

POCKET CEU: EXOTIC WOODS MAKE WOOD INTO ART

Sabra Waldfoegel

Learning Objectives

When designers finish reading this Pocket CEU, they will be able to:

- Define the term "exotic wood."
- List at least five species of exotic woods and describe the color or pattern that makes them unique.
- Define at least two terms related to figure in exotic wood.
- Explain why exotic woods are most commonly used in the form of veneer.
- Describe how exotic woods are commonly used in furniture design.



An exotic wood can be used as an accent on the most visible part of a cabinet. Nick Berman's Sunset console shows the impact of zebrawood used as a cabinet door. Courtesy of Nick Berman Design, Los Angeles, CA.

Exotic woods sound exotic: Anigre. Bubinga. Cocobolo. Padauk. Zebrawood. But if you ask the USDA's Forest Service, the technical definition is plain and simple. Exotic wood is anything that doesn't grow in North America. Balsa wood, the fragile stuff that model airplanes are made of, is as exotic as African ebony.

Furniture and veneer makers think a little differently. Niall Barrett, a New York state furniture maker, says, "An exotic can be anything that looks odd." The bright orange of cocobolo, the striking-purple color of purpleheart, the deep-brown of wenge, and the matte black of ebony are all part of their appeal. So are unusual patterns. Eric Thompson, vp of sales and marketing for Brookside Veneers, agrees, "We start with the imported definition, then add 'figure' to it—a pattern created by nature that's different from a standard growth pattern." If the definition is visual, then there are "domestic exotics" as well—familiar woods like maple, ash, or walnut that are unusually and strikingly "figured."

Suppliers think in terms of rarity. Exotic woods come from species that grow in the wild in specific areas of the world. Barrett says, "You can't farm cocobolo trees. They take a hundred years to mature. They're

part of a complete ecosystem." As a result, they're scarcer than trees that are cultivated on plantations, like teak or mahogany. Cocobolo trees are more expensive, and their use brings up environmental issues that the use of cultivated species does not.

Environmental Issues

For some designers—and some clients—the use of exotic woods is highly charged. Feelings about deforestation are so strong that some designers avoid exotic woods altogether. Thompson urges designers to "not equate exotic or imported with poorly managed forests or degraded forests. Be open to imported species and not assume because it's imported that it's illegal or poorly managed or poorly harvested."

There are several kinds of oversight that can help designers and their customers in using exotic wood. The Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species (CITES) uses scientific criteria to decide if a tree species is endangered, and will then put it on watchlists or ban it from international trade. Thompson recommends that designers "take a balanced approach and don't use anything that's been labeled as endangered."

Other watchdog groups provide certification that tropical forests are being well managed. The International Tropical Timber Association (ITTO) maintains a website with white papers and links to information on certification. Anyone who is working with a furniture maker or hardwood supplier can ask about certification for the way the trees are managed and the wood is harvested.

Because exotic woods are scarce, the market tends to regulate the supply. Rick White, warehouse manager for Rockler Woodworking in Minneapolis, says, "A region will dry up for political reasons and the wood is no longer available. One wood might get so expensive that people will start using a substitute." S. Lloyd Natof observes, studio furniture maker in Chicago observes, "If a material becomes expensive, there's more incentive to manage the forest well."

How to Recognize Exotic Woods

While designers don't need the same skill in identifying wood that furniture makers or woodworkers do, being able to distinguish them has its advantages. Clients like to know. Martin Goebel, a studio furniture maker in St. Louis, researches wood for designers and clients. He says, "interior



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A plain design can showcase the figure of an exotic wood. In Nick Berman's entry-hall table, the striped figure of zebrawood adds visual interest to a simple shape. Courtesy of Nick Berman Design, Los Angeles, CA.

designers and clients want to know a lot about it so they can talk about it. They like the romance of it."

The qualities that make woods exotic—color and pattern—are easy to see, even in unfinished wood. Barrett describes commonly used woods by their appearance: "There's zebrawood, a dark brown, honey-colored stripe. Padauk is a red. Purpleheart is purple. Cocobolo or African rosewood isn't really rosewood. It can vary and be all kinds of colors, orange, black striped."

The sidebar describes some of the most commonly used woods, including their origins, their appearance, and their typical uses.

The other quality that distinguishes exotic woods is figure, or unusual patterns in the grain. Furniture makers will refer to burl, birds-eye, or pommele; they will call wood "curly"; they will talk about crotch wood. Those terms are also defined in an additional sidebar.

The Importance of Veneer

Because exotic woods are relatively expensive, they're rarely used as solid stock. Goebel says, "The majority of exotic hard-

woods, both in commercial and studio applications, are used as veneer." There's a practical reason. "You can take the best of the best logs and veneer it off. You can stretch a log. You can get 10 or 20 times the wood with the use of veneer." Using veneer is also a way to be environmentally sensitive. "I like the smaller environmental footprint that veneer has," says Natof.

