

Swansong for a dovetail

Pro furniture-maker *Nicholas Chandler* asks: is the dovetail a dead duck?

Here's one for you. What's more than 4000 years old, but yet still one of the strongest, most attractive joints around? Yes, I'm talking about the dovetail.

It was used by the Ancient Egyptians at the temple of Kom Ombo and to this day remains a statement of a furniture maker's skill. At exhibitions, any chest of drawers or desk is pounced upon with glee and relish by professionals and amateurs alike, drawers opened and heads tilted to inspect the dovetails, with comments made as to whether they are hand-cut or, shame of shames, machine-cut (cue sucking of teeth, shaking of heads and muttering in beards).

They're the emblem, the badge of pride, the benchmark of a fine craftsman. The things stay together even if the glue has dried up around them. Try asking that of a dowel joint. It's still a matter of considerable pride amongst many makers that their dovetails are hand-cut in an age where we take for granted that the bulk of the making of a piece of furniture is done by machine and power tools for speed.

This opens up a whole can of worms regarding what is and what is not acceptable these days in the nature of craftsmanship.

David Savage said last year in this magazine that dovetails are for amateurs to get worked up about, not for the professional maker. Was he right? Has the dovetail had its day?

He was, in fairness, writing about box making and dovetailing the box together with through dovetails at their corners. Point



▲ This walnut chest with incredible dovetailing detail dates from around 1600 and lives in Seville, Spain

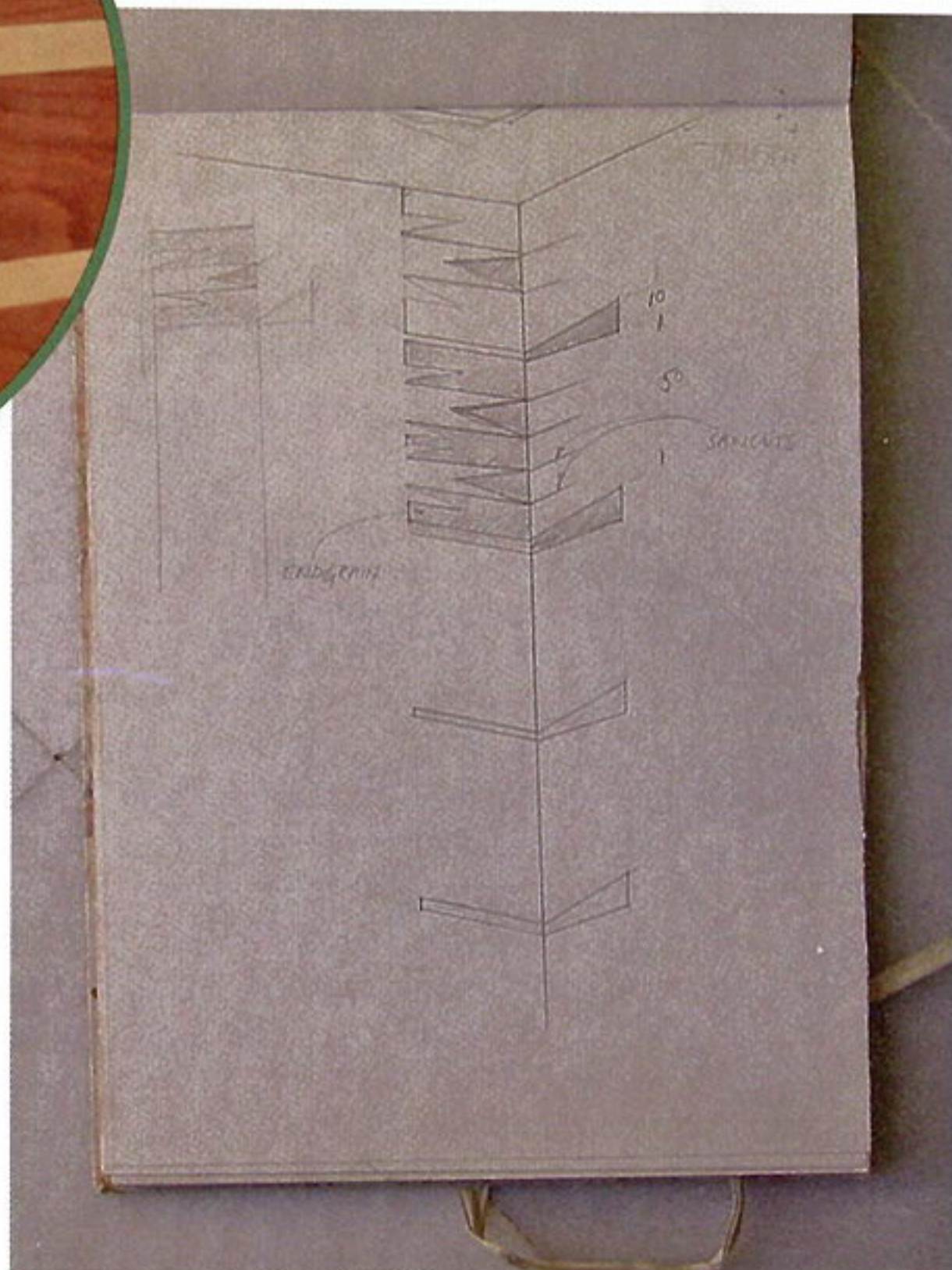
taken. These days you rarely find a hand-made box showing off dovetails proudly. Boxes are usually veneered and adorned in many other ways, and the dovetail has to be used judiciously. The question is, or should be: will the overall appearance and design be enhanced by the addition of dovetails?

