

A “Mimic” of a Sixteenth Century Panel Chest

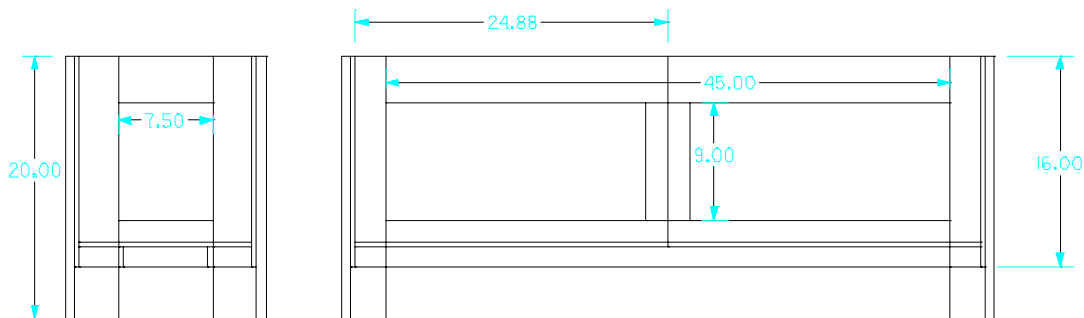
By Kevin O’Shaughnessy

Some time ago I was involved with discussions about SCA rapier, more specifically about the appearance around the Rapier List Field. It was stated that at first glance it can be difficult to tell whether rapier combat or golf is the game of the day. The reason is the prevalence of the (wonderfully useful and utilitarian) plastic “hard-shell” golf club cases being used by rapier combatants to haul their stuff around. I know because I use one too.

When the disparaging remark about the looks of all the golf cases came up I didn’t have any real defense. After all, I’m guilty of having one of those things myself. Being the obstinate and contrary person that I am I decided to do something better; to “improve” the look of MY area by replacing my plastic golf case with a more period-looking case. In retrospect I should probably have had my head examined.

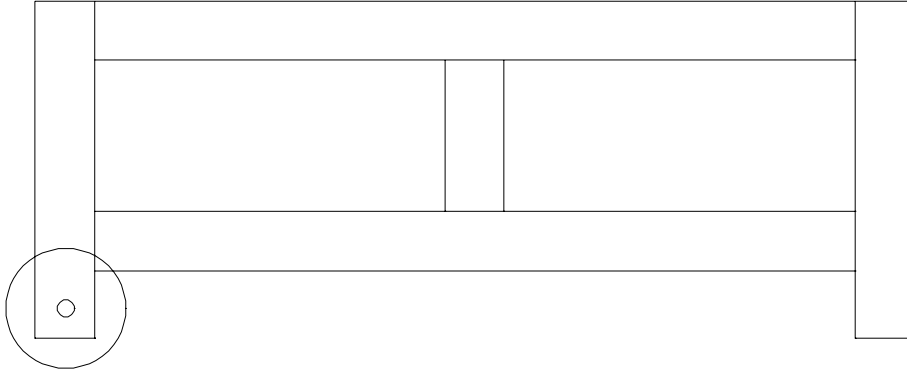
I had seen the websites showing how to make “take-down panel chests” to hide mundane items like coolers and such. I really liked the concept (and still do) but I didn’t want to just “build a box” AROUND my golf case, I wanted to replace it. So, I was going to make a chest. Not just any chest, but a panel chest. And it was gonna have WHEELS on the back so I could still pull it like a golf case. And, of course, it was going to be a complete, solid chest with a hinged lid, not a “take-down” chest. Those whom the gods would really irritate, they first make somewhat kooky.

Being an engineer, I fired up the trusty Computer Aided Design program and started slapping pixels around. (*Yeah, I know there’s a whole lot that can be said about designing 16th century furniture with a CAD program. Let’s just not go there right now.*) After measuring my longest rapier I determined the inside length of my new chest. I chose a width that appeared to fit my rapier helmet okay, and just pulled a height number out of the air. After a little sketching on CAD I came up with this:



The main boards were finished 1”x4”s (Pine) from Home Depot. The panels were ¼ inch plywood. The base pieces were 2”x4”s (though I adjusted that a little and used one 2”x4” and one 2”x2”). The lid was a “pre-laminated” pine board, 2 feet by 5 feet by 1 inch (nominal). These are great construction pieces for simple work where you aren’t trying to be “period accurate”. The whole thing was to be screwed & glued together.

