

Photo Realism in Marquetry

Having received a surprising number of complimentary comments on my humble effort for the 2015 International Exhibition, the most oft occurring of those comments was “how did you manage to get such a photographic look to your picture?”.

Well, as I said in my last editorial, there is no particular secret to its production, so here are my thoughts, methods and own set of guidelines which I employ for my marquetry work.

You don't normally expect to see a photo realistic piece of work in the medium of marquetry. The make-up and nature of those basic materials we use for our art, although decorative, do seem on the face of things to prohibit anything other than big cats and birds from being presented with any degree of photographic realism successfully.

The figure and grain of our veneer does seem to dictate, quite naturally, how our picture will ultimately end up looking. But, if appropriate consideration is given to these aspects of veneers, we can use such things to our advantage in order to achieve a good level of photo realistic appearance to our work.

One thing you should bear in mind here, especially if we are going to try to get anything like a realistic appearance in our marquetry project, is that artificially coloured and dyed veneers are not going to be our friend, they are too uniform and poster paint like in their appearance. We want the natural variations in tonal and luminance qualities of the veneers to be the components which will be the main contributors to the photographic style of our marquetry picture.

The naturally occurring fade or transition from dark to light found on many veneers is highly important to us in our pursuit of



The picture this article is based on:

“Mile End Road in the 1930’s”

our end goal. It avoids that stepped appearance from cutting graduated darker or lighter pieces and grouping them together in an attempt to give the illusion of a smooth passage of light to dark (or vice versa) – the ‘stepped fade’ looks artificial and has a cartoonish quality to it.

As you can surmise from what I have said so far, any attempt at photo realism in marquetry is quite obviously going to come down primarily to some very careful veneer selection. And, not only that, it is also going to refine down even further to not only the species of veneer selected, but also the figuring and shading which occurs naturally in the veneer; this quality quite often taking prominence over the grain pattern of the selected veneer.

Another very important aspect for producing photo style marquetry is to consider the tonal and luminance qualities required by distance as opposed to the dominance of the foreground elements. Allied to that is consideration given to levels of detail, the over use of detail in the distance can easily make things look artificial, especially if you go overboard with fine line work - you are not doing a technical piece, you are attempting to get

a photo realistic appearance in your marquetry picture. You will be amazed at what you can actually leave out of your work in order to achieve your photo realistic appearance.

And now for the 'cruncher' - if you are going to attempt to produce a convincing photo style of picture in marquetry, a rather important element you are most likely to need is an artist's eye! Unfortunately not everyone possesses such a thing, but if you follow the basic guidelines you should be able to achieve a good approximation of a photo realistic piece with which you can impress, at the very least, your own family and friends with your marquetry skills!

For this article we are, as you can see, using this year's Rosebowl picture as our guide. At the outset I decided to try to limit the different species of veneer I would use for this picture. In all, including the borders, I used 12 different veneers, you can see the ones I used in this veneer chart. For photo realism you do need to be careful with your veneer choice.

There are already several members of the Marquetry Society who do quite naturally produce works of a photo realistic nature; in particular the work of John Jeggo, Peter White, Patrick Levins, Gordon Baker and Alan Townsend spring to mind – but note that these are all Rosebowl winners themselves and the quality of their work has been acknowledged. Also of note is the portrait work of Les Dimes, it is certainly worth studying Les' work because it's very inventive.

So, introductions over, let's look at how the picture in question came into being.

At the outset I decided to base my picture on the appearance of a sepia photo from around the nineteen thirties era. Quite often these photos exhibit a good spread of contrast from almost pure white to nearly jet black, with a good mixed spread of nicely defined mid tones in between.



I decided to make the sky the whitest part of the picture, the darkest would be the tram/trolley bus itself. The darkest veneer I could find in my collection which was closest to a true black was African Blackwood. Not a common veneer I'll grant you, but it did the job splendidly. It is a little tricky to cut; you need to take care to keep your cutting blade well lubricated with wax. A block of Bee's wax is very handy for dipping the tip of your blade in with sufficient frequency.

The veneer I chose for the sky, the lightest part of the picture, was Hornbeam (sometimes known as white Beech). This was a very white example and, although sometimes rather difficult to cut, was not too bad as long as the blade was kept lubricated as described above for the

African Blackwood.

