

Rochester Institute of Technology

## RIT Scholar Works

---

Theses

---

2009

### Layering

Aimee Pickett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Pickett, Aimee, "Layering" (2009). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

# Layering

By Aimee Pickett  
MFA in Woodworking and Furniture Design  
School for American Crafts

Thesis Committee Members:

Richard Tannen  
Andy Buck  
Skip Battaglia

## **Introduction –**

It is my belief that furniture has the potential to store worlds. It can protect the china inherited from a grandmother. It can display porcelain bowls collected on a trip through Asia. It can bear the scratches from a pet, or carry the hallmarks of its previous owner. These are merely a few examples of how furniture can store personal history. In the same vein, I believe that a piece of furniture has the potential to become a metaphor of oneself through daily interaction. Ideally what is chosen for a home reflects one self, and as a result each home should maintain a unique and personal touch. In order for this individuality to exist and thrive there is the need for the talent, imagination, and craftsmanship of furniture makers. It is through their vision and content, their ability and craftsmanship to translate emotions and experiences that three-dimensional objects come alive. These objects provide people, whom have other talents, with the ability to express themselves. I believe that by making these objects, furniture makers make environments healthier and richer places to live in. They help others connect with and express themselves.

This thesis explored the metaphorical, functional and visual layering represented by pieces of furniture, captured through filtering layers of my personal identity. I explored how, through layering, the user is invited to interact with pieces. Thereby, creating opportunities for new experiences. I am interested in how intimacy is created by forcing a user to move through a piece. Can intimacy create opportunities for visceral moments, such as moments of reflection, awareness and discovery? Furthermore, would using various layering techniques alter the results? By layering through multiple openings, suggestive space and even different forms, my goal was to develop a conceptual and aesthetic language, linking pieces together into a cohesive body of work.

This exploration was not just a journey through woodworking but also a journey through myself. The struggle that started this body of work was grueling and ultimately could

have stopped me in my tracks. I felt so vulnerable and fearful that I almost became creatively paralyzed. The fear of having myself and my craftsmanship visible and judged was a concept that terrified me. So I turned to artists and craftsmen who inspired me throughout my time in graduate school, in the hopes that some answers would come to light. I studied the work of Carlo Scarpa and his use of positive and negative space; barriers; reflection and how he guided his participants through his spaces. I absorbed his philosophy of work, that life becomes meaningful through the expression of self and through using the expression of others (the artist) to aid in self-expression:

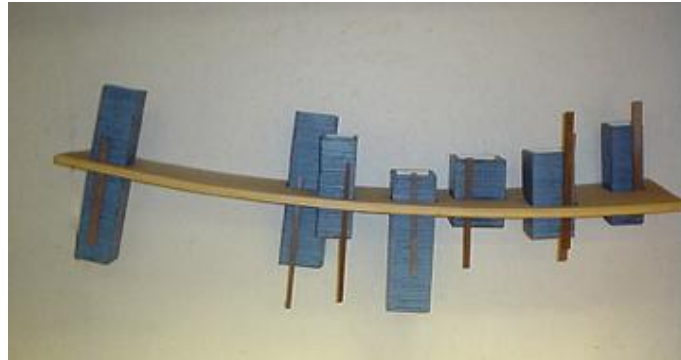
“I believe that it is art that makes us grasp the reality of the world. It is the effort that man has made, since his beginning, to make clear himself, through forms, his own existence.”

I studied Kashmir Malevich and his cubist expression of souls through simplicity of form and color. I went back to the work of Doris Salcedo and her manipulation of archetypal furniture in her pursuit of expressing victimization of grief. I choose to look at these three artists not only because I was familiar with them, but because of their various disciplines and goals: Carlo Scarpa with architecture, Kasimir Malevich with two-dimensional art, and Doris Salcedo with art and furniture. I believed this diversity would aid me in finding my voice. I looked and studied and ultimately became more confused. The problem I found with looking at the work of other artists is that their voice, their style seeps into ones own, especially if one have not found a definitive voice. As a result, I was everywhere; sketching pieces that had little aesthetic cohesion, and reflected more of the images I was looking at then of my own ideas. I realized that I needed to do research, to look, to trudge through existing ideas, but finally I had to stop, find both physical and mental space of my own, and regroup.