What about the wheels I was blathering on about? Well, my idea was to reinforce the “legs” at one side, drill holes through them for a shaft, and mount a removeable set of wheels on a removeable axle there. With a handle on the other side I could simply lift and tow. When I got where I was going I could remove the wheels and stow them inside of the chest out of sight. It also makes sitting on the chest a lot easier.



I am aware that proper panel chests of the period utilize pegged mortise and tenon joints with slots carved to hold the panels. I wasn't prepared to go there for a couple of reasons: 1) I was trying to make the chest as light as possible, and would have to make the wood thicker in order to do that. 2) I don't have a router to cut the mortise and tenon joints. I also don't have assistants who work for food to do the tedious stuff by hand for me. So I butted the main boards together with some wood glue and screwed and glued the panels onto the backs (inside) of the boards. That turned out far better than I deserve it to have done.



Inside front of chest

Being a novice woodworker, I had to go buy long wood clamps for assembling the finished sides to each other. Not being a complete chowderhead I used the “glue & screw” method and even used a square to true things up as best as I could. I also heavily countersunk the screws so as to be able to hide the screw heads with wood putty.

I chose to use a fairly dark wood stain that really brought out the grain of the pine boards. After seeking the advice of someone who really knows how to make furniture I varnished the wood with Spar Varnish, sacrificing a little more “periodness” in order to have more of an “all weather” finish. *(I ran out of dark stain doing the outside of the chest and had to finish the inside of the chest with a lighter color.)*

I was on a shoestring budget and used “around the house” lumber wherever possible. Thus I discovered I didn’t have TWO straight pieces of 2x4 in my supply. I did have ONE straight piece, along with several straight pieces of 2x2. So I ended up using one 2x4 and one 2x2 as the bottom supports for the chest. It did have the effect of making it lighter. I also used 2x2’s to reinforce the inside corners of the chest. Since I intended to haul it to events I wanted the extra strength wherever I could.



Bottom of chest. *(Note the one 2x4 and the one 2x2.)*



Inside corner of chest showing reinforcement

I bought “D” ring chest handles and mounted 2 on each side. I used brass machine screws to mount the handles. They go all the way through the chest and are secured with nuts and washers on the inside. They are MUCH stronger than wood screws provided with the hinges. I then sewed leather straps between each pair of handles in order to make one bigger carry handle on each side.



Mounted “D” Ring



Reinforced machine screws securing handles

Standard black hinges were used. They mount externally on the back and inside the lid. They are the least “medieval looking”, but are unobtrusive.



Inside view of hinges

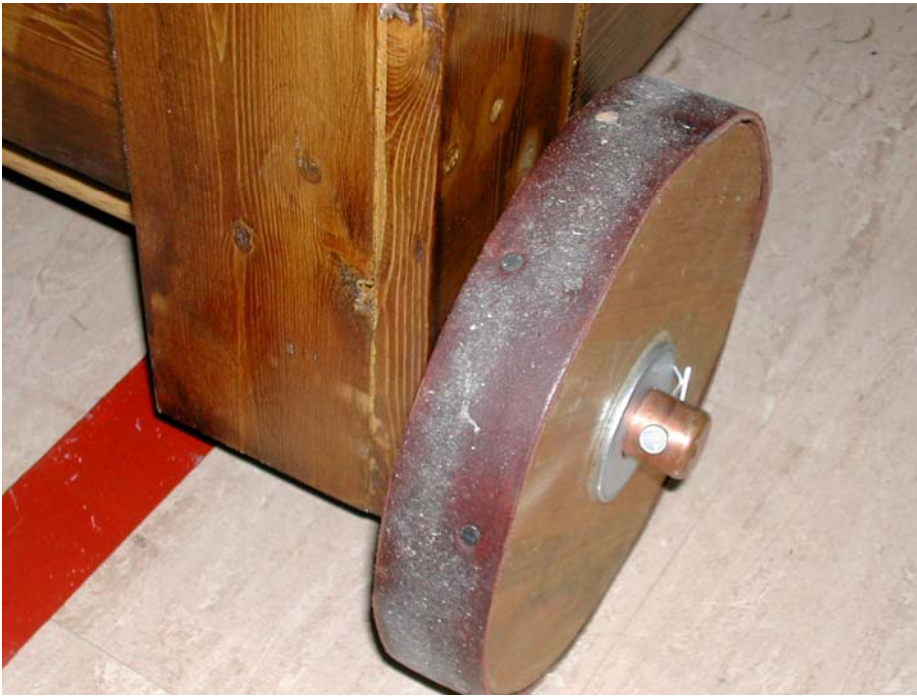
Belts held on by decorative upholstery nails function as the “latches” for closing and securing the lid.



