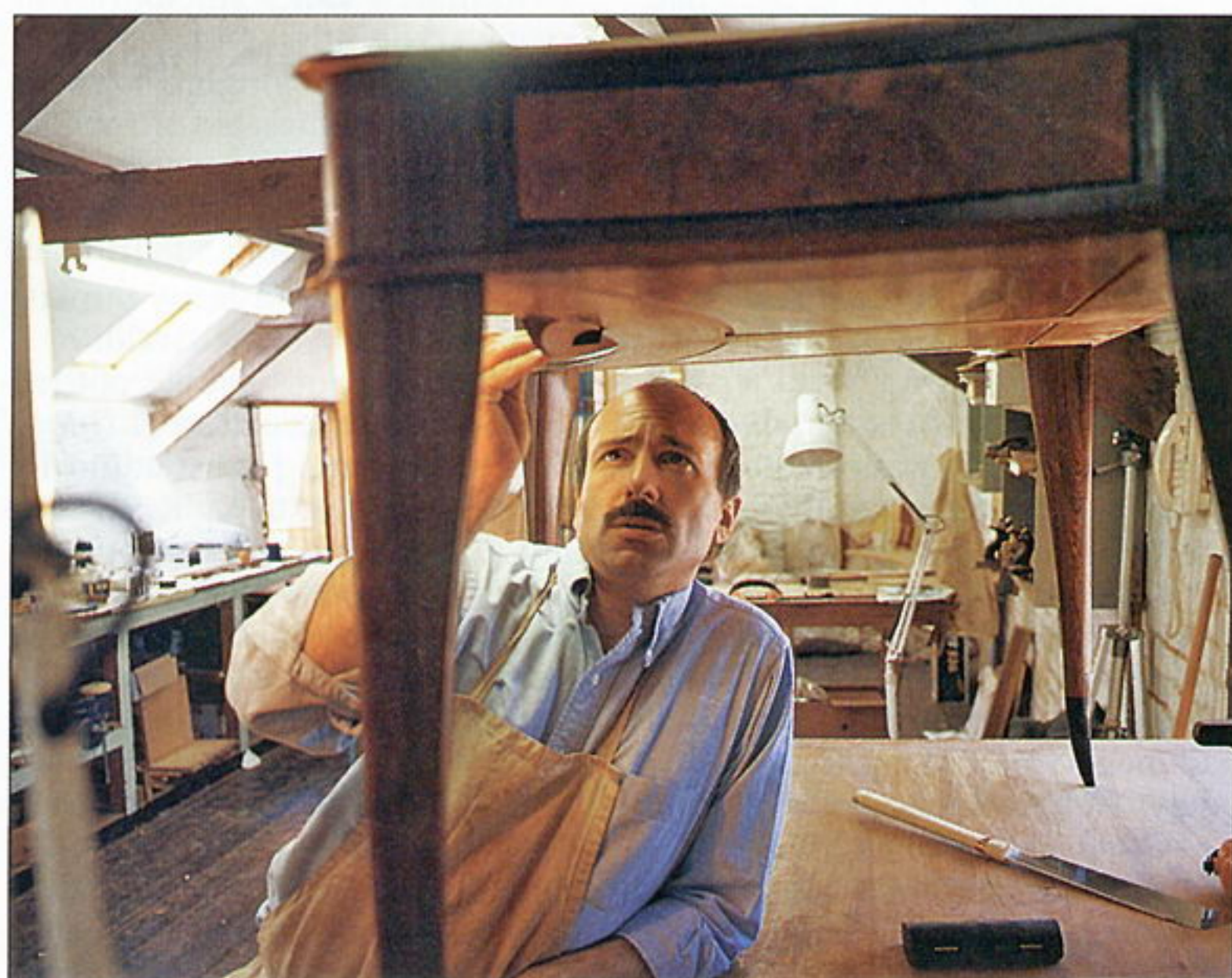


“Nick put it in his vice and tugged and pulled on it until he went quite red in the face. The joint was unbreakable, the only damage suffered being to the jaws of his vice”

Breaking the rules

David Savage argues that some commissions demand a non-purist approach



DESCRIBED in F&C No. 9 two very special commissions we received for three very special pieces of furniture.

