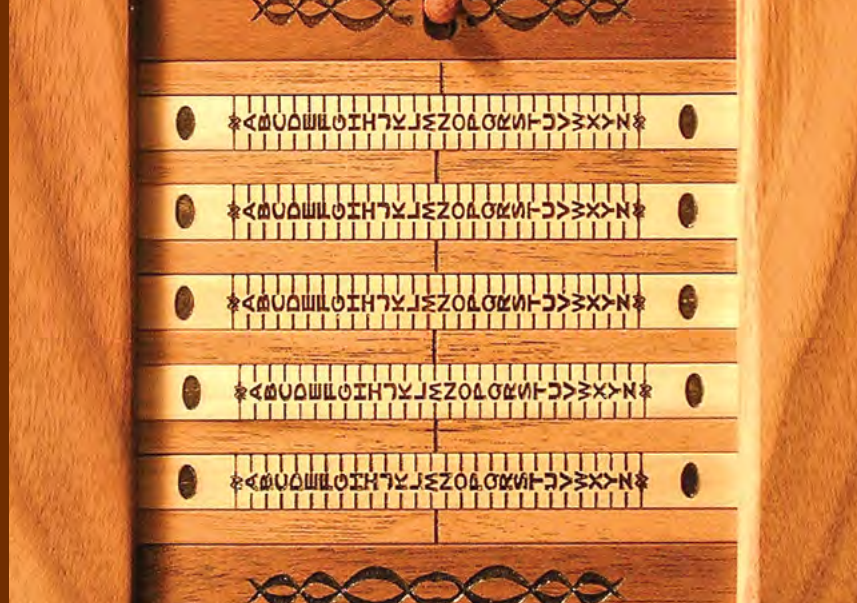


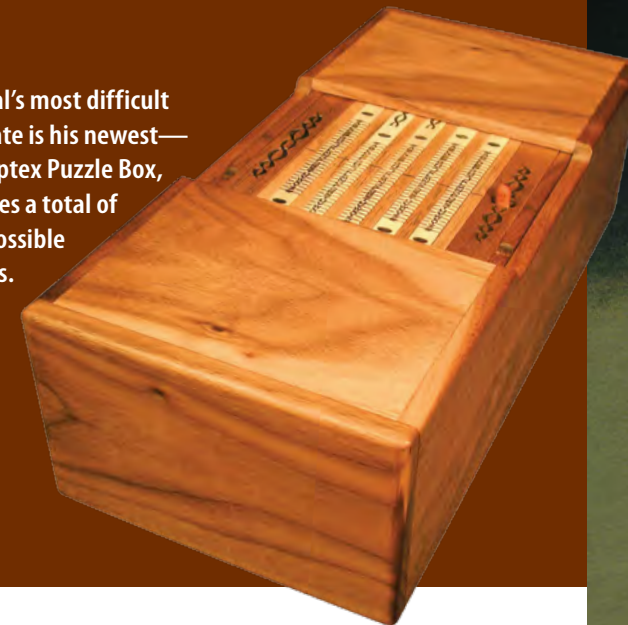
Randal Gatewood's Artistic Puzzle Boxes

Beautiful and challenging boxes are inspired by ancient Japanese traditions

By Kathleen Ryan



One of Randal's most difficult designs to date is his newest—Ultimate Cryptex Puzzle Box, which features a total of 17,210,368 possible combinations.



The Yin Yang puzzle box utilizes a multi-component dial mechanism that includes a cam lock and wooden spring.

Centuries ago, Japanese artisans handcrafted beautiful boxes to secure valuables and secret documents. Because there were few visible means of opening the boxes, only those who knew the secret could get inside. Methods for making the boxes were closely guarded and passed verbally from master to apprentice. Japanese craftsmen still make traditional puzzle boxes, but there is a new breed of puzzle box artisans.

Randal Gatewood is one of a handful of artists in the world dedicated to handcrafting original puzzle boxes. He combines artistic workmanship with fine-tuned precision mechanisms to bring a new level of expertise and intrigue to the art form.

The Road to Making Puzzle Boxes

Randal became interested in puzzle boxes after receiving one as a gift more than thirty years ago. In a way, his career prepared him to become a box-maker. After serving in the Army, Randal, who lives and works outside Athens, Texas, worked as a machinist and learned about precision workmanship with required tolerances of only .001". He then ran the productions facility at an industrial coatings factory. During his free time, Randal was a woodworker and made furniture. Later, he took a job in the aircraft industry, where he spent fifteen years building and refurbishing cabinetry for private business-class jets.

In 2002, the company Randal was working for went out of business. "That's when I decided to try something I had wanted to do for years, which was building puzzle boxes of my own designs," he said. Randal established Quagmire Puzzle Boxes™.

Designing Puzzle Boxes

Randal's goal is to create complex functioning boxes that are as challenging to open as they are beautiful to look at. "A good puzzle box should provide the tasks

of logical reasoning, manipulation, dexterity, and even a little luck at times," Randal explained. "Some of the very high-end puzzle boxes require from ten to 200 or more moves to open the box. I want to intrigue the puzzler with as much challenge as the design will possibly allow."

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The artisan quickly learned how complicated a task he had set for himself. It took him months to complete his first prototype and months more to produce the boxes. Designing these intricate puzzle boxes involves hours of contemplation, imagination, sketching, fabricating, jig building, and prototyping. "For me, the process of mind to manifestation is the ultimate challenge and the fun part," said Randal. "The whole creative process is what motivates me most. I usually start with an idea of what I want the box to look like, and then I let that dictate what mechanical options are available to make it all work."

Made in editions ranging from sixty to 120 boxes each, these boxes are crafted from hand-culled exotic hardwoods selected to accentuate the design and theme. "Wood is a wonderful palette for creativity because each type has its own properties—color, density, grain structure, and overall workability," said Randal. "As puzzle boxes are mechanical, they require very close tolerances to be maintained. I always look for a wood with a good straight grain and veer away from knotty woods and erratic grains—especially for making moving parts."

According to Randal, accuracy is the key to making puzzle boxes with moving parts. "Because wood is hygroscopic, it expands and contracts with atmospheric conditions. So it is crucial to make allowances for that movement and to produce parts with consistent accuracy. Combined with good wood and grain selection, this will ensure proper operation for a long time."

Even after years of experience, creating these boxes takes so much time that, working full time, Randal can only make a couple hundred complex boxes per year. That production limitation makes the boxes rare and plays a big part in making the art form collectible. His creations are sought by collectors in at least sixteen countries around the world. "Boxes that I created just a few years ago have sold at auction between collectors for five to six times their original purchase price," said Randal. Many of his new designs sell out within days of completion. Collectors sign up for Randal's newsletter on his website to receive notice of upcoming releases.

Randal plans to continue to elevate the art of designing and building totally unique and original puzzle boxes well into the foreseeable future because it's not just a job, it's his passion. "I very much consider inventing new puzzle box designs like creating art—what I like to call working art, because puzzle boxes are something that you can really interact with as well as display for their aesthetic value. The artist in me hopes that others will receive the concept of my artistic gesture. The craftsman in me hopes that it will be touched and appreciated. Every box I make is made with the ambition for heirloom quality that will last for many years to come."

For more information, visit Randal Gatewood's Website at www.quagmirepuzzleboxes.com. Please note that Randal does not offer or sell his puzzle box plans.



Owners of the Ultimate Personal Box can change the combination to one of 1,330 choices.

The Original Double Crossed Box was Randal's first puzzle box and requires twenty-three moves to open the lid.

