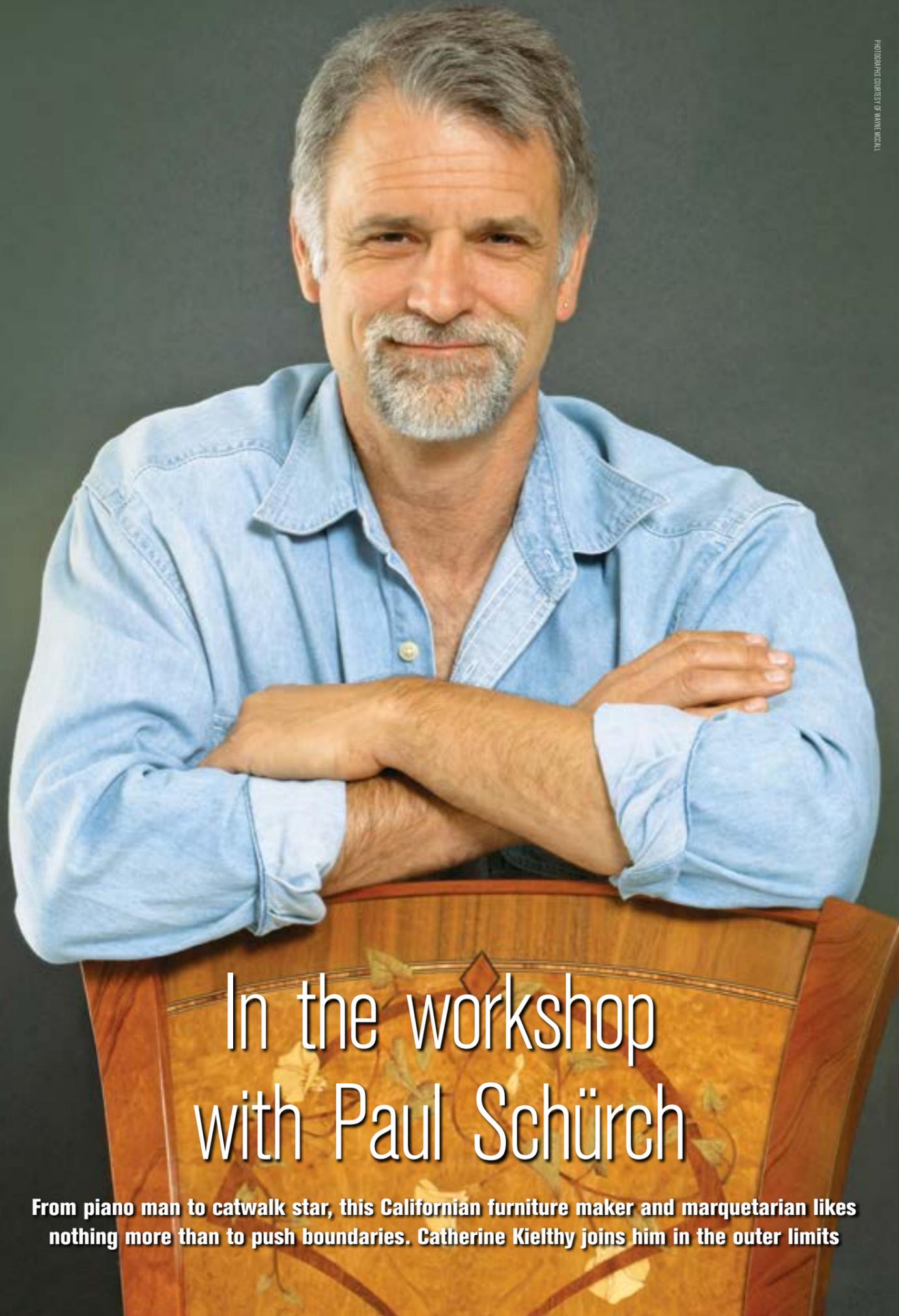


PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MARNE LOCALI



# In the workshop with Paul Schürch

From piano man to catwalk star, this Californian furniture maker and marquetarian likes nothing more than to push boundaries. Catherine Kielthy joins him in the outer limits



A bow-front Rose Chest cabinet with lightly curved front and sides and ergonomically positioned knobs. The marquetry, which drapes over the top, includes a spider web of inlaid silver wire in the side panel