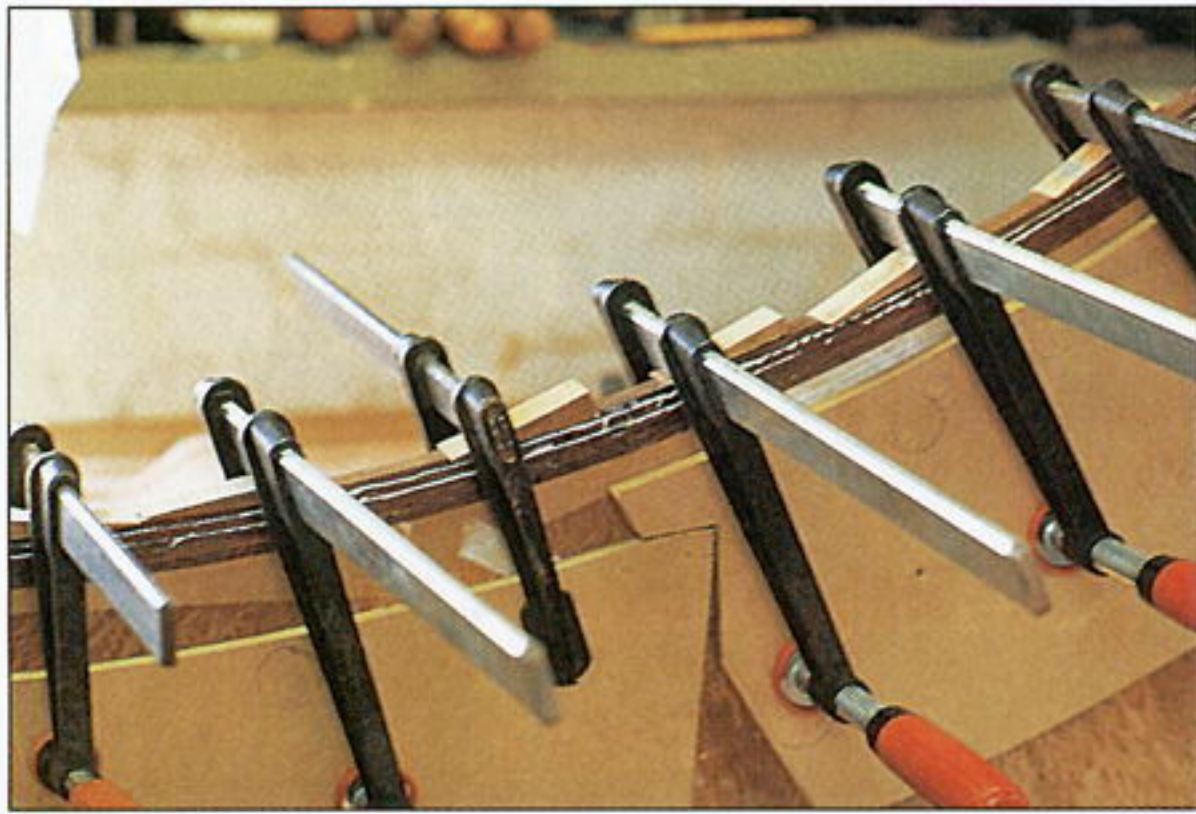
The first was a writing table with a matching chair to be made in rosewood with vavona (*Sequoia sempervirens*) burr and ebony details. The second commission was for a similar chair also made in rosewood to complement another writing table that we had made some months earlier for a London client.

These commissions were linked in my mind because they followed a similar line of development, both involving curvaceous and sensual shapes in dark hardwoods with richly figured burrs and black ebony detailing.

The desk was worked on first, craftsman Nick Chandler draw- ➤



● **DAVID SAVAGE** is a well-known designer-maker and writer on the subject. He now offers courses in cabinetmaking from his workshops in Bideford, Devon. He can be contacted on 01237 451515.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: The lippings for the front and side edges of the desk are laminated; in this case the 2mm thick laminates were bent onto the MDF desk top and held in place with wedges; three laminates were glued up at one time



ABOVE: The sides of the desk are of veneered and shaped mahogany; the burr panel was scribed around prior to fitting a rosewood banding



ing out a fully sized rod. When a design idea goes up to scale everything changes. In this instance we didn't need to develop a construction method because this desk was following a constructional approach that I had used many times before, but we did need to develop the shapes and the forms that we were going to use.