The next large part or element of the picture to consider was the pavement. This was important to get right as it had to represent natural shadow and display a sense of depth into the bargain.

For this task I selected the only piece of weathered Holly I had in my veneer stock. Luckily (very luckily!) this single piece had the perfect shading in its natural make up.

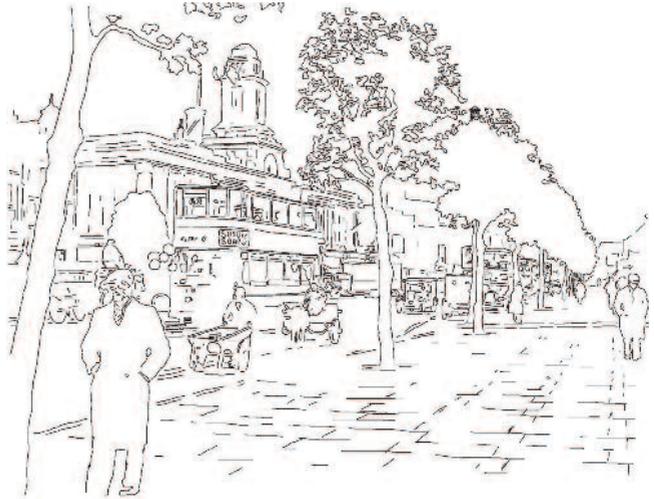
The important element here is that the shading effect has a wonderfully natural gradient from light to dark which replicates the diffused shadow outlines you would see as a normal visual aspect of genuine daylight shadow.



3 veneers chosen to form the waster/background

After sorting out the sky, pavement and natural black veneers, I then needed to find the best veneers for the buildings, roadway and trees.

So, for the buildings first, the veneer with the most appropriate characteristics for representing Portland stone as seen on a



The line drawing

misty morning turned out to be pale Oak. A lot of Oak has a medullary ray figure which shows up as a sort of large speckling effect running across the grain giving

Oak its easily recognisable appearance; however, you can find sections of Oak veneer which has uniform straight lines coupled with some 'land' between the lines which is virtually grain free and smooth looking. It is those parts of the Oak veneer that I used for the major elements of the buildings.

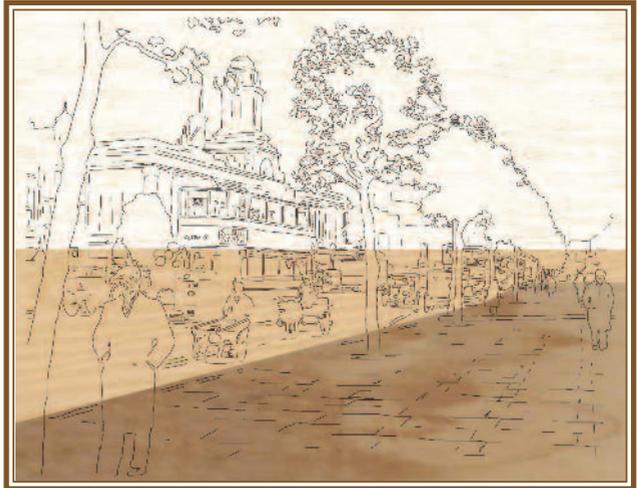
The roadway was just a carefully selected piece of Olive veneer. I wanted the main figuring pattern to be used for the foreground of the road, the distant part of the road however, required a lighter appearance. So, as I say, a

careful selection of the chosen Olive veneer provided the piece I needed.

The last of the main veneers required were the principal ones for depicting the trees. For this the obvious veneers were Walnut Burr for the leaves and Kingwood for the trunks and branches.

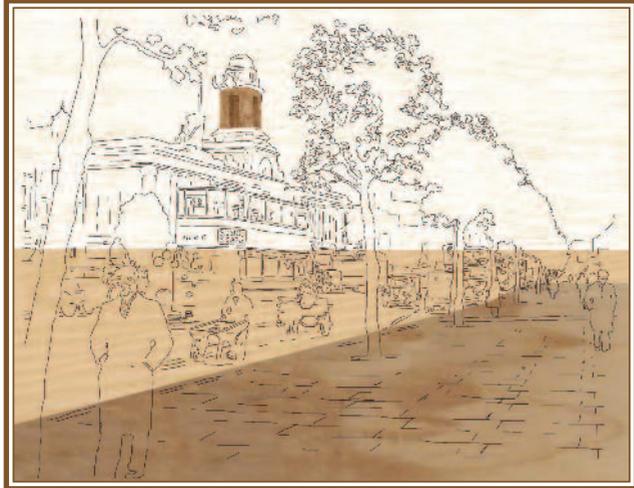
The Kingwood has natural figuring which gives a good representation of tree bark. Walnut Burr has the right colouring and is easy cutting, so it is ideal for the job of representing leaves on a tree.

