



MARTIN O'BRIEN CABINETMAKER, WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA



Martin O'Brien, cabinetmaker and furniture conservator
Winston-Salem, NC

"I enjoy coming up with unusual solutions to woodworking and finish problems," says Martin O'Brien. "This may sound different, but I want my repairs to be easy to re-treat or to reverse for generations to come."

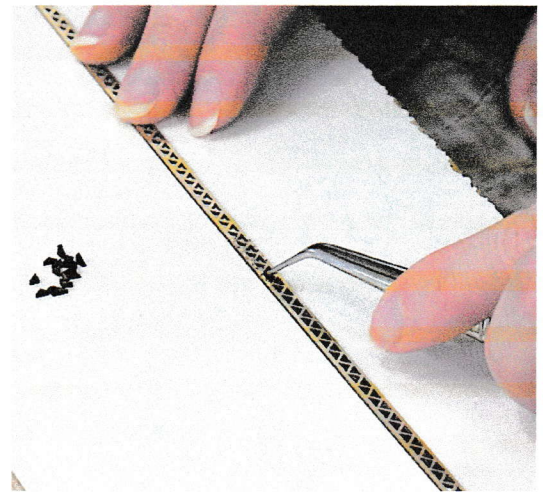
Conservation requires anticipation of what will happen to a given object in the future. Not just the next few years, but the next few centuries. Modern makers would do well to become familiar with materials, techniques and principals used by conservators."

His company, Martin O'Brien Cabinetmaker, is based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His furniture and other wooden objects can be found in many private collections. But most days, you'll find him working to conserve and restore fine furniture from an earlier age.

"The chairs were in poor shape: broken parts; badly executed repairs; dull finishes; and worst of all..."



Lannuier chairs before treatment



Brass banding: wooden triangles or "diapers" are pushed into the glued space. Note that they are too small to be handled with fingers; tweezers are required. Fish glue/gelatine was used as an adhesive.

was made. Martin's solution was to commission a CAD drawing so that it could be cut with a CNC laser. After many inquiries, he found a company in Oregon that could do the work. He sent them some brass sheet and dark-wood veneer (Katalox, a tropical hardwood) and eventually received the replacement sections.

The next step was to glue the tiny laser-cut wooden triangles into the la-



Chronicles (continued-2)

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Misaligned repair: lyre of Lannuier chair. Misaligned repair with PVA adhesive, aka "white glue"

ser-cut brass with fish glue. Finally, a curved substrate was created to bend the banding to the curve of the crest rail and sandwich it between thin strips of dyed-black veneer. The finished product is virtually indistinguishable from



Inlay old and new: detail of inlay after adhering with hide glue—Bottom: Original, likely cut in a press with a metal die/stamp. Top: Laser-cut reproduction

the original.

O'Brien says as impressive as Lannuier's work is, the artisans who produced these bandings with such precision over 200 years ago deserve equal praise.

He also undid old misaligned repairs done with PVA glue, repaired the damage with hide glue, and did a careful surface cleaning. Upholsterer (and *P&T* associate editor) Mike Mascelli took on the challenge of stabilizing the existing upholstery and providing new silk show covers. *For more information on this see Mike's article on page 37 of this publication.*

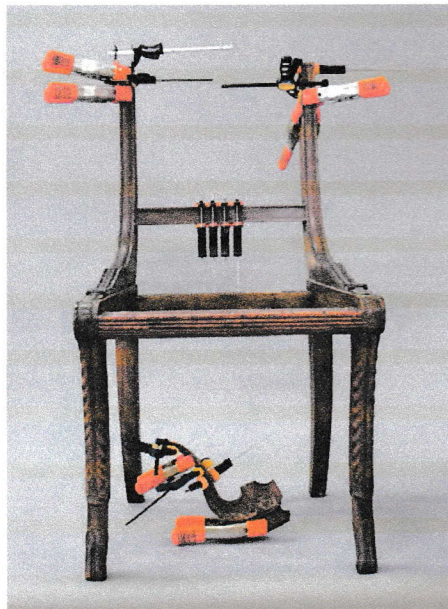
Another commission involved a sideboard from MESDA (the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, in Winston-Salem). It was missing a chunk of wood on the front. O'Brien says "The finish on the piece was old and black and cracked. The Museum said 'We want you to patch that gaping hole and we want whatever you put in there to match the rest of it.'"

After some thought and research, he filled the hole with epoxy. Then he used a technique he'd read about but never used. "It involved making a mold



Lannuier chairs after treatment

of an adjacent area, of the old wrinkled varnish. I was able to coat that textured mold with multiple coats of colored shellac. And it took some trial and error, but I was able to catch the shellac at a particular moment before it became totally dry and brittle, but flexible enough that I could peel it off the mold, then lay it over the synthetic fill I placed there earlier. I brushed some more shellac on to make it adhere, and the texture stayed there and matched."