Head-scratcher

The legs of the desk especially caused us to scratch our heads and fiddle around. I wanted the feet of the legs to flare outwards. I have done this many times in many different pieces of furniture but this time I wanted to combine a rosewood leg with an ebony foot.

To gain strength for this we adopted a technique developed at Parnham of drilling both pieces before fitting a decent length of threaded steel rod to link them.

“The design was progressively tightened, with only one facet of each leg being changed at a time, until the whole piece came together”

The gap between the threaded rod and the drilled hole is taken up by epoxy resin.

This joint was tested when one of the legs Nick was shaping went a bit too far, requiring a new leg to be made.

Nick put it in his vice and tugged and pulled on it until he went quite red in the face. The joint was unbreakable, the only damage suffered being to the jaws of his vice.

Often in this sort of high risk work the shapes and forms involved are pushing the boundaries of constructional forms.

This may offend many purists who feel that screws, Araldite and threaded rods should not feature in the construction of fine furniture — and I must admit I have flinched at using them myself for some time — but adherence to old-fashioned joinery techniques like mortice and tenons and dovetails imposes limitations on the desired shape.

Uncomfortable

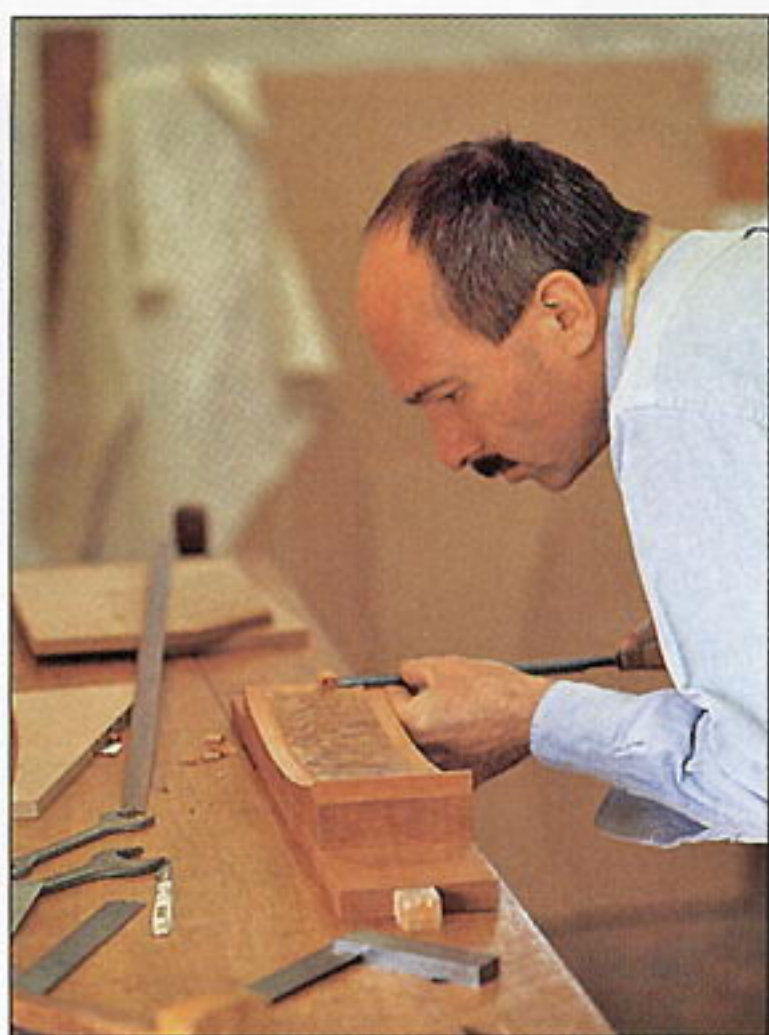
As a designer I begin to get uncomfortable, but as a woodworker I admit that while feeling right about using these tech-



ABOVE: The desk top showing the vavona panels framed with rosewood bandsawn veneers



ABOVE: Nick Chandler cleans up the desk front moulding



RIGHT: Letting in the rosewood bandings to the desk sides; these are 2mm thick bandsawn veneers

niques took some time, if they work then what the hell!