Having selected my major and most important veneers, my next job was to block in the larger elements of the picture using those veneers. These were roughly, the top third of the picture a piece of clear grained Hornbeam for the sky area, the middle section was the Olive veneer for the roadway, and finally the weathered Holly was put in place



The design transferred onto the waster/background

well as being major 'background' elements of the picture) I drew the design on the 'waster' in the normal manner by using a sheet of black carbon paper placed under the full scale drawing which I had previously made on a sheet of A3 tracing paper that was then positioned and taped along its upper edge onto my newly made waster. A good sharp pencil is helpful in transferring a clean drawing.



First veneer cut in on the clock tower

With the veneers selected for the largest elements of the picture, I cut these to size and shape ready to form a sort of waster and/or background veneer for cutting the finer elements of the picture into.

Once I had glued and taped these three pieces in place which, as I've just said, were going to act as my waster veneer (as

With the design now transferred onto my waster I could start cutting in the essential items which go to make up a marquetry picture.

I started with the clock or bell tower of the main building. For some of the shadow area in the recesses I made use of the medullary ray darker figuring found in the Oak veneer. This provided just the right amount of dark contrast to those lighter and more uniform clearer straight pieces of Oak veneer I used for the majority of the building. That medullary ray figuring was to prove useful for shadow effects.

I particularly avoided any strong contrasting appearance as I wanted the buildings to give the impression that they were being viewed on a misty autumnal morning rather than a sharply defined sunny day. The artistic point to bear in mind here is that shadow is much more important than any outline. If the shadows are depicted correctly, then your eye will fool you into thinking that detail and outlines are all in place, even though they are plainly not! This approach is very important if you are doing portraits, you will be amazed at what shadows alone can achieve, they will make or break a portrait - but this subject is for another article, although to be honest, I have used this technique in the figures seen in the picture this article is about.

When the buildings were in place I turned my attentions to the tram/trolley bus and the other very dark elements of the picture. The veneer chosen for this task was the aforementioned African Blackwood. Before cutting this veneer I taped the back of it as it rather has a tendency to split and crumble. The next step was to cut the window for the trolley bus in the waster veneer assembly. The trolley bus was then cut in from the African Blackwood using the usual window method you are all familiar with.

This standard window method was then followed for the rest of the picture, except for the leaves on the trees.

The usual marquetry methods for depicting the leaves on trees are either to use a fragmentation mixture, or use a burr as the main element and then cut in a handful of leaves to give the illusion of a lot of foliage.



More of the clock tower cut in and the design redrawn to indicate where the overhanging leaves will appear

However, after seeing a marquetry mural made by Spanish marquetarian Susan Bart last year (see photo on opposite page) I realised that, if you are dedicated enough, you can actually cut in every single leaf of a tree! Susan showed the way, so using Susan's incredible work as my inspiration I attempted to replicate Susan's leaf work in my own picture.

The main problem I faced though, was that my picture was an order of magnitude smaller than Susan's mural. So I had to make compromises. I couldn't cut in every single small leaf, the background veneer wouldn't stand up to a multitude of almost microscopic windows being cut into it. So what I had to do was cut in a few leaves every day, then leave the picture alone for 24 hours to let the glue cure, then cut in a few more and repeat the process over about a month or more until the leaves were all cut in.

I left out cutting in very small branches as these were not particularly needed; once again it's your eyes that will give you the illusion of them being there if the leaves are arranged in appropriate sort of clumps. As I said earlier, it's amazing



“Conversations with a Bird” by Susan Bart

The marquetry mural which proved to me that a complicated realistic leaf structure can indeed be made in marquetry.

what you can leave out of a picture. Many of those technical niceties are not really required for a convincing picture. Too many fine lines and perfect geometrical shapes don't always make for a perfect picture, but carefully placed artistic elements really do add something almost indefinable to a very pleasing marquetry picture.