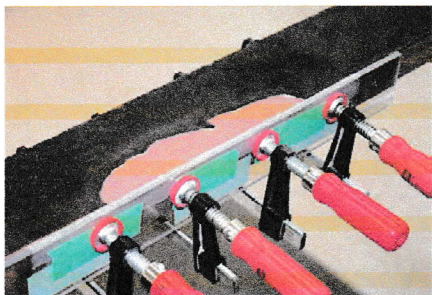


Clamping: gluing/clamping of areas repaired with hide glue. Note: flexible epoxy (G-Flex by West Systems) was used for the fractured areas on the dovetail mortises for the crest rail as well as the major fracture at the base of the lyre (right "arm" not shown). I felt that epoxy in these areas was necessary because of significant gaps in the wood as well as the need for a more flexible bond in these two areas.

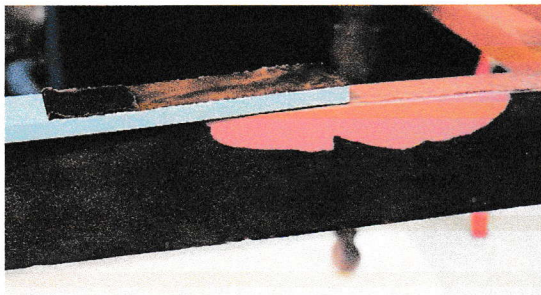


Chronicles *(continued-3)*

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Sideboard epoxy: filling of loss with epoxy (Araldite 1253 over a hide glue barrier). Clear acrylic dam holds epoxy while curing.



Sideboard shellac: pigmented shellac film being peeled away from silicone mold, just before application to epoxy in-fill.

(Editor's note: read that section again and think about it. That solution blows my mind!)

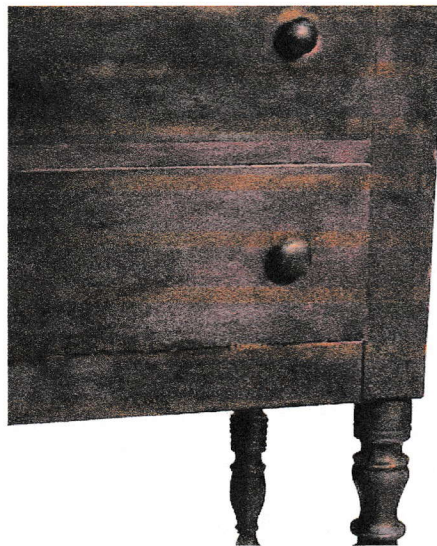
Like many SAPFM members, O'Brien's path to his current career

city of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Then he'd work full-time during the day in various woodworking shops, learning the trade.

In 1993 he moved to Winston-Sa-



Sideboard before treatment



Sideboard after repair

didn't follow a straight line. He graduated from college with a degree in Spanish and psychology, thought about becoming a doctor, but decided he really liked working with his hands and in particular, working with wood.

"One of my earliest memories as a child—I was maybe three or four—was a cabinetmaker coming to the house, putting some built-in cabinets in. I remember his tools, I remember the smell of the wood."

So for six years, O'Brien taught Spanish in the evenings at the Univer-

lem, hoping to work for someone else. When that didn't work out, he was "forced into" starting his own business. His plan was to design and build fine furniture, but "The market here in Winston-Salem was just screaming for somebody who could restore 200-year-old furniture. There's so much history in this town." He hadn't been trained in restoration, but "It was either start from scratch, learning restoration/conservation, or starve."

So when people would ask if he could carve or gild or turn something,

"I would say yes, I would run to the library, check out a book, do some research, and teach myself the task."

O'Brien does a lot of work for MESDA. "They don't have any in-house conservators at this museum, so they farm out all their conservation. I'm fortunate to get some of this work. Sometimes I have to replace parts on a piece, sometimes it's just a simple repair or restoration of a painted or varnished surface. No job is ever the same. There's always a new challenge."

Early in his career, he got a request to do some letter carving in wood. This was another experience of self-teaching, but it eventually led to a long-term relationship with renowned lettering artist John Stevens. Now he does a lot of sign work in both wood and stone. "Stone has become a passion of mine. It's really forgiving; you don't have to worry about grain."

O'Brien works out of a 2000-square-foot shop in old cinder-block building. He says "I do handwork when that seems faster; I use power tools when they seem faster, because I do have to make money."

The shop has an area just for finishing. What happens there "is more akin to art and science. The finishing side can be unpredictable. I've given some lectures at SAPFM Midyears, and I've tried to get people to think that way, to be comfortable with a lot more trial and error."

O'Brien says, "It's a difficult living. I won't sugarcoat it." He laughs. "I'd say most full-time furniture makers would probably tell you that, at any given time, they are 30 days away from being homeless."

But he adds, "I have done this exclusively since 1987, and every single day I wake up and I cannot wait to get to my shop and work." —JB

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN O'BRIEN