I am a great believer in a shape or form being exactly right or exactly wrong, with no half-way point or fudging of the issue. Either the blessed thing is dead right or you might as well not bother; and the view of what IS dead right changes as the object is evolving in the workshop.

I am lucky to work with a highly skilled craftsman because that keeps me slightly at a distance from the piece of furniture, and I hope keeps me that little bit more critical.

This was shown most clearly when we came to fitting the legs onto the desk for the first time. We had made four beautifully shaped legs — all of them slightly different because the shape of the desk demanded asymmetrically shaped ones.

Each looked and felt great until we fitted them on the desk and

stood the desk on its feet, when very suddenly my athletic dancer, *see F&C 9*, had a very bad case of heavy thighs.

New profile

For days I walked around the desk trying to catch it unawares; I find that looking at something for too long muddles the critical faculties. On forming a view of a particular angle I drew a new line on the leg with a white chinagraph pencil, Nick took off the leg and patiently spokeshaved it back to the new profile.

The design was progressively tightened, with only one facet of each leg being changed at a time, until the whole piece came together.

Curved surfaces especially need careful consideration. A curve can either be flaccid and loose or it can have speed and movement. During this process of refining and enriching, the

new workshop word 'wang' was christened.

"Has this curve enough 'wang' for you, Sir," Nick would ask — this mode of address itself being unusual because it's not often I'm called 'Sir'.

A good design will start off with a very clear idea and then become very complex as it develops into solving all the technical problems and working out structurally how the piece can be made.

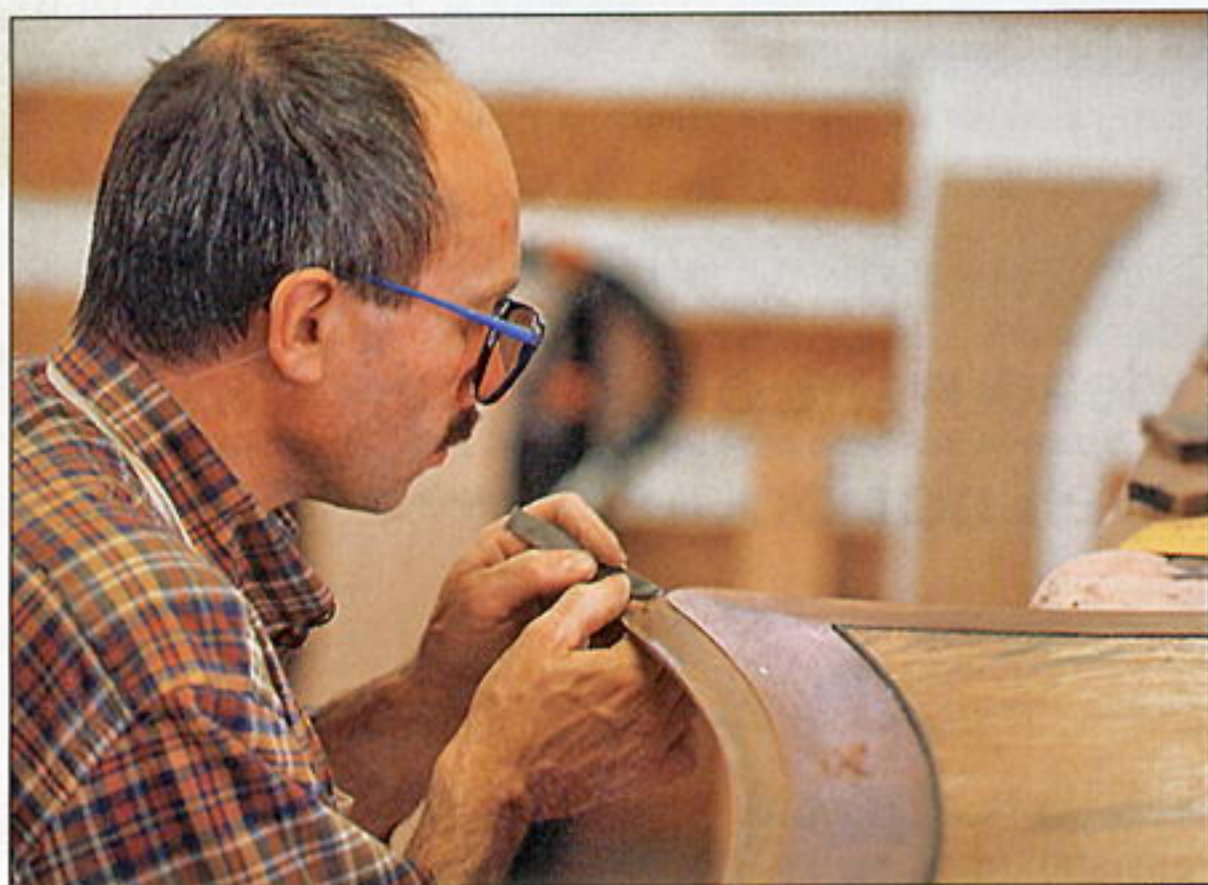
With a successful design, that complexity will be resolved and it will again come full circle to a simple straightforward idea. Good designs in my view are economical both in time and materials.

