

Playing with
Color



Want to come in my house? If it's anything like this colorful portable structure designed by Barbara Butler, the answer will surely be yes.

You don't have to be a child to revel in the artistry of Barbara Butler. Her play structures rival a Disneyland setting, but she also creates one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture -vividly colored armoires and desks, elegant tables, and whimsical beds, all beautifully carved and painted in her own free-form style.

A self-taught artist with a degree in political science, Butler has been building playhouses and furniture for more than a decade. Her clients include Robert Redford, Kevin Kline, and Phoebe Cates. Although based in San Francisco. She spends much of her time traveling throughout the country and building on-site, often creating miniature villages. Her exuberant furniture is also in high demand. And she's just formed a new company to market her line of portable playhouses.

We asked Butler to make us a simplified version of one of her colorful toy chests: her recipe for special oil stains, plus instructions and templates for decorating her own chest, are on pages 79 and 80

Artist Barbara Butler makes fanciful pieces for inside and out, and shows how to decorate your own furniture

THE TOWER OF POWER

When I carve a piece, I'm thinking about how I'm going to color it," says Butler. The top of this armoire houses stereo equipment, while the television is concealed behind the hinged door, in the middle.

"The day I install this piece in my clients' living room, their children loved it so much, they began to draw on it with Magic Markers," Butler says laughing.

"I had to come back and sand it off, then paint over it again."

Butler's custom furniture is priced from \$700; her limited chests at \$450; and her new line of portable playhouses begins at \$3,900. Call (415) 864-6840



“I try to make all my furniture *sing*. If it doesn’t sing, then I won’t be happy with it.”

- Barbara Butler



Party of Four

More subdued than her other pieces, this elegant, pine-top table is embellished with copper detailing, which gives it a rich finish. Note the hand-sculpted red-wood legs and how the carved rim holds the bright red color.

Noah’s Bed

“People tend to shy away from using too many bright colors,” says Butler. “In my case, I usually can’t apply enough of them.” This twin bed demonstrates her point. The bright purple and yellow teamed with turquoise and red make a big splash. The richness of the colors comes from the way Butler carves the design into the furniture before applying the paint stains: Small grooves made with an electric carving tool prevent the different stains from spilling onto each other when she applies them to the wood. The stain also collects in the grooves, intensifying the color.



Barbara Butler in her San Francisco studio with the chest she made for us

Barbara Butler’s toy chest

“I try to make all my furniture sing.” says Butler. “If it doesn’t sing, then I won’t be happy with it.” Butler is happiest when she can let loose with color. She teams purple and red with bright color splashes on the toy chest she made for *Sunset* with a scallop on the lid and trim on the corners (above). Here’s how to carve and paint an unfinished chest (without scalloped edges) using Butler’s templates and stains. Adapt the templates to fit the size of your chest, or create your own designs.

TIME

- Carving: 2 hours
- Making the stains: 2 hours
- Staining: 2 hours, plus drying time
- Varnishing: 2 hours, plus drying time

WHAT YOU NEED

- Untreated chest (18 inches deep by 36 inches wide by 18 inches high).
- Templates (see designs at right)
- Pencil
- 1-gallon paint can
- Safety goggles
- Dust mask

- Electric carving tool (Dremel, Ryobi, or Black & Decker) with 1/2 inch drum sander attachment
- Package of 1/2 inch fine (120 grit) bands for drum sander attachment
- Scrap wood
- Sandpaper (150 grit)
- Homemade oil stains (see page 80) or commercial paint
- Rags
- Artist’s brushes
- Foam-pad brush
- Water-base varnish (such as Varathane’s Diamond Finish)

FOR THE LID

With a pencil, draw a guideline 2 inches in from the edge all the way around the lid. Place the diamond template (see below) inside the guideline at one end of the lid, with three points touching the guideline, and trace the diamond. Move the template over to make a second diamond touching the first, and trace. Repeat the process for the third diamond, which should meet the guideline at the far end of the lid. Use a 1-gallon paint can as template for the circles, then draw an X inside each circle.

FOR THE FRONT, SIDES, AND BACK

Lay the chest on its back and arrange the templates (below) to match the front of the chest shown. Trace around each template with a pencil. Repeat to trace designs on sides and back.

CARVING THE CHEST

When carving, wear safety goggles and a dust mask. Using an electric carving tool with a 1/2-inch drum sander attachment, practice carving on some scrap wood. “I hold the tool with both hands and use the bottom hand to steady myself against the work.” says Butler. The goal isn’t to carve a perfectly straight line.



On this template, each square equals 1 inch. To size the drawings for the chest described, enlarge the templates accordingly. The diamond pattern is specifically designed for the lid, but you can place the other shapes anywhere.