

Light & Luster - Midwest Home - September 2009 - Minneapolis, St. Paul, Minnesota

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By Chris Lee



Photo by Steinway & Sons

Photographer. Stained-glass restorer. Boat builder. Wood-veneer master. Thomas Schrunk's career has been a study in motion. The only constant has been his fascination with light and its properties. "I'm an artist with a strong interest in why things happen optically," he says. That's why the 67-year-old Schrunk calls himself "an artist in lustrous materials." He coaxes lustrous properties from wood, metal, and even concrete by catching the light just so, in the grain of wood or the patterns cut into concrete. He creates his signature flow-pattern parquets by varying the grain angle (and thus the brightness) of individual blocks of veneered parquet, and then arranging them in patterns that seem to dance and flow. Thousands of individual blocks are numbered and laid in a predetermined sequence to create the flow and the variable luster of his pieces—which is why his dining tables start at \$10,000 and his custom wood parquet floors run \$50 per square foot.

Though the St. Anthony artist works in a variety of materials, wood veneer is clearly his medium of choice. He brings wood alive, controlling its color and pattern with magical results—an ability acknowledged by no less an authority than Steinway & Sons. The world-famous piano maker has used Schrunk's veneers on four art-case pianos, masterpieces of parquet-patterned walnut, Brazilian cardinal wood, and ribbon-striped sapele. His 2005 piano, "Europa," glows with book-matched walnut and Carpathian elm burl woods that radiate up from the instrument, emulating the music. Schrunk is thrilled by his Steinway commissions, if still a bit bemused by his success. He approached the company himself, simply sending a query via its website. "The door doesn't open unless you knock," he says.

He knows; he's knocked on plenty of them. Born and raised on a small farm near Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Schrunk attended the University of Iowa until, inspired by John F. Kennedy, he joined the Peace Corps for a two-year stint in India. He returned to Iowa to earn a bachelor's in general science and a master's in art history. Always ready for an adventure, he joined an architectural dig in Yugoslavia as a photographer. There he met his wife Vanca, a native of Croatia, whom he married in 1973. The two attended graduate school at the University of Minnesota; he in architecture, she in archeology. He soon realized that the profession held little appeal for him and began restoring stained-glass windows, already studying the interplay of light and surfaces. In 1987, on a lark, he and his 5-year-old son made a glass-bottomed boat. Intrigued, he began a larger boat the next year and used wood veneer on the seams.

He was hooked. He learned by trial and error to make wood veneer sing. "I see what's right and wrong," he says. "Sometimes wrong is a tool." He experiments until he gets it right—that's how he perfected a technique for casting changeable, light-responsive patterns in concrete. His lustrous concrete has been used in applications ranging from art panels in the Sears Centre Stadium outside Chicago to a stairwell in a Charles Stinson-designed home in Chaska. Experience the play of light on Schrunk's flow-pattern wood veneers at Blue Sky Galleries in Minneapolis, where a spectacular table shows off its burl veneer and an 8-foot curved wall piece displays a circular flow pattern. Just be sure to keep moving. "My work is meant to be observed in motion," says Schrunk. "You need the changing light to perceive the luster."

Chris Lee is editor of Midwest Home.