It became clear that the answer could not be given to me. I was the only one able to define my voice and make pieces that expressed my journey. I accepted that the choices I was to make would define only the next five months. I needed to clarify this for myself due to the fear that the aesthetic vocabulary of this body of work would be what I would have to adhere to my whole career. And I needed to talk to people beyond the microcosm

of the school environment. So I turned to a few friends who asked me hard questions, and who helped to shed light on the situation. I came out of these conversations with a path, a focus and an object. This object became the small box that sits in the wall-hung cabinet; the box inside the compartment in the drawer of the coffee table; the space alluded to on the cabinet piece and the final piece itself. I needed a thematic object to spring me into action and guide me. This body of work is much more than aesthetically cohesive pieces of furniture. This body of work represents an internal struggle, a building of self-assuredness, self-confidence, self-believe within my craft and the development of my skills. I am a stronger, better person because of these pieces.

## The Work -



Though unsure of the direction of these boxes, I began with a piece I made over the summer of 2006. This piece was my interpretation of the environment of Deer Isle Maine: where islands casually pop up through the surface of the water only to partially reveal themselves, leaving one wondering what lies beneath, what secrets are held, what is conceal. The wall-hung piece consists of a gentle bent laminated maple curve shelf with blue band saw texture boxes. The boxes are secured into place by cedar wedges, and can be moved up and down like the flow of the tide. From this piece I pulled basic elements and translated them into my concepts of layering, family and ancestry. Like the boxes in the wall-hung piece, I chose three boxes each increasing up in size, suggesting a growth from one to the next. I pulled from the curved maple shelf, by having the lids mimic the same gentle curve. However, each lid extends past the box creating an overhang that shelters the preceding box, thereby creating a visual layering and a physical one as well.



The surface treatment of each box is a circuitry-like patterning, which flows over the surface. The line represents a lifeline, which passes over itself and links into mahogany squares. The line is my journey, which has led me to this moment. Each mahogany square represents a specific event in my life that I felt shaped me. One square on each box is lightly carved to signal to the user that these surfaces are linked. Upon inspection one will see that the line travels from one box into the next. I chose the use of a cream color milk paint to create lightness. I sanded lightly through the surface to suggest distress, struggle and use. Marigold yellow milk paint runs through the V-carved line emphasizing its golden quality. The squares remain mahogany, as it is in these moments that truth and honesty exist.

Upon revealing the meaning behind this piece, I was asked if there was enough reference to my personal experiences. What became clear was that I did not want my thesis work just to represent my personal layers of family heritage, but to create a physical and visual experience of opening and revealing layers of interior depths.

### **Wall Hung Cabinet –**



For this piece I wanted to push layering to a more physical level. I enjoyed the surface treatment of the boxes, but it was no more than lines. How could these lines become more than decorative? How could the lines dictate function? These questions were the

beginning of this body of work. How could I take the line work, and incorporate it into each piece in a functional manner? I knew that for my first piece I wanted to create a wall-hung piece that reflected the user's body. I wanted to require the user to open up the cabinet piece by piece, isolating each area and providing a moment with that space. This was my attempt at recreating a moment when I had to understand where I was, how I got to that place and where I was going. I needed to look at each aspect of myself, so that I could understand the whole.

The height of the piece was determined by my own height. From there I knew a narrowness was necessary, to accentuate the length and shallowness. The piece needed to be able to sit against the wall in a solid and graceful manner, without bulging out unnaturally.

