

Magic Finished Case Has Hidden Drawers

Woodworker Brian Grabski pushes custom design limits.



Photo courtesy Brian Grabski

Walnut and elm burl veneer top is finished with imported Kusmi shellac.

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Brian Grabski, a Minneapolis, MN-based commercial woodworker, specializes in building custom interiors and one-of-a-kind furniture. To learn the trade, Grabski worked summers in cabinet shops during high school, and while earning a business degree at the University of Colorado. After graduation in 2005, he opened his one-man shop in Minneapolis, creating custom kitchens, cabinets, business offices, tables, bureaus, even pool tables.

Some of his provocative pieces carry hidden compartments, revealed only after a series of complex maneuvers opening doors, drawers and sliding bolts or pins — the bookcase shown here is one such project.

Grabski conjures up his special antique finish effects by using old fashioned techniques and materials. The look and feel of the painted bookcase surface replicates older traditional finishes. The milk paint used on this bookcase consists of milk protein, clay, earth pigments, and lime. Where conventional paint can chip and scratch, milk paint penetrates into the grain, polishing as it wears, says Grabski.

For this piece, Grabski used three layers of color: lexington green, barn red, and pitch black, in that order. "The subtle complexities will improve as the furniture wears, creating a tortoiseshell appearance," he says. In addition, Grabski added small tear-outs and other "hand tool marks" to create the authentic look of a genuine antique piece of furniture, along with custom wood drawer slides and full mortise solid brass hardware.

To create the rich tones on the walnut and Carpathian elm burl book matched veneer top, he used Kusmi #1 button shellac imported directly from India. The shellac is applied over a preliminary coat of boiled linseed oil. "The oil penetrates the wood, giving a maximum illumination to the fibers," says Grabski. "No other finish can compare when it comes to the illumination of the natural beauty inherent in the wood."

To assure purity in the ethanol solvent used for dissolving the shellac, Grabski eschews ordinary denatured alcohol, using instead 190 proof Everclear (95% pure ethanol) as his preferred shellac solvent.

"It's not only what's visible that makes this piece unique, but also what goes unseen," Grabski notes. Built into the bookcase is a hidden drawer, accessed by pulling each of the visible drawers open to a certain point before latches they control slide out of the way, like pins in door lock. That allows a length of wooden dowel to slide out — hidden as a knot in the wood itself — opening a secret compartment built into what looks like normal moulding. View more project photos at designedandmade.com.

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See Brian Grabski's hidden drawer bookcase video in an April 21, 2010 blog at woodworkingnetwork.com