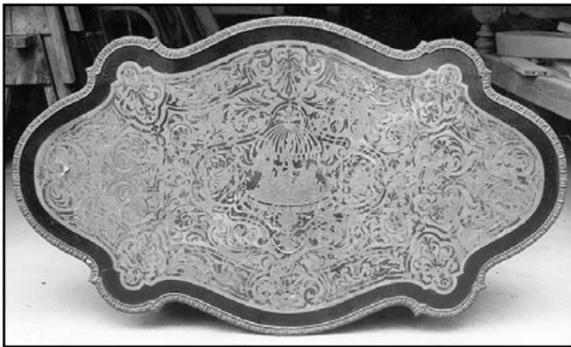
## Marquetry and Parquetry Delight Thee

Evidence dates veneering to 2000 BC in the Greek, Roman and Egyptian empires. The modern history of veneering in England, however, originated in continental Europe. Two key events brought veneered furniture into dominance in England during the 1660s. The first was the return of Charles II from exile, because once he returned he introduced new high standards of furniture design and craftsmanship from both Holland and France. The luxury-loving Court, aristocracy, landed gentry and merchants were soon to follow the royal lead.

The second catalyst was the rebuilding which occurred following the Great Fire of London in 1666. British authorities had the old timber-framed housing replaced with new brick and stone houses which had bright interiors. Traditional oak furniture was considered too bulky and clumsy and the desire developed for beautiful and compact pieces.

The attraction of exotic pieces from faraway places (Europe, India and Asia) increased following the Court fashions, trade and colonisation. Naturally, the inherent artistic and monetary value of such items made their possession highly desirable. Veneered furniture was more varied and better designed for convenience. It lent the pieces an elegance and lightness which the previous styles lacked.

The veneers were thin sheets of wood which typically were beautifully patterned. They were sawn from blocks and glued to carefully prepared flush surfaces of the carcass or frame. They varied in thickness from one sixteenth to one eighth of an inch. This is much thicker than modern machine-produced veneers. Because they repeated the pattern of the block from



Brass inlay table

which they were made, they could be laid on the carcass in a number of attractive designs.

Particularly interesting figures include the oval oyster shell pieces cut transversely from small branches of trees; crotches cut from the intersection of branch and trunk; and burrs taken from malformations on the trunk. Walnut was most often associated with this late Stuart era; however, yew, maple elm, mulberry, ash and kingwood were also well favoured. Olive and laburnum were the major timbers used for oyster shell pieces.

Marquetry is a form of veneering in which intricate patterns (either pictures or designs) are cut in a series of veneers and then fitted to the surface, much like a jigsaw, and often referred to nowadays as 'inlays'. This technique called for a great variety of colours, so veneer came from a wide variety of trees and the veneers were then dyed, stained or scorched to get the right shades.

Modern timbers are not always available or of the same grain or colour as those from years ago. Old veneers are usually faded from sunlight, so repairs done in new timber of the same variety will often result in too dark a colour. Careful initial selection followed by dyeing or staining is called for in quality restoration work.

Floral marquetry was most popular during the reign of Charles II, and to get the green colour for the leaves, sycamore was stained and given the name of harewood. Marquetry designs may include several different types of timber such as satinwood, ebony, and walnut, each of vastly different colours.

Parquetry is a geometrical form of marquetry and commonly relies on the oyster shell pattern or various other geometrical designs. They are usually done in light coloured woods such as box, holly or sycamore.

Of course, major changes had to occur in the English furniture industry as the trade of joinery had to evolve into the trade of



Oval marquetry inlay table before restoration



Oval marquetry inlay table after restoration



One of the techniques used in the process of repairing marquetry and parquetry work.

cabinet-making under the tutelage of skilled immigrant craftsmen. Indeed it was the cabinet which typified the flamboyant fixture of this new era. They were made with expensive materials such as precious woods, ivory and tortoiseshell, and enriched with metal mounts, sometimes of silver. Cabinets were used by wealthy patrons to house their collections of coins, stones, shells and other precious objects (particularly prior to reliable banking and in times of unrest). Most cabinets were exquisite works of art in their own right, and many are located in private and museum collections today.

