



Robert Novak

Quilted Mahogany

The tale of a magnificent mutant

by Mark Berry

One of the pleasures of woodworking is often the story behind the wood itself. Some wood, specially selected for its striking grain or some other unusual characteristic, will raise eyebrows and interest in its origins. But on rare occasions a wood turns up that practically pops the eyes out of your head. Recently our woodworking firm, Hoddick, Berry and Malakoff, had the good fortune to work with the extraordinary mahogany you see pictured here. The wood was so amazing that I decided to track down its story. Here's what I found.

In 1965 in Honduras' Chicibul jungle, a party of loggers discovered a large mahogany tree—over 100 ft. high, 10 ft. in diameter at the base, 50 ft. to the first branches. The spiraled bark indicated that the wood might be highly figured. Felling and transportation to the mill almost 200 miles away was a daunting prospect, but loggers take pride in being able to fell these monsters, so down it came. Unfortunately it didn't fall where they intended, toppling backward into a large ravine instead. Even after the log was cut in half a D7 Caterpillar tractor couldn't pull it out, so there the tree rested for the next 18 years.

In 1971 Robert Novak, who was running a sawmill in the Chicibul jungle, first heard rumors of a giant figured mahogany tree stuck in a ravine. After Novak left to form his own lumber company, a mill approached him about purchasing the log and after some haggling, a crew was sent into the jungle after it. They quartered the two halves with chainsaws, then dragged and trucked the eight pieces 100 miles through the jungle to the river. The quartered logs were then sawn in half again, pushed into the river and floated 70 miles down river to a steam-powered sawmill—a vestige of early British logging operations.

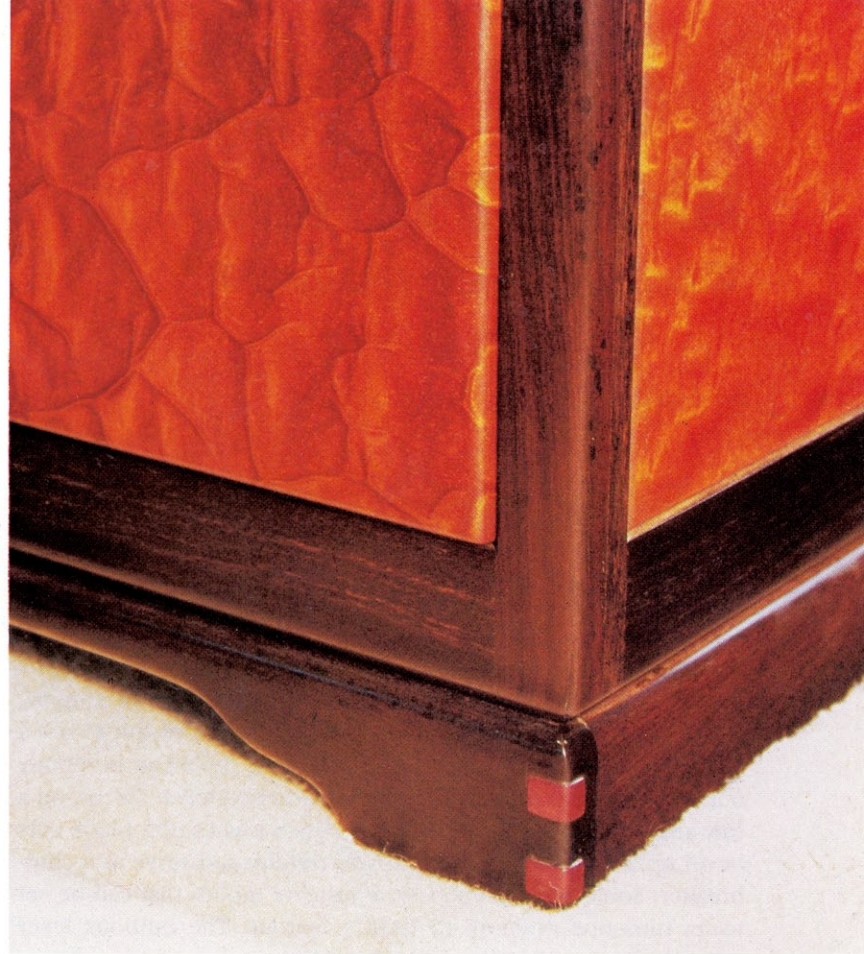
When finally opened at the mill, the log was revealed to be the rarest of the figured mahoganies, technically known as "blistered" or "quilted." The exact cause of this grain pattern is not known, though it is believed to be due to a genetic defect. A 20-year-old desk made of mahogany with an identical figure sat in the mill office, and none of the millhands had seen anything like it in the interim. News of the rare log drew other buyers, and soon a bidding war ensued between Novak, who wanted to mill it as lumber, and two firms, one German, one