The other thing with leaves and trees is to note that as they recede into the distance they get paler, so the distant ones should be quite a few degrees less contrast than the ones at the front; it's all down to giving the illusion of distance. The key to achieving this effect was just to mix some lighter coloured fragments in to the mix for the distant foliage.

The discarding of unnecessary detail in an art work has long been an element of the standard practices adopted by top artists since the “plein air” impressionist movement which started nearly two hundred years ago. J. M. W. Turner would often use virtually a blob of strategically placed paint to depict an item in his paintings. These blobs would look like

nothing in particular close up, but when viewed from a little distance, they would take on the form of a deer, a horse, or most anything which fitted in with the theme of the picture. A very useful technique which takes advantage of the ‘mind’s eye’ assuming something the artist cleverly engineered into his or her work in order to give a painterly effect of a lot more complexity than there really is in the work.

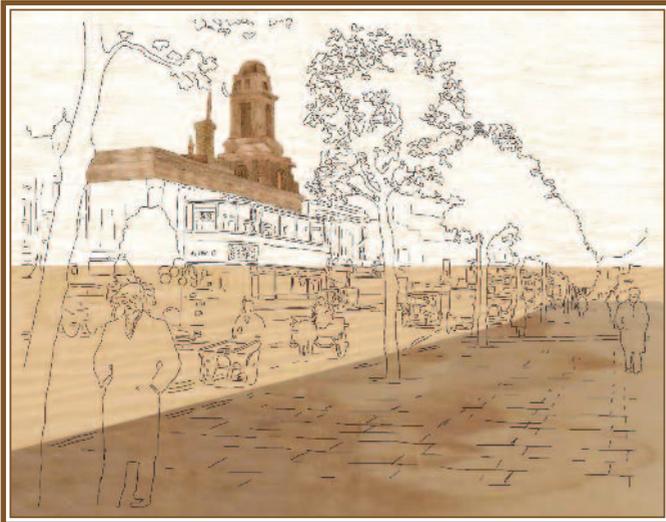
It is this impressionist technique that I

have made much use of in my marquetry picture. I didn’t want to over burden the picture with masses of fine lines dominating the layout as I’ve already mentioned in the text at the start of this article. Fine lines, as I say, when used in moderation are a very useful adjunct; but they are often overused just to show the maker’s technical expertise.

This approach unfortunately turns what could have been a good piece of art work into a technical drawing or blueprint – not the result we are looking for!

Another painterly element which should come high on the priority list is the important subject of shadow. Shadow gives more substance to a picture than outline does. Shadows occur in nature outlines don’t! Outlines are mostly for cartoon work. Shadow gives depth and helps to describe roundness in an object.

I always give a good 90% concentration to shadow, outlines however are very far down on my list – except when I produce my cartoons on page 3, then they take dominance, which is as it should be for cartoon work.



The clock tower and roof of the main building are cut in. We now progress onto the columns and the walls .

As well as shadow and ‘impressionist’ art techniques, I also try to limit my palette. What I mean by this is that I restrict the amount of different veneers I use for my pictures. Yes I know we have hundreds, even thousands, of different veneers at our disposal, but again it’s like oil paint, of course there are hundreds and thousands of different colours in that. But, just because there are multitudes of colours we don’t use them all at one go, we limit what we use for the job in hand. It may (and generally does) result in choosing say about seven colours and making what we need for the work by mixing and combining from those basic colours.

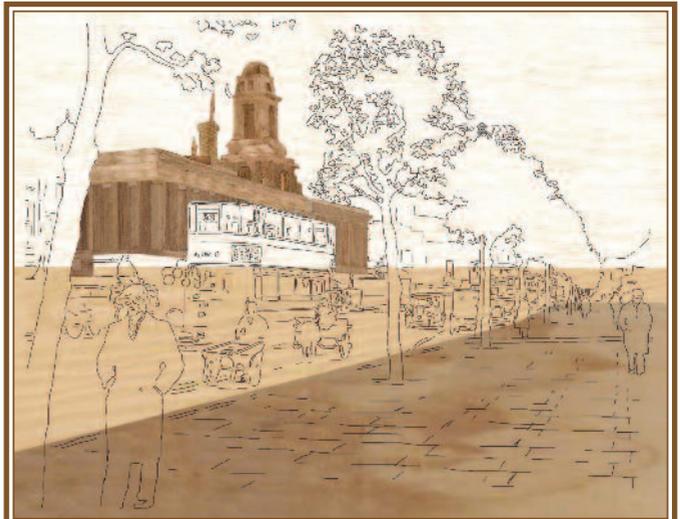
The same principle goes for marquetry. I study my picture, photo or whatever I’m using as the design for my marquetry picture first, then decide on my veneer

palette and select usually around seven veneers to make up that palette.