The cabinet comprises various timbers, including imbulia burlwood and satinwood, mixed stone and marble

Building model planes. An innocuous enough pastime for a child you might think. But making them with the intention of setting them on fire and launching them from the roof of the family home? That's a kid who likes to test his own – and his parents' – limits. Meet Paul Schürch, a man who is still turning heads today, thanks in part to his family's decision to enrol him on a piano building school in Switzerland. At the age of 15, Paul moved to Bern, where he started his apprenticeship. After a year, he switched to a church organ apprenticeship and spent the next three and a half years in Neuchatel fine-tuning his skills in a workshop that had many skilled master craftsmen under one roof: "It set a good foundation for me," he recalls. "Building complex musical instruments requires the mastery of a diverse, layered skill set including leather, fabric, wood, metal, felt, adhesives, mechanical systems, aesthetics and tonal design."

On his return to the USA, Paul set up his own business repairing and building church organs, but it proved financially challenging and he soon moved into furniture making. He began doing simple woodwork and construction before transitioning into reproductions and eventually commissions and studio furniture.

Main image: the top of Paul's 735mm diameter Spiral Fish table, which won second place in the 'Marquetry Furniture' division at the recent Design in Wood Competition and Show in Del Mar, California



Above: created with natural quilted maple veneer and bamboo fabric, this formal dress has more than 1300 lacquered wood scales allowing for a full range of motion. Weighing less than 1.6kg, it is comfortable and flexible enough to sit in for the wearer. The dress won first place in the 'Veneer Art' division at the Design in Wood competition.

### Learning the hard way

His first foray into marquetry came after an approach by an interior designer who requested a large table that was expandable from seven to 11ft and involved intricate inlaid designs and stonework. How hard could it be? Very. With very little experience of thin veneer, Paul spent the next six months cutting patterns out of solid wood and stone and inlaying all the components into a solid maple wooden background.

The project wasn't only time-consuming, but financially unrewarding, since the price was a fixed amount. The whole experience, however, convinced him that there had to be a more effective way of producing this decorative furniture. This prompted a trip to northern Italy, where he found a workshop practising traditional and contemporary

marquetry techniques and where he discovered the art of production marquetry. With this came a more realistic means of earning a comfortable livelihood that would support his young family.

Paul's other research missions included a year in the UK, where he learned boat building, some three decades ago. "I like pushing material and design limits," he explains, "and I wanted more curves in my work. This was found in lofting and building boats, so I went to Lowestoft, Ipswich, to learn the art of fairing curves. Wood and steel set onto a hostile salty sea, quite different from the delicate work found inside protected churches in Europe!" Straight lines are certainly few and far between in Paul's pieces, which made us wonder if there was a reliance on laminating. "Laminations and

shaping curves from solid wood is a strong element in my work," he confirms. "I use an adjustable radius (compass) hand plane in much of the curved solid wood construction, and laminating plywood, solid wood or veneer over a plug or form in a vacuum press to make those delicate curved surfaces."