The line traveling through the piece dictates the shape and placement of the doors. I divided the body into four sections, finding inspiration in some of the *Chakra* points. The first is the head/ consciousness/intellect, the *Sahasrara* and the *Ayna*. This is where logic persists and controls over all other points. Upon opening this door one finds a small open container to store items. My intention was to supply a space for possessions relating to that specific area. The next step is the heart/compassion /equilibrium, the *Vischuddha* and the heart *Chakra*. This is where fulfillment in self resides. Here a picture of a loved one could live, a friendship ring, or things of the heart could live. The next step is the gut/intuition, the *Manipura* and the *Swadhistana*. This is where ones instinct lives and where right or wrong becomes clear. This door is the largest because it contains the one element that overrides the head, the heart and the feet. Upon opening this door a small box is found. The box has golden lines running along it, signaling the opening. Inside is a golden interior, reflecting all. That is where the truth lies, where lies perish,





and where the golden qualities of every person exists. The final step down is the feet/the base, the *Muladhara*. This is where groundedness dwells.

The last step to completing this piece was to find an appropriate pull. A standard surface pull would create a visual distraction to the door lines. This was an opportunity to explore and choose something different. I knew an inset pull on the doors was the solution. However, metal felt too cold, so fabric became an option. I chose felt for its tactile quality, soft but stiff. I chose the color of the felt to complement the mahogany. In essence the pull simply blends in.

This piece has a calmness and tranquility to the exterior, but upon opening it one sees its brilliance and life. I looked to my deceased grandfather while building this piece: he glided through life with a sense of stature, calm strength and self-assuredness. As I investigated deeper into my memories of him, opening him up piece-by-piece I saw more and more of his beauty and generosity, his heart and adventure, his truthfulness. He was right there for everyone to see. He taught me the benefits of being out there and being as honest with myself as possible. He reflected his beauty onto others and enhanced their own. This piece is designed to enhance the user's beauty through reflection. It allows the user to see themselves for who they are and what is important to them. The user can choose to have the whole cabinet open or simply one area at time, giving an intimate experience with a certain section. Sometimes when one sees the whole one misses the beauty in the details.

### **Coffee table –**

While finishing the wall-hung piece, I began to think about the body of work as a whole. It was suggested that I think about the flow from piece to piece. I sought fluidity and cohesion to create a tempo guiding the user through the pieces. As a result, the next piece needed to stand on its own and closer to the ground. In retrospect I was subconsciously creating a wave-like ebb and flow through the pieces, the ups and downs of life.



In this piece I wanted to continue to develop the idea of multiple openings. Instead of simply having doors, I wanted compartments that opened, using the line to dictate the shapes. This coffee table functions as a puzzle with pieces coming together and which are inextricably linked; remaining constantly in rapport with one another through hinging. One side remains affixed while the other glides on ball casters. In order to open the piece the user must open the small lid first, which acts as a locking mechanism. This element became a necessity due to the engineering of connecting these shapes together. Once the user opens the coffee table the interior space is exposed and they are confronted with a layer of choices. Two drawers appear. Upon opening the drawers the user is confronted with yet another layer of possibility. One drawer contains a smaller enclosed area and inside lays a small box. This box has a similar feel to the one found in the wall-hung piece, however it does not open. Though one can hear the jingling of the contents inside, they are never seen. I wanted to create a journey for the user, where more effort was rewarded with more opportunities. The deeper into the piece one goes, the more sacred the space becomes. Like delving further and further into someone's psyche only to realize that one will never totally understand.



I did not want the piece to feel overwhelming due to its size. I therefore used a lighter color, cream milk paint, to create weightlessness. Furthermore, by designing the coffee table low to the ground it not only feels less imposing but also creates a hovering effect. Again I

used gold leafing on the edges, which elevates the piece into a precious object. By slightly sanding the edges the piece has a feeling of use and history. Again I wanted to achieve a sense of calm and tranquility while also creating a piece that can take on different appearances. Thereby transforming the surrounding space.