One-sixteenth of the original quilted mahogany log emerges (left) after a 70-mile float to a Honduran sawmill. Above, the freshly bandsawn boards, some almost 4 ft. wide, are sorted before being stacked for air drying. Berry and his partners resawn and laminated the mahogany to plywood for the carcase of the dresser (right and far right). The ebony border helps keep the wood's extraordinary figure from overpowering the piece. The end grain of the solid drawer fronts displays the same figure as the face.



Fritz Hoddick



Fritz Hoddick

American, who wanted it for veneer. Novak won.

The huge pieces were pushed through the mill's 40-in.-throat bandsaw under Novak's close supervision, each log carefully positioned for the best possible cut. The entire milling operation took 12 days. The yield was nearly 12,000 bd. ft., of which about a third had true blistered or quilted figure, another third had more of a wavy, ribbon figure, and the balance was a combination of these two and about three other grain patterns.

When air-dried to 35%, the wood was shipped to Miami, and drying completed in an evaporator kiln. Mahogany usually takes approximately 11 days to kiln dry. This mahogany took 30 days because of its greater density and the special care and gradual drying required by the wavy grain. Half the wood remained in Miami, while the other half was shipped to Handloggers Hardwood Lumber, run by Tim Mahoney in Sausalito, California. Novak sold the rest directly to woodworkers around the country to whom he had sent a mailing.

A brochure printed by Novak preceded the shipment to Handloggers, stirring up interest in the woodworking community. My partners, Peter Malakoff and Fritz Hoddick, and I were among the first to see it. The lumber was incredible. Straight, flat, fully figured and without defect, the boards were over 1-in. thick, 10-ft. to 14-ft. long and 6-in. to 36-in. wide. The price: \$10 to \$30 a board foot, depending on width. As we went through the stack we were joined by a man who had heard about the wood and wanted to buy some and have furniture made from it. Peter Malakoff cleared his throat and mentioned that we happened to be woodworkers. A relationship quickly developed, and we soon found 250 bd. ft. of figured mahogany (the pick of the shipment) stacked in our shop.

Having got the wood and the client, we had to figure out how best to use it. Design is particularly crucial when using a highly-figured wood, as the wood can easily be overpowering. Eli Sutton, a free-lance designer with whom we often work, came up with a modern rendering of the classic Japanese *tansu*, a traditional chest with doors and drawers. The ebony frames the wood

like a picture; a simple and elegant solution. The client liked it enough to commission two, one for himself and one for a friend.

Because of the rarity and expense of the figured mahogany, we had the 1-in. thick boards resawn. The risk of the blade wandering in the 18-in. to 24-in. wide boards forced us to settle for splitting the boards in half. After resawing and thickness sanding (planing was out of the question), we were left with veneers slightly over $\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick.

We glued the $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. veneers onto $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. Finnish birch plywood and then fit the $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. panels in the frames. We couldn't bring ourselves to put ordinary backs on these pieces, so we installed figured-mahogany panels there, too. As I began working the wood, I noticed another amazing feature: the figure on the edge grain *and* end grain was almost identical to that of the face grain. The wood was also exceptionally dense and quite stable.

The solid quilted-mahogany drawer fronts form a pattern taken from a hexagram in the *I Ching* that has special significance for the client. The drawers, which slide on Accuride glides, are fitted with Tutch latches, so that no hardware mars the lines of the hexagram. Finished with four coats of Tungseal and a coat of Trewax, the quilted mahogany has matured with the passage of time to a deep, rich brown with a striking iridescence.

Having whetted your appetite for this extraordinary wood, I have to say that only about 1,000 bd. ft. remains at Handloggers (PO Box 1625, Sausalito, Calif. 94966), and Novak (PO Box 1365, Sausalito, Calif. 94966) also has some. But don't give up hope. When I last spoke with Robert Novak he was making plans to have the 12-ft. long butt of the log (about 3,000 bd. ft.) pulled out of the jungle. He also told me the following story. After his wood had been milled he took a sample to a friend at another Honduran mill. His friend called over his tree hunters and said, "I'll give anyone \$1,000 who finds a tree like this." So with a cash incentive and a little luck maybe we won't have to wait another 20 years. □

Mark Berry works wood with his partners in San Rafael, Calif.