Essential simplicity

I mentioned the idea of enriching the design, a motive that should not be confused with making a design over-complex. For me all ►



ABOVE: Desk top is veneered with burr panels after a night in the vacuum bag



ABOVE: Using a blade from a Stanley multi-plane, Nick is scraping the moulding and clarifying the shape after routing

of the greatest pieces of furniture are essentially very simple, but often rich and varied rather than dull and plain.

This kind of simplicity unfolds itself gradually upon acquaintance, as if the fundamentals of the design have imploded rather than exploded.

Awareness of the variety and subtlety of the piece comes only with prolonged acquaintance. These subtle mouldings are built into the piece to provide delight and extra sumptuousness to the image.

Quite often these enrichments can come as the direct result of a technical complication; this occurred with the surface of the desk, comprising two burr veneer panels framed with rosewood, *see panel*.

I feel that at times I'm working

against cabinetmaking instincts, for the cabinetmaker always wants the piece dead right, with the joints fitting exactly and the surfaces absolutely flat and smooth.

Take heed

Certainly all of these aims and objectives are perfectly right, especially when constructional integrity is desired; but when cabinetmaking becomes engineering in wood then I am afraid I lose a lot of interest.

Don't confuse this with adopting new techniques and new constructional methods just for the sake of it.

Many designers in the recent past have been badly bitten by new materials that have appeared on the market and shown new design opportunities only to display their inadequacies a few years later.

Personally I think long and

hard before adopting new techniques and new materials, and they have to offer something very positive to the design process before I'll do it; for example I still finish my desks and chairs using transparent shellac rather than melamine lacquer.