This piece was yet another constructed hollow shape, like the wall-hung cabinet. Pieces had to be joined together to make interlocking shapes. Yet the overall feel is of a solid form. What if one shape was solid and one hollow? What would the dialogue between the two pieces be? How would it affect the lightness of the pieces? Similarly, where was the small box leading? Was it necessary?

### **Cabinet –**

In response to the questions raised by the previous piece I began to design a cabinet. I also wanted to retain the flow of the work. Creating a dialogue with the wall-hung cabinet was important; therefore this piece was similar in length, and rectangular form, while remaining freestanding. I envisioned this piece as a bridge between the first two pieces and the last one. Therefore, one section was comprised of a solid form and the other section a constructed element coming together to create a larger form.

However, in this piece I wanted to emphasize distinction between the elements. Therefore, I had the solid element remain mahogany on the exterior, and the constructed element, the door, was painted cream, creating a tie back to the coffee table. I also inset the door by a 1/2” to create an image of the solid form outgrowing the constructed form.





I wanted to explore layering in a new way to that of the coffee table, in order to continue exploring how altering the layering affects intimacy with a piece. I attempted to create color and space layering. On the exterior the mahogany and cream are the dominant colors, however a hint of blue protrudes from the inset door. Upon opening the cabinet, blue becomes the dominant color. The white of the door becomes secondary and the gold leaf door edging accentuates the transition to the blue. By having the edges of the door gold leaf I continue the motif

of the golden interior, adding a touch of elegance to a work, which has a hard geometric quality. Not only do these colors create a layering, but also they clarify the layers of forms coming together to create the whole.

Within the solid cabinet is the layering of space. This piece holds three hollow spaces, which move towards the user: each moving closer and closer, providing storage space. The spaces have no defined use, yet feel as if only one object can be placed within, lending to a display like quality. The idea is that the piece looks like a sculpture, yet upon further investigation one finds it opens and within lay clues.

Having it rest slightly off the ground like the coffee table contributes a sense of floating. By raising it up a feeling of precious hovering is created, giving each piece a more ethereal quality.

The golden indent on the top second surface suggests a possible location of the little box. I chose to do this in reaction to input from a committee meeting: that the suggestion of something is often more powerful than its actual existence. What was meant to be there? Does it exist somewhere else in the piece? What is its connection with the other piece? Leaving the box out of the piece allowed me to move on from the idea. The success of this piece is to be found in that it showed me the path to my next piece.

## Untitled –

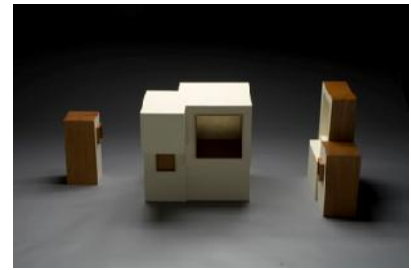
This piece does not signify an end to my body of work, but a beginning. It signifies a step towards making beyond graduate school. The genesis and evolution of this piece was by far the most honest, fluid and clear of all the pieces. It was free from distinctions and free from my need to force function, themes, symbolic transfers and statements.



I wanted to create a piece in which parts are linked metaphorically rather than physically. I wanted to suggest a past connection between the parts whilst suggesting independence from one another. Each piece breaks away from the central form and opens itself up. The smaller corner falls away to reveal an opening with a gold leaf interior. I used gold leaf as before to again suggest the magic and treasure of the interior. Creating an opening on the main form and slight indentations on the corresponding forms allows the viewer to mentally pull the pieces together. It was also important for me to break every surface of the cube, thereby evoking an interlocking feel. I decided to paint the main component the cream color that is consistent throughout my body of work. However, I wanted to create a distinction between the central piece and its appendages, so I lined them with mahogany, but retained the inset in the large piece mahogany in order to fortify the connection between the three forms.

This piece symbolizes for me the true breaking apart of the metaphorical little box that is a common theme throughout all my pieces and unites them together. Thus there is no need to shelter anything, to open anything, to protect anything. Everything is out in the open and in this openness there is strength and resolve. This piece is the little box on a large scale. It leaves the limited arena of something precious and becomes a strong, imposing presence. By no longer having a small box to guide the way, I free myself as a maker. And yet without that small box I would never have reached this point.