It doesn’t help to use countless various veneers because with all the variations in grain, figuring and colour, it is so easy to end up with a patchwork quilt effect. And, if you throw chemically dyed veneers into the equation, you would be surprised to find how easy it is to unwittingly end up with a distorted cartoon effect rather than a photo realistic effect.

So choose your veneers carefully, it is very important to get this right.

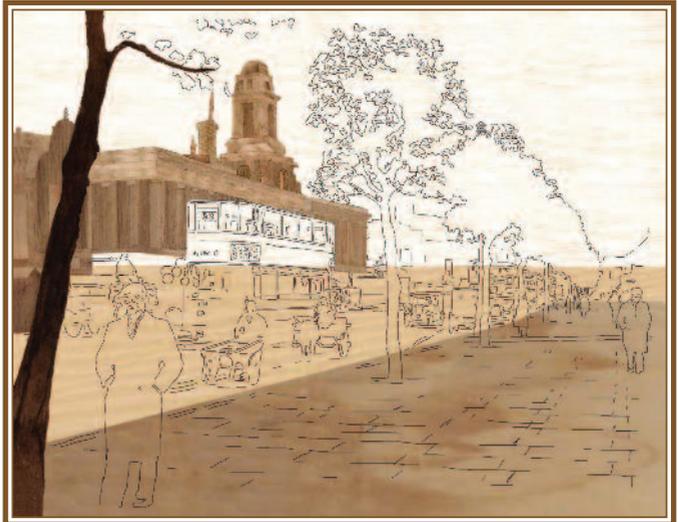
As you will have gathered, I prefer to concentrate on an artistic approach to my marquetry rather than follow a ‘rulebook’ standardised style of work. To this day I still only know a handful of the veneers I work with. I select my veneers by just looking through boxes of them until I spy



The columns and walls of the main building are cut and inserted into the picture

the veneers which will function for my veneer palette for the picture I am going to work on.

An encyclopaedic knowledge of veneers could, in this instance, be something of an impediment to choosing the best veneers for a photo realistic production. There are many recommendations of veneers best suited for various tasks, but these recommendations may well restrict the best choice for photo realism just because a few books and accepted 'knowledge' says otherwise.



To add some definition and a contrasting element, the tree on the left together with more building are added

Personally I don't pay any attention to such perceived wisdom. I go with what my 'artist's eye' tells me. A good example is the recommendation for using Bird's Eye Maple for portraits. I would never use such a veneer for portraits, it is too deep in colour, plus those myriad nodules will give the appearance of bad acne! My preference there is actually Olive Ash – it has many instances of natural graduations of light to dark which works superbly for things like shadowing around chin, nose, eyes etc.

In this article I have talked quite a bit about the 'cartoon effect'. What I mean by this is the use of outlines to define elements of your marquetry picture.

Whenever you can, always try to avoid using an outline in your marquetry. If for instance you are working on say a nose in a portrait, well rather than drawing an 'L' shape to represent the nose, take a look at where the shadow cast by the nose falls and note the slightly darker skin tone in that shadow area.

Now if you cut that shadow into your portrait instead of using the 'L' shaped outline, you'll be surprised at how much more

convincing your portrait will look. It is this sort of approach I have used for my marquetry work.

When selecting the veneer for various parts of a picture I always try to find the natural 'shadow' effect in the veneer I have chosen for the task in hand. That natural darkening I have already mentioned gives me the opportunity to create depth and roundness in my picture which looks reasonably convincing.

So far in this article we have primarily looked at the artistic viewpoint involved in the chosen methods for creating a form of photo realism in the medium of marquetry.

In the subsequent article we will look more closely at the practical aspects of creating a natural look to the people inhabiting the picture plus the construction of trees, vehicles, pavement and roadway. The leaves on the trees, as I've already explained, are a different matter entirely, but I'll expand on that and show you that it isn't as difficult as it first may seem, all you need is a little patience when working on that part of your picture.

To be continued.....