

by Joe Barry



Articulating Tambours

Tambours bring to mind the classic roll top desk. The small slats of wood that are the tambours create a curtain that can be drawn over the mess of a desk and secure the contents within. They can also provide a visual consistency or massing for a piece of furniture. Plus, they appeal to our inherent sense of play (Peek-a-boo!). Admit it. They're kinda neat!

The most common form of tambour is wooden slats glued to a backing of 10 or 12 oz. artist's canvas. There are also

reports of silk or leather being used. To help conceal the canvas if it is exposed between the slats, it is helpful to dye the canvas black. Hide, white and yellow glues have been used to secure the canvas to the underside of the tambours. In one case, the manufacturer made a sandwich of the canvas by placing thin slats of veneer on the inside of the canvas. One of the best resources and how to make a curtain is the Guild video of Jere Osgood's demo. Borrow it and all will be made clear!

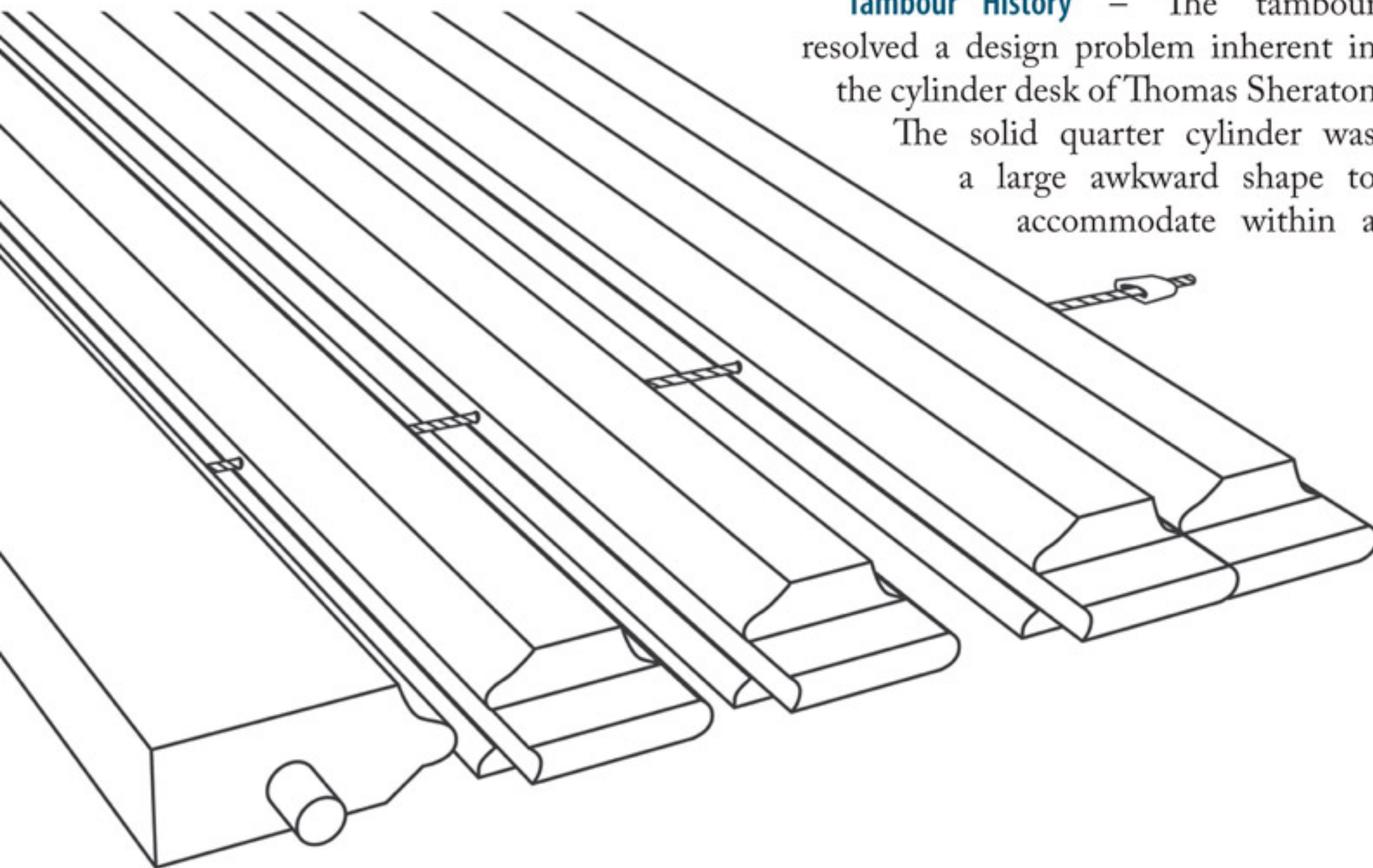
Tambour History – The tambour resolved a design problem inherent in the cylinder desk of Thomas Sheraton.