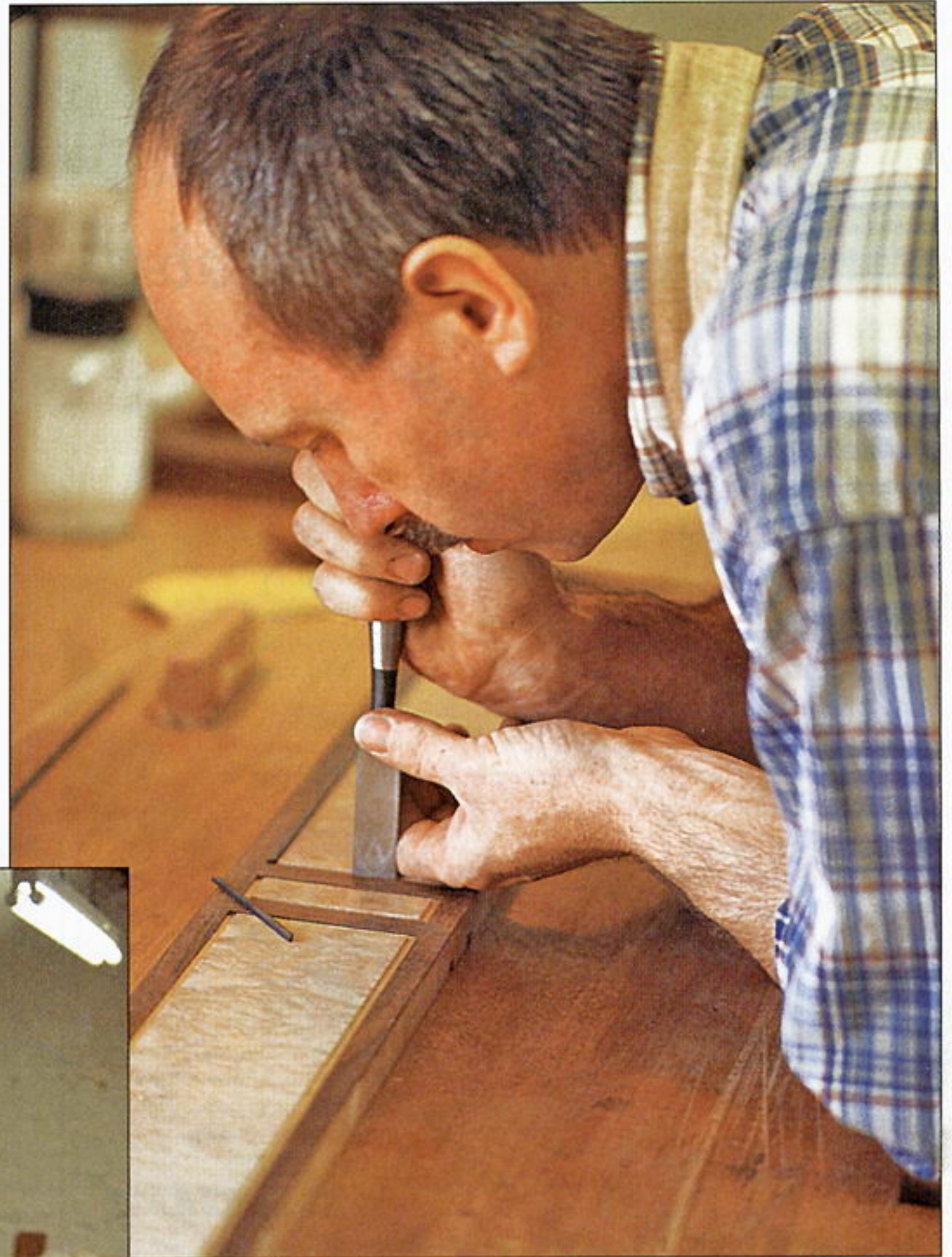
I believe that shellac lends greater translucency and depth to the finished surface. The colours are better, bringing out the beauty of the burrs and lending greater depth and a polish that is totally appropriate for this kind of furniture.

Lacquer would give me more protection, but do I really want to cover a fine piece of furniture in a coat of plastic? ■

