

A Taunton Chest *Revisited*



Norm Abram, host of *The New Yankee Workshop* on PBS.

by JOHANNA MCBRIEN

When the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, rediscovered their Taunton chest (see pages 232–234), Russell Morash, executive producer and director of *The New Yankee Workshop* on PBS, recognized it as an ideal piece to reproduce for their television show. Morash, host and master craftsman Norm Abram, and cameraman Steve D’Onofrio visited the conservation department of the MFA to examine the museum’s chest with Art of the America’s senior curator Gerry Ward (right). Before they left, Norm took some measurements and photographs and headed back to the shop.

Says Norm of his chest, “I didn’t copy the original exactly.

I used my own inspiration.” This is reflected in his choice to not only make the lift top, but to use the same design to build a chest of drawers, a more convenient form for today’s audience.



Both pieces are discussed in the 23.5 minute episode airing in March, which in reality took two days to complete at the shop Norm and Russ built in 1988 expressly for taping the program. Regarding his philosophy for doing the show, Norm adds, “When I build a piece, I work as if the camera is not there. I’m always thinking about the next step and don’t compromise on what needs to be done.” Norm’s precision, coupled with the

instructive format of *The New Yankee Workshop*, transferred perfectly for this Hands-On segment.



[Step 1] Both chests are based on straightforward six-board construction (top, bottom, sides, front, and back); the lift-top chest is the focus for what follows since it directly relates to the MFA chest. Though the MFA chest is made of pine, Norm uses poplar because it takes a stain well and has clearer boards than much of the pine available today. To simulate single boards, as were originally used, Norm glues up three boards for the top and sides, cutting an arch in the sides to make simple “bootjack” legs **[Step 2, below]**.



[Step 3] The top is hinged at the back and chamfered cleats are applied to the ends of the top, serving both as decorative elements and to help keep the top flat.



[Step 6] The vertical moldings are cut with a V-groove at each point where the horizontal moldings (cut with a pointed tip) are inserted. They are glued and nailed in place. (This shot is of the chest of drawers.)



[Step 5] The front is composed of two simulated drawers (behind which is the deep interior well accessed from above) and one working drawer in the bottom. The half-inch, half-round moldings are applied along the inner edge of the sides, and along the middle and lower edge of the façade.



[Step 4] The $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch boards of the front, back and sides are rabbetted at the corners for a strong joint, just as in the original.



[Step 7] The front lower molding is glued in place along the facing edge of the bottom. The drawer will run directly on the bottom of the case.



[Steps 8–9, above and below] The drawer is made with half-blind dovetails so they are not evident on the drawer façade (above). The drawer front is cut with a half dado along the bottom edge; the sides have dados (grooves) run along the inner bottom and back edges to receive the drawer bottom and back (below). No nails or glue are used so there is freedom of movement to prevent splitting.



Artist Natalie Gardner was invited to decorate the façade of the lift-top chest in the manner of the MFA's original.

"We normally never get into the decoration of a piece on the show," says Russ, "but in this instance, it's all about the decoration."



[Step 10] The first step was to stain the chest, approximating the original reddish brown by mixing together several oil-based colors. Once dry, Natalie covered the chest with an isolating coat of shellac so she could rework her drawing if needed and not damage the stained surface.



[Step 11] To lay out the design, Natalie says "I looked at the photographs of the MFA chest and worked out the formula, starting with the major design elements and then filling in the details." All this is done freehand, first with a white watercolor pencil used to lay out the design.



[Steps 12-13, above; below left] The decoration is then painted in oil. Once dried, the chest is covered in a coat of polyurethane to protect the surface.



The lift top and the alternative chest of drawers.



Russ and Norm review the completed lift-top chest.

Photography for above three images courtesy of Anthony Tieuli for WGBH, Boston.

The materials list and plans for building either the lift-top chest or the chest of drawers are available at www.newyankee.com; the program is #1910. A DVD of the show is also available. *The New Yankee Workshop* is a co-production of Morash-Associates, Inc., and WGBH Boston.

The New Yankee Workshop airs Saturdays at 1pm pn PBS (check local listings).