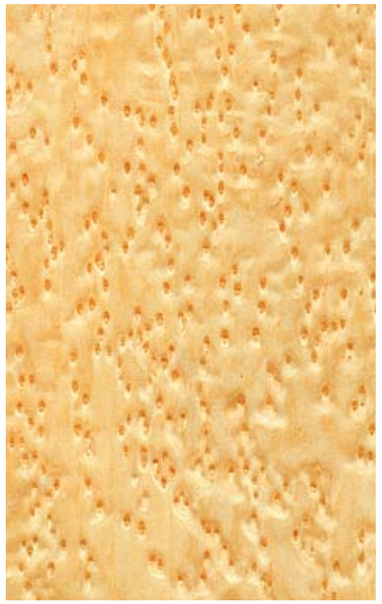
Veneering

Veneering is a perfect way to exploit the natural variety of wood

"People often talk about veneer," wrote Graham Laird in GW103, "as if it implies poor quality. So why," he asked, "should anyone want to use it?" Why? Well, the answer's as obvious as the implication of poor quality is mistaken: veneering affords you the opportunity to introduce an extraordinary degree of variety, class and polish to your woodworking. It allows you to do things that would be either impractical, impossible or simply unaffordable with solid timber. You can veneer man-made boards, for example, to create large panels that look like solid timber but which have none of the problems of movement. You can exploit the decorative beauty of burrs, say, in ways that you couldn't if you tried using them in the solid. You can lend your work the outward appearance of exotic timbers while using more workaday woods for the inner structure – which, if nothing else, is good stewardship of a precious resource. And if you want to add decorative detail, there's marquetry. Oh, but then that's another chapter...

A remarkable palette

If you've ever fancied giving veneering a go but thought of it as a dark art rather than a practical craft, then you should forget about the mechanics, about the cutting and the matching and the gluing. Think instead about the palette that is provided by wood's natural variety. Almost anything you can make can be painted with the unique grains, colours and figures of veneer. And if that doesn't inspire you to warm your glue pot, nothing will!



▲ Selected figured maple stock is peeled to reveal the classic bird's eye detail

▲ So-called quilted bubinga comes from an African hardwood that's similar to rosewood

▲ The most widely used veneer is the rotary-cut form, more commonly known as kevasingo

▲ Zebrano provides spectacularly attractive veneers when sliced from quarter-sawn stock

▲ The flecked, swirling figuring of masur birch is caused by boring larvae attacking the wood

A quick walk in the woods

The organic and wonderfully capricious quality of that palette is perfectly illustrated by burr (or burl) veneer, which comes from the outgrowths that can occur where a tree has been damaged or infested by mould and insects. When sliced into veneer, the close-packed and dormant buds that make up the burr are transformed into the whorls of its unmistakable figure.

The ink-on-parchment pattern of masur birch, meanwhile, is caused by the work of woodboring larvae, though no-one has a satisfactory explanation for the unique figuring in bird's-eye maple

It doesn't necessarily take galls or grubs to give us decorative figuring, though. The irregular grain of a tree stump is used to produce butt veneer, which is a less dramatic alternative to burr. A further variation comes in the form of curl veneer, which is taken from a fork in a tree. Rotary cutting – which slices layers from a whole log as you might peel a potato – turns the three-dimensional diverging grain into a feather-like two-dimensional figure.

In the same way, depending on how they're cut, wavy grained woods can give rise to striking effects such as quilted bubinga, or that favourite of musical instrument makers, fiddleback sycamore.

You'll find much more conventional figuring in crown-cut veneer, which is taken from a half-round log by taking tangential slices. This produces decorative veneers that can be as wide as 24in. They also have the same figure as plain sawn boards – whorls where the older, smaller growth rings meet the face at more acute angles, and lines where the larger rings meet the face at more obtuse angles – which is why it's often used in cabinet making.

When timber is quarter-sawn, on the other hand, the radial cuts will reveal the rays in woods like oak or plane, and the striping of the growth rings in timbers such as zebrano.

Bare essentials

You need just a few specialist tools to enable you to try your hand at veneering.

Veneer saw
The teeth of a veneer saw have no set, and are designed to cut on the pull stroke only. For all the thinness of veneers, you should expect to take several passes to achieve a clean cut. See ***Jointing***

Veneer tape
Gummed paper tape that's wetted and used to hold veneer sections together. The gum Arabic it uses is veneer-safe, and as the tape dries, it shrinks slightly, ensuring a tight joint. After gluing, the tape's easily removed by simply wetting and scraping it. For some alternative taping practices, see ***Jointing***.

Electric iron
Handy for exploiting the property of pearl glue that means it can be softened by heating, allowing you to press the veneer and ensure a sound bond to the substrate. See ***Hammer veneering***.

Scalpel/craft knife
Handy for fine work, or just because you've already got one in the workshop, but see ***Jointing*** for advice on cutting square edges with knives.

Glue pot
If you're going to use pearl glue – and it's good stuff – you'll need a means to keep it warm. Simple double-walled kettles stand on a stove or hotplate that heats the water in the outer pot, which keeps the glue in the inner pot at a working temperature without the risk of burning. If the veneering bug bites, you can buy a thermostatically controlled electric glue pot – a Teasmade for gelatine, really.
See ***Adhesives*** p54

Veneer hammer
When drawn down the veneer with a side-to-side motion, the hammer encourages any excess glue to move from the centre of the veneer to the edges. You can make yourself a veneer hammer by mounting a strip of acrylic or brass into a wooden block with a handle. The trick is to relieve the edges of the strip so that there's nothing sharp to catch the veneer. Some people make theirs from 3in hinges whose round backs make good bearers.