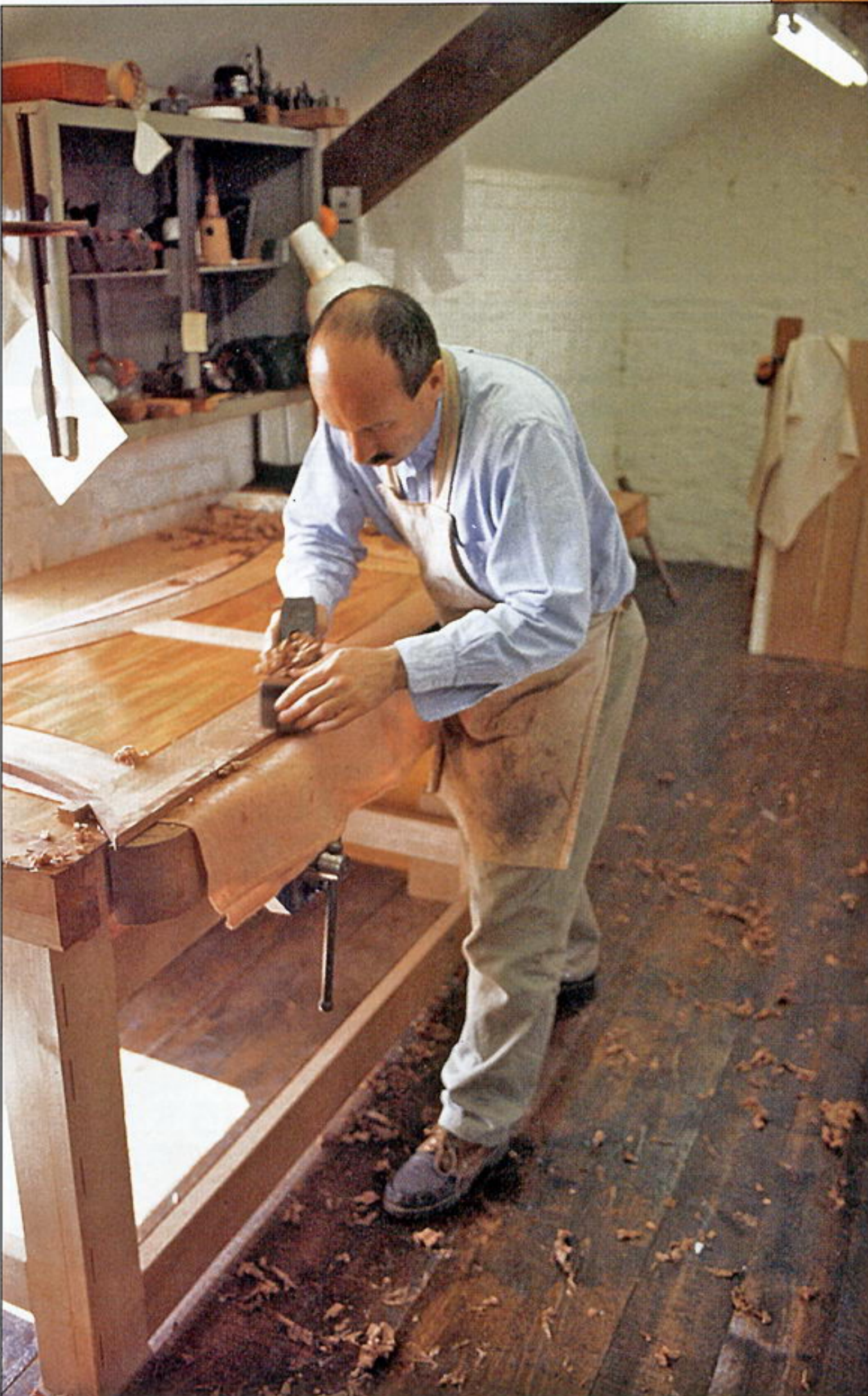
● **Next month: David Savage** talks about the design and construction of the chairs and shows the finished pieces working together.



ABOVE: A detail of the desk back panel, showing how slightly raised and domed ebony lines give a light-catching detail



ABOVE: Ebony lines are inlaid into the sides and back panels; Nick cleans out a routed groove with a chisel



LEFT: The bottom of the desk is a mahogany frame and panel; the rosewood lippings are planed flush with the surface

PROBLEM – WHAT PROBLEM?

THE PANELS of the desk surface were conventionally veneered but Nick needed to frame them with band-sawn veneers of 2mm ($\frac{5}{64}$ in) thickness. These were cut and then glued onto lands that had been routed 2mm lower than the surface of the veneers.

In one place however, Nick had made the thickness of one of these veneers just a tad too thin and I was faced with a decision to either replace those veneers or plane the frame in such a way that it tapered from 1mm ($\frac{3}{64}$ in) thickness at the outside edge to 2mm ($\frac{5}{64}$ in) thickness where it joined the burr veneer.

We opted to pursue the latter course for two reasons: firstly it overcame the technical problem; secondly it lent a variety to the surface of the desk, giving it a slightly cushioned rather than dead flat appearance. Certainly nobody would see it unless they got down and checked it with a straight edge, and only a cabinetmaker would do a silly thing like that.

Instead it may be sensed or felt, so lending the piece richness and variety.