View showing belts across lid. “Yup, it’s warped.”

The lid...sigh. The pre-fab piece of wood turned out to be slightly warped. My budget didn’t allow for replacing it, so I just lived with the warpage. Heck, wood must have warped in period on occasion, and the chest is NOT a “rich person’s” chest.

I built the wheels from $\frac{3}{4}$ " plywood. Two pieces each glued together makes each wheel. The axle is an oaken dowel and the "hubs" use big washers, pins & cotter pins. I made leather "tires" for the wheels and attached them with upholstery tacks.



Wheel close up – "Yup. It's used."



Wheel & Axle parts, wooden washers, metal washers, leather washers, cotter pins and copper caps

On the inside I attached two thin planks parallel with the back of the chest. These planks have straps and buckles attached to them to secure my rapier and dagger in place. Another strap and buckle is on the left side of the chest. That one is to secure my rapier helmet.

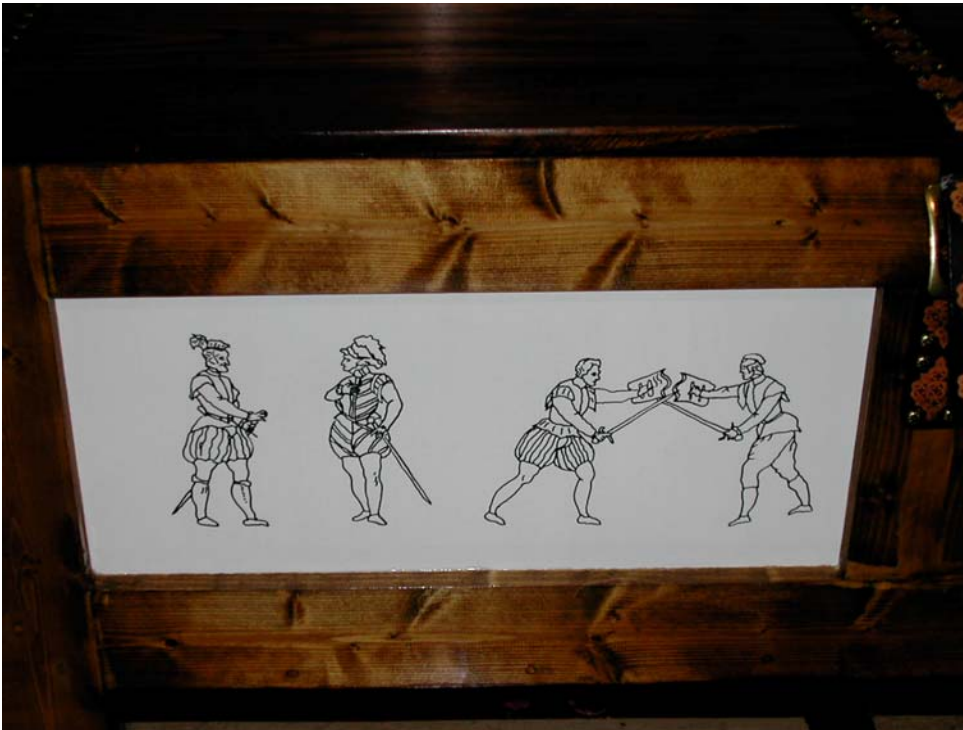


Inside view of chest showing wooden planks

I covered up the screw heads on the inside of the chest with strips of blue velvet held in place by decorative upholstery tacks. I glued some of the same velvet to the bottom of the chest as well. I was somewhat concerned with the possibility of the velvet holding excess moisture. Time will tell whether that will be a problem.

As work on the chest progressed, the staining and varnishing and such, I realized I wanted something with a little more “oomph” in the appearance. So, realizing that period chests were often intricately carved and painted (surviving ones, anyway), I decided to venture down that path. Not carving, because I didn’t choose suitable wood, but with decorative painting. I decided to paint the panels white and then paint images taken from the book “Arte Del Armi” by Achille Marozzo. The idea seemed fitting with the whole “rapier” theme of the panel chest.

I printed images taken from a scan of the sixteenth-century book, and then traced them onto the white-painted panels of the chest. I then carefully painted over the traced images. I chose to leave it in simple black and white line drawing style. I liked the simple, elegant effect.



Front panel art on left side



Front panel art on right side



Left side back panel art



Right side back panel art

While much heavier, the chest easily holds all of the equipment I used to hold in my plastic golf case. It is not too heavy to work with though. And it looks much better than a golf case too!