The solid quarter cylinder was a large awkward shape to accommodate within a

piece of furniture and took up a lot of interior space. It limited the size and depth of the pigeonholes within the desk. By making the cylinder out of slats, it could be bent around a gallery of pigeonholes to drop in behind for storage. A further refinement is to bevel or shape the outside edges of the slat allowing them to turn around an exterior radius. This led to the "S", double curve, or "waterfall" curtain that is associated with the classic roll top desk. Typically the tambour is shaped with a bullnose or a 30° bevel on each outside edge.

Tambours can also be made in other shapes. The Bureau du Roi, arguably the first roll top desk, was made for King Louis XV in the 1760s (ordered in 1760 – delivered in 1769!) had flat tambours for the marquetry surface decoration. John and Thomas Seymour used tambours shaped with a scratch stock and inlaid with bellflowers for the galleries of their lady's desks. Hoosier cabinets had relatively flat tambours. Danish Modern used a flat square edged tambour so that the veneered face of the sideboard presented what appeared to be a solid piece of unbroken teak. Tambours have also been made in a variety of shapes and even been carved in bas relief. A more ambitious shaping into a sawn tambour can give the curtain a swelling belly like a Bombé bureau.

During the reign of the roll top desk in the late 19th century, the major drawback to a canvas backing became readily apparent. In an age when every man carried a pocket knife, it was relatively easy to insert a knife between the tambours and slice the canvas bypassing any locks. The 19th century was in many ways the age of the patent gadget. In a very competitive marketplace, furniture manufacturers were always ready to market a newer and better widget. The answer to the security problem was to replace the canvas with a couple of wire cables threading the tambours together. A different approach was to make the



Wire cables provide a more secure approach than canvas backing – Remove material on the face at each end of the slats to create 5/16" x 3/8" long tenons that will be held in the 7/16" groove.

tambours interlock so that there was no space for a knife to get between them.

Making articulating tambours could be a very complicated process requiring multiple steps to form the tambour. Fortunately, we now have choices in router bit sets made especially for this task. If you have ever considered building a strip canoe, you are familiar with the cove and bead bits used to make the strips. In early strip canoes, each strip had to be beveled to match the changing bevel of the previous strip. Or you relied upon the “crap in the gap” technique when applying the fiberglass coating. Then someone had the bright idea to mill a cove on one edge of the strip and a matching radius along the other edge. This allowed the pieces to mate smoothly without any gaps as the strips wrapped around the turn of the boat. The same idea has been applied to making tambours.

Amana Bit Set – Amana (www.amanatool.com) has brought out a bit set in association with Lonnie Bird. This three piece set (#54314 for \$189.95) will make the ball and socket style. No additional canvas or wire is needed to assemble. The tambours interlock.

This style of tambour has been like the Loch Ness monster. It occasionally pops up in the woodworking magazines to tantalize briefly and disappears only to briefly show up again later. I first sighted it briefly as a letter in *Fine Woodworking* #15 (1986) and then later in #79 (1989) it re-appeared in an article on building a roll top desk. It also briefly surfaced as a how-to in the British publication *The Woodworker* (Volume 102, issue 8 – 1998). But building this monster required a lot of steps and custom tooling before these bits were made by Amana. Now it is a relatively straightforward process.

To make the Amana style tambour there is one step that is not readily apparent on first viewing. You rip your material wide enough to make two tambours plus 1/8" for a saw kerf to separate them after forming. The large bit cuts the face profile and half of the ball. After running all four edges across this bit, you have two tambours almost fully formed and needing only a rip pass between the two balls to separate them.

Before ripping them apart, a groove is made in the two outside edges to provide relief for the ball cutter. The ball cutter makes a pass inside the groove to shape the spherical recess. The third bit is a round over bit to relieve the sharp corners around the groove and provide clearance for articulation. Now you can rip them apart! The ball slides into the spherical socket and you have the tambour without the canvas or wires. One

criticism of this style is that the neck below the ball might be fragile in ring porous woods such as oak. I've experimented with this bit and believe that not to be an issue with good stock selection.

In this day of the internet we now have some great support materials. Both manufacturers have additional technical information linked to their catalog pages for these items. You can even watch Lonnie Bird make tambours live on YouTube!

One Last Point – These bits are made for use in a router table. They are not designed for freehand use and you shouldn't be trying to shape small stick like tambours freehand.



Amana style (Lonnie Bird) tambour router bit set. Designed for creating tambours without the need for wires, canvas or glue.