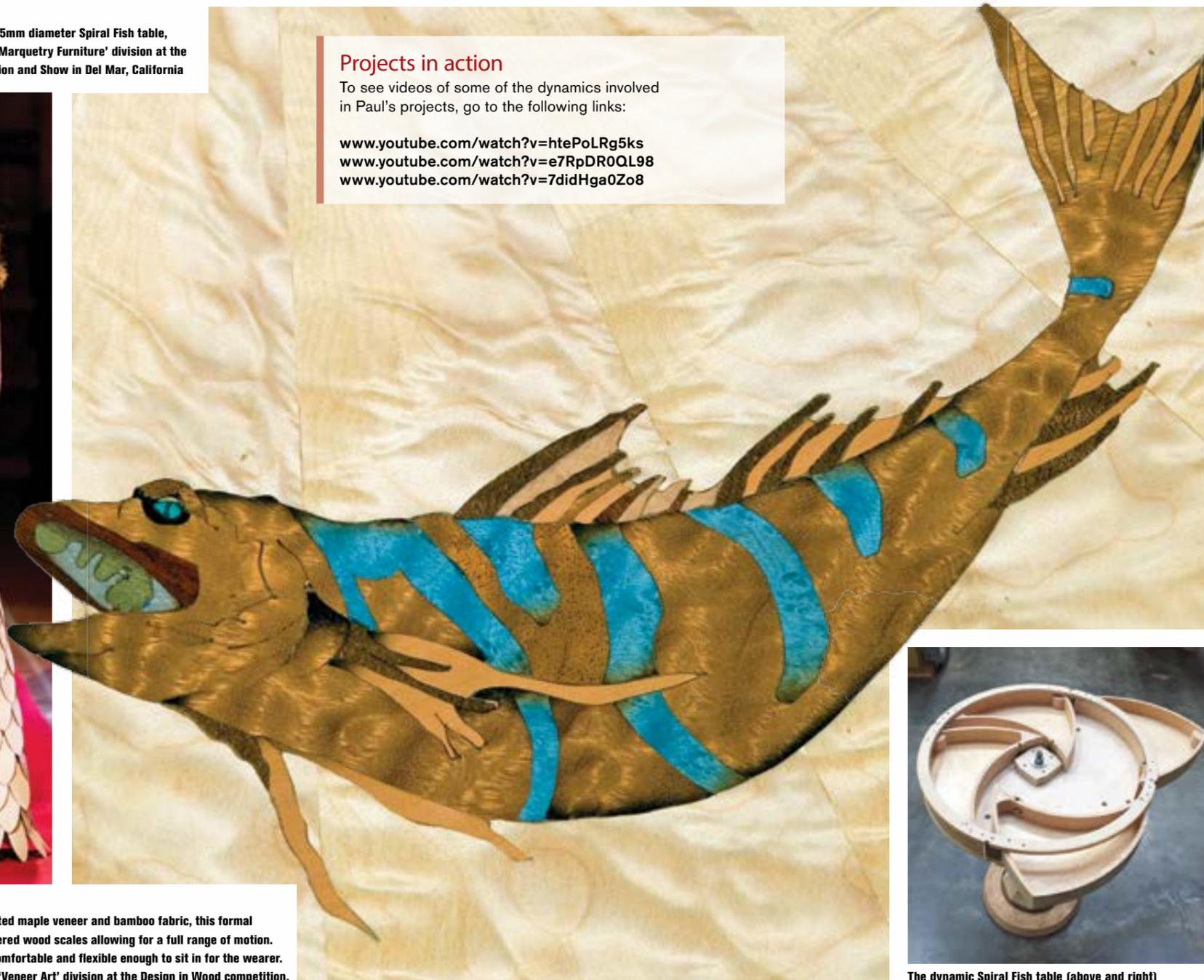
### Dynamic intentions

His collaborative Pod cabinet project, a fantastic 6ft-diameter display cabinet with 10 articulated compound curved doors that sequentially nestle together when opened and sequentially hook together when closing, is a stunning example of these curves. It also illustrates the dynamism that he strives to bring to his projects. He insists, however, that for him form follows function. "I develop an idea through sketching and drawing a

### Projects in action

To see videos of some of the dynamics involved in Paul's projects, go to the following links:

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=htePoLRg5ks](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htePoLRg5ks)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7RpDR0QL98](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7RpDR0QL98)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7didHga0Zo8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7didHga0Zo8)



The dynamic Spiral Fish table (above and right)



Paul calls the Pod's hinge system a "lobster door mechanic". The panels are epoxy-infused fibreglass in 'Mercedes red'



The Spiral Fish table comprises mixed timbers, including quilted maple and elm, silver wire and opals. Finished with French polish and wax it depicts a prehistoric fish chasing a lure down a whirlpool of slipmatched veneer

detailed full-size plan with top, front and side views. This allows me properly to plan out and resolve the various construction issues, before any actual wood is cut. Form and functionality are foremost and the method for constructing a project will emerge as the mechanical drawing develops. These can be technically challenging pieces and a drawing is finally complete when I believe that another woodworker could use it alone to build a piece. Clients can offer clues for a design idea to develop, which make my job easier, but I do enjoy the process of creating on my own, from the things and people that inspire me. I enjoy combining different ideas into a cohesive piece that works."

