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Highly Recommended

Finally back in print, "Illustrated Cabinetmaking: How to Design and Construct Furniture That Works" (Fox Chapel) is a book that belongs in every woodworker's library. It is a treasure trove of information on how joints go together and how the many different forms of furniture are assembled. Even after years in the craft, every editor on staff uses this book as a reference and a guide.

— Christopher Schwarz



On the Level

True Dovetales

Most people have the wrong idea about dovetails. They look at the interlocking pins and tails of this fundamental joint and look for gaps as a way to measure the maker's craftsmanship.

This is akin to liking the steel in a chisel because it can be polished to such a nice mirror sheen. It misses the point entirely. Dovetails were developed because they were the strongest way to join two pieces of wood without reliable adhesives at hand.

Their beauty (or ugliness) is incidental.

And so I worry about beginning woodworkers who fret they will never cut a dovetail worth using in a piece of casework. So here's the truth: The first set of dovetails you cut will be great.

They might look like the teeth of an 18th-century British deckhand, but they will hold two boards together better than any other joint you can cut by hand.

When you are done, cover them with moulding. That's what our ancestors did. Until the

Arts & Crafts movement kicked into high gear, most woodworkers went to great lengths to conceal their joinery. They concocted joints — such as the secret mitered dovetail — to conceal the fact that these two boards were dovetailed together. The connection was supposed to be seamless. The joinery invisible.

But about 100 years ago, as machinery pushed out the hand-cut joinery of the 19th century, we became fascinated by expressed joinery. Perhaps this was a reaction to the shoddily made furniture of the Victorian era. Seeing the joinery was your guarantee it wasn't made from dowels. Or perhaps it was because our machines allowed us to join with perfection every time, even if we didn't have the hand skills.

In any case, this was the beginning of a national obsession with tidy rows of perfectly cut dovetails. And once we invented dovetail jigs for the router, we raised the bar even higher. Now we had to imitate a machine that could make them 100-percent airtight.

And so the hand-cutters emphasized the fact that they could space their dovetails irregularly. Then the machines developed the capacity to

space the dovetails irregularly. So now the hand-cutters say they can make dovetails so closely spaced that the distance between them is only a saw kerf (about .042"). And I'm sure the dovetail jig manufacturers are hard at work on a way to counter the hand-dovetailers.

As a result of this tension, we have scads of dovetail jigs and too many magazine articles that show you how to cut the joint by hand (or fool your friends into thinking you did). We here at *Woodworking Magazine* have resolved to focus our efforts elsewhere and skip this conflict entirely. We think there are bigger fish to fry.

However, I'm sure that you need a recommendation for where to begin learning to cut dovetails.

My personal favorite is Rob Cosman's book and DVD on the topic, which he sells for about \$55 on his web site at robcosman.com. We cannot do any better.

Rob's DVD shows what the body positioning, sawing and chiseling looks like.

The accompanying spiral-bound book is a great companion for the shop because it shows you exactly what each step should look like in close-up detail, from layout to the final glue-up.

Rob has taught thousands of people to cut dovetails (heck, I took his advanced class about eight years ago), and he really knows how to teach the process.

I guarantee that dovetailing is something that comes with regular practice. Start to dovetail all your carcasses together and within a short period of time, your dovetails will become tidy and tight. And eventually you will reach the point where you think: Boy, it sure will be a shame to cover those joints with moulding.

And that's exactly what I was thinking as I nailed on the cove moulding on the cover project. *WMM*

"We need 18th-century woodworking tools and techniques about as much as we need 18th-century dentistry."

— Dr. Andrew Friede
woodworker

Christopher Schwarz
Editor