In the early 19th century, the Barnsley workshop and the other members of the Cotswold school used dovetails as a means of



◀ A bedside cabinet, made by Nicholas, with hand-cut dovetails on the drawer

expression. The joints bore witness to the almost missionary nature of their work and philosophy: that the hand is mightier than the machine and there is honour and dignity in working with one's hands. The decorative dovetails in their designs were used



▲ These dovetails are machine-cut but still pleasing to the eye

▶ A drawing of some intricate dovetailing that Nicholas found on a chest in a Devon church

▲ The dovetail has long been the ultimate symbol of a woodworker's skill; looking at this chest, it's easy to see why

wisely and not all were on show in a marked manner.

These days as I visit designer maker furniture shows and see desks and chests, less and less of traditional drawer making and fitting is to be seen even from that bastion of English furniture making schools, the Edward Barnsley Trust. You should have heard the collective intake of

A furniture designer and maker for 19 years, Nicholas lives, works and teaches in Spain. Contact him on 00 34 627 815 881

breath from makers at the collector's cabinet they once showed that had slick, unseen, self-closing drawer runners made from steel, nylon, ball bearings and springs!

The cabinet won't suffer from sticking drawers in the winter, or drawers that twist and lock in the summer; neither will they have to be replaced in 10 years' time when the runners wear down and the wood must be replaced. It's all about 'contemporary design' and 'ease of use', you see.

Contemporary design

In these days of high turnover and bigger profit margins, do dovetails have a place in a contemporary design sense? They certainly make no commercial sense whatsoever, being demanding and very time-consuming to produce.

The nature of handmade furniture making is changing. As the nature of modern design is changing to reflect the mores of celebrity home makeover TV programmes, so is the manner of the making. And the dovetail's place within it is becoming smaller and smaller.

As an academic exercise, there is no joint finer than an array of dovetails to tax the impatience of

the new woodworker. It's either dead right or it looks awful.

My first apprentice, Matt, was doing just fine up to the moment when he cut his first batch. He sheepishly showed them to me and said: "Do you mind if I make them again?" I was delighted that he had said it first. He chopped them off, prepared the stock and had another go. And another. And another... of course, he slowly got better at them, because it's impossible to get worse.

There is just so much written about making this joint. How to fudge and fettle a fit, how to undercut the land between the pins, how to fill gaps when you've sawn over the line... but all it comes down to is control. And by that I mean hand/eye coordination and lots and lots of practice.

On my furniture-making courses, the point I stress most of all at regular intervals, is that if you can cut to a line with a plane, saw or a chisel and be confident about it, I have taught you all that I can. It's all about the confidence that only comes with practice.

Next time you try a dovetail, prepare that stock, draw in those lines, take up that saw and remember that what you're about to do may be a dying art. ↘