These ideas come from Paul's studies of old and new architecture, musical instruments, miniature carving, fine art,

and furniture in museums and second-hand shops. He also takes cues from other contemporary studio makers and adapts lines found in nature. "I strive to combine the form, imagery and the storyline into a cohesive theme that runs throughout a particular piece of furniture. I will reflect upon a design's merits and be guided on how it makes me 'feel' when I view it, not

how a particular design 'looks'. I alter and modify a design until it feels right, most if not all design issues are resolved, and I become excited about building it." He likes projects that do unexpected things, for example his spiral fish table where the drawers are opened by twisting the top, his wooden dresses that allow full motion for the wearer and the Pod with its 'lobster' hinge system. ▶

## Marquetry for the modern age

Returning to marquetry, which in the past would have been considered an acceptable alternative to a photograph, we wonder where he thinks its values lie now. "A photograph is about composition, lighting and capturing a special moment in time," he says, "and marquetry is a timeless craft of rendering an image or pattern using natural materials. I believe such work is cherished for the natural beauty and the skilful effort required to make these decorative surfaces." He also rejects any notion that it has to be traditional even though it is frequently pigeon-holed as an 'old-fashioned' look. "Marquetry gives me an added element and dimension to my work that complements the furniture form and tells a story. It certainly can look traditional, but the theme can be virtually anything, as long as the piece is well designed and thematically balanced.

As with many crafts, marquetry goes in and out of fashion, but he is optimistic the USA is rekindling a general interest in hand skills through private trade schools. He teaches at some of them and also runs classes at his workshop in Santa Barbara, California (see below for details). But state schools, he argues, also have an obligation to introduce hand skills to a younger generation by providing stimulating workshop classes for students whose talents "don't fit in elsewhere, as it was in my case".

In the meantime, Paul will continue to push the perceived limits of designs, using natural materials and techniques, and to learn from the "extreme problem-solving" it brings. Let's just hope he's come down from the roof. *F&C*

## Maker's maker

"As I gather inspiration from countless other furniture makers from the past, and contemporary designer maker and artists still living today, even from students that I have taught over the years, it would be hard to select just one. People to mention would include Roentgen, Riesener, Oeben, Schwerdfleger, Hårle, Soggi, Wheeler/Carmichael, Castel, Krenov and Maloof. If I had to choose, I would say my two teachers who gave so much of themselves to train this brash Swiss-American apprentice, who was always asking curious questions, pushing the limits for himself and testing their patience. Joseph Neidhart was a designer-builder of church organs in Switzerland, and Franco Remonti was a master of marquetry and inlay. They both made extensive drawings, allowing the artistic embellishments to evolve in concert with the mechanical design, holding true to the final vision of the pieces they created.

"My advice? Work hard, find solutions, produce a quality product you are proud of, and trust your intuition."



## Class pictures

Paul has long offered instructional education, tools and supplies to those interested in creating marquetry, mentoring from his studio and attending seminars in the USA and abroad to teach students of all ages the art of creating images using wood or stone. For students of all levels, he suggests his following YouTube clips as a taster:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbeNfvKr0v4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbeNfvKr0v4)  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFGklu6mchY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFGklu6mchY)

Perhaps for the more experienced person, he suggests Pietra dura. He learned the art, which involves making pictures from semi-precious stones and marble, near Florence, Italy. "Some of the most amazing work can be seen in shops and museums there today." He cautions, however, "that it requires a different skill set and it requires a brute application of patience to be successful. Not for the faint of heart...". You can see an example of Paul's Pietra dura in his Torah cabinet (see right) and at

[www.veneerartist.com/schurch-portfolio/66-thistle-jewelry-cabinet/](http://www.veneerartist.com/schurch-portfolio/66-thistle-jewelry-cabinet/)  
[www.veneerartist.com/schurch-portfolio/58-ruby-tiq-cabinet/](http://www.veneerartist.com/schurch-portfolio/58-ruby-tiq-cabinet/)  
[www.veneerartist.com/schurch-portfolio/9-lapis-dining-table/](http://www.veneerartist.com/schurch-portfolio/9-lapis-dining-table/)



Paul's Pietra dura work is evident in the Torah cabinet with back-illuminated front door inlaid stone panel depicting a pomegranate and leaf motif. The cabinet is crested by a walnut burl and satinwood tiara with ruby gems set in gold findings



A marquetry tray of a budding jasmine on a trellis. Here, the mechanical structure of the floating corner blocks is carried over into the marquetry design

## Contact details

For more information about Paul's marquetry classes, go to [www.schurchwoodwork.com](http://www.schurchwoodwork.com); to view more of his work, visit [www.veneerartist.com](http://www.veneerartist.com)