This piece unlike the others has no prescribed function. By releasing myself from the concept of function, the piece can dictate its own purpose. It could be an end table or a coffee table. One part can be in the living room, while its corresponding parts could be in the kitchen or bedroom, thereby connecting all the rooms together through their connection with one another. I attempted to take an immobilized piece of furniture within one room and liberate it to exist at the same time in many



spaces. This is an intriguing concept for my future works. By creating pieces that link physically or suggestively, how does that transform the ideas of furniture? Only through the freedom of definitions can this exist. It is this piece that I find to be the most successful due to its sense of honesty. It is also the most successful because it leads me towards a new body of work.

This piece is the conclusion of my thoughts on movement from the void interior to a complete solid piece. It is a movement from one construction method to another. This fluidity is what I was trying to create on every level with each piece. The fluidity exists from the high to the low, from the rectangular to the square, from the mahogany to the painted surface, from box to box, with gold leafing to create a common bond between the pieces. Allowing the flow to exist makes the pieces stronger both collectively and cohesively.

## **Future of my work –**

To conclude, from all of my explorations in this thesis one thing is for certain, one cannot control nor dictate someone else's actions. One can simply give clues, supply suggestions or at best lead by example. I believe that layering is a clue, a mechanism, which if implemented within a piece of furniture can create an intimacy through interaction, resulting in at best reflection, awareness and discovery. Layering through isolation allows for concentrated reflection. While creating a journey through multiple opening compartments can forge a path deeper and deeper into scared space. Using more visceral layering such as color and space suggests a journey not reliant on physicality but on visual and emotion interaction. Creating a concept of visual layering in independent pieces with the suggestion of there once having been connected allows for freedom. And as a result, this proves that to achieve layering a physical layer is not necessary. However, regardless of the mechanism that is used to forge a connection with a piece of furniture it will only be as successful as the willingness of its participant.

By analyzing how layering effects interaction, this thesis has taught me about myself. From initial stages of sketching, to writing the thesis statement and then to making the work, this experience has made me a stronger and more well defined person. The physical and visual layering that I created in these pieces provided me with an aesthetic solution to a deep, personal exploration. Each piece of this body of work symbolizes a personal step forward. The three boxes were my starting point: my first step into unknown and scary territory. They are not perfect. They have unresolved issues. However, within these issues answers to a clearer path are revealed. The second step forward is the wall-hung cabinet. It is a step towards self- reflection, of me at that moment, vulnerable with all my qualities and imperfections laid bare. The third step is the coffee table. This is the depiction of my multiple layers, of opening myself up for others to see. The fourth step is the freestanding cabinet, where I finally understand my ability and am empowered to stand on my own as I am. The final step is the untitled piece and this represents self-liberation from definition and expectation. I know that

within each piece these steps are not always visible to others, but they are what inspired me to make and to keeping making.

I have learned through this work that I need to take specific steps before engaging in a body of work. I need time to study, to absorb, to discuss, then to sketch. After that I can put my head down and make. Also, I need to find an object or visual reference to ground me in my making. I also learned that I am not the type of maker who can spend countless hours in the studio laboring over a piece. My sentiment is not suited to that type of working style. However, that does not mean that making is not important to me. The hand-mind relationship coupled with the use of imagination and creativity is paramount in my life.

The future of my sketchbook and pieces that evolve out of it is inextricably linked to the final piece of this body of work. 'Untitled' is the bridge between past, present and future. In many ways, it is the beginning of my next body of work, exploring forms and suggested connectivity. It pulls me away from the feeling of having to define everything, and enables me to allow the piece to evolve naturally. It also leads me to a place where the goal of connecting with others comes secondary to that of connecting with myself. Everything that I need to find happiness and fulfillment resides within me.