Veneer also allows for a different approach to design. Natof finds that veneers give him options that lumber doesn't. He says, "For design, I like how they free me up. They don't have a grain that's drawing the eye in a line." He likes the nonlinear quality of veneer. Figured veneers like burl can give a piece of furniture a three-dimensional quality. He says, "It moves from being an emulation of a board to being an object. If you take a square and veneer it with burl, you see the object much more. It moves the eye around it."

Natof realizes that many people associate veneers with splitting or separating, based on their experience with antique furniture. Contemporary techniques and glues have changed the quality of work in veneer. Many studio makers use a thick veneer that can wear well. Goebel, who resaws his



Natof's credenza is made of cluster-burl walnut and veneered in pommele maple. The pulls are satin nickel, and it measures 26" deep x 80" wide x 40" high. Courtesy of S. Lloyd Natof; photography by Joe Davis.

vener to 1/8" says, "It has the characteristics of solid wood. Bumps and nicks can be sanded out or refinished. Ordinary use won't destroy the furniture."

How Exotic Woods Are Used

Most exotic veneer goes into making furniture. Hartman says, "It isn't used in production furniture mode, since there's a limited quantity of wood available and the price is prohibitive. You see it in customization or in studio work."

Handmade-furniture makers tend to use exotic woods to provide visual appeal or accents. Goebel likes to use two or three different woods in a piece, using a native hardwood for the main parts of a piece and reserving the flashier wood for panels, veneers, or inlay. He uses exotic wood on sections that will be seen, like cabinet doors or a veneered top of a table. "There's no reason to use cocobolo on the back legs of a chair that will be against the wall. It's on the focal point of each piece—where everyone's eye will go," says Goebel.

Handmade furniture made from exotic wood is part furniture and part sculpture. Furniture makers, who live for wood and the beauty of wood, are effusive about the

aesthetic side of what they do. Natof likes the idea of adding beauty to the world. Goebel describes his work as "a functional piece of art."

Furniture makers also use veneer on pieces with larger surfaces. Hartman says, "When you have a nice big expanse, it shows the beauty of the wood." One of the most common uses for exotic veneer is on desktops or tabletops, which can be designed to create patterns within patterns like starbursts or lozenges. Some furniture designers are also using exotic veneer on cabinets and built-ins. Patterning can provide a focal point for the piece and add to the look of a room. "It's good to have some patterning and it can be done with exotic woods. What's beautiful is the pattern," says Christine Hartman, manager for the Minneapolis showroom of Holly Hunt.

The remainder of exotic veneer is used for wall paneling or doors. Wood can provide warmth to a space that paint or plaster won't. In public or corporate spaces, it can also signal status or grandeur. According to Thompson, having wood on a large expanse in a room "creates a visual effect with a pattern that adds a great deal of pizzazz to a space."



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This Brentwood Credenza and Bookcase from Southcone is made from mohna. Once thought to be a kind of mahogany, mohna is blonder than the better known mahogany. Southcone imports their mohna from Peru and Ecuador.

Exotic Woods in Room Design

Like all wood, exotic woods add warmth and richness to a space. But exotic woods have special visual appeal. "The main reason to use exotic woods is their color and rich tone. They can be iridescent or striped. The colors are absolutely stunning," says Goebel.

From a design point of view, exotic woods behave more like fabric than wood, in that they provide color and pattern. They can work on two levels, from far away and close up. Natof says, "Designers shouldn't be afraid of visually dramatic grain. At a distance, it fades to color and texture. Only when you get close do you see the detail and activity. Designers are comfortable working with color and texture, and that's what they are at a distance of six to eight feet."

Exotic woods can please the eye. A piece of furniture made from exotic wood can be the centerpiece in a room. And the beauty of exotic wood can be used in a way that preserves the environment while delighting everyone who sees it.

Further Resources

Wood Information and Identification

"Tropical Hardwoods, Tech Sheets," based on Martin Chudnoff, *Tropical Timbers of the World: Agriculture Handbook #607* (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, Forest Products Laboratory, Madison, WI, 1984). In-depth descriptions, no images. Online at www2.fpl.fs.fed.us/TechSheets/tropicalwood.html.

"Exotic Woods," an exhaustive website maintained as a labor of love by a woodworker and enthusiast. Many images of both finished and raw wood. Online at www.hobbitthouseinc.com/personal/woodpics.

"Index to information about some hardwood species," a shorter list of exotic woods, based on Chudnoff's material, maintained by Hibdon Hardwood Inc. Descriptions and images. Online at www.hibdonhardwood.com/speciesinfo/SpeciesSelect.html.

Environmental Issues

The International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) maintains a website that discusses issues relevant to tropical-forest management. Online at www.itto.or.jp/live/index.jsp.