Plenty of useful small tables with their decoration of parquetry or marquetry used to be placed around the house for various purposes. Additionally, new types of writing furniture came into existence in the late 1600s, including writing cabinets and later the bureau. Trinket and jewellery boxes, sewing tables, games tables and writing boxes were all quite fashionable.

Unfortunately over the years veneer becomes susceptible to various problems. These may range from water penetration, perhaps from drinks or vases; knots in the underlying timber becoming obvious through the veneer; movement and distortion of the patterns as a result of moving joints in the underlying timber; and general wear and tear causing, sometimes, deep damage to the veneer surfaces.

Annoying and unsightly bubbles may begin to appear as the polish cracks and opens due to the strain of the movement in the underlying timber. Flicking the veneer surface with the fingernail and listening for the sound can alert the tradesman to potential problems in this regard.

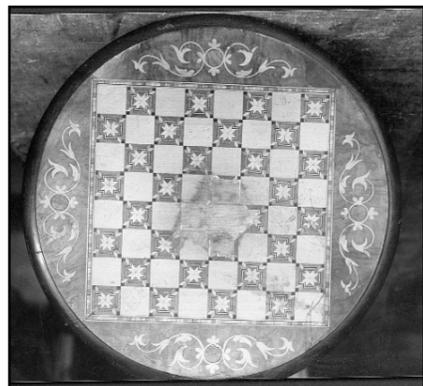
A lot of marquetry shows distinct ridges in it due to the glue creeping upwards. Dents and marks need to be carefully examined before sanding. If they are too deep to sand off, they will have to be removed and replaced. Ideally

this is done by careful selection and colouring of replacement veneers and fitting them after careful consideration of how best to match them in with original grain and veneer patterns.

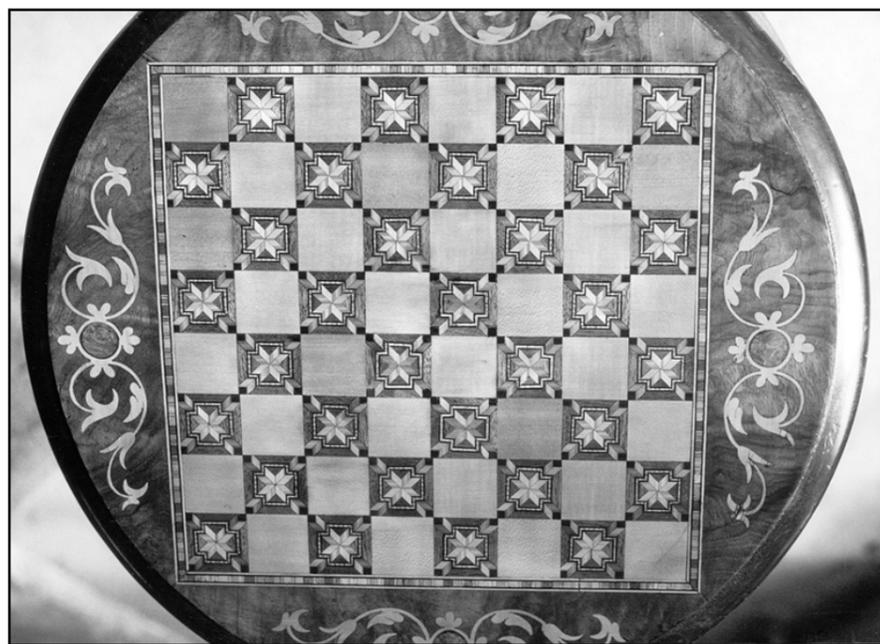
Anything is possible when it comes to the repair or reproduction of marquetry or parquetry patterns. Appropriate choices can be made for each type and style of furniture with consideration of the era from which it came. Where there is a picture, design or pattern which is severely damaged, a copy can always be made. If the original design is completely unrecognisable, research can be conducted to enable a suitable choice of design to be made. Additionally, there is no reason why contemporary original designs cannot be incorporated into new, restored or reproduction furniture should the owner so desire.

Just as in the past, the joy and prestige of owning veneer furniture still exists today. Charles II would be pleased.

GLEN BENNETT  
Veneer Craftsman  
GN Olsson Antique Restorations &  
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Parquetry Sewing table before restoration



Parquetry Sewing table after restoration

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