

Wood

by Sara K. Tedeschi, '04

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Wood is best when in roughly hewn chunks, and in planks, and when sanded smooth. I do not love it in living form, however, nor do I prefer it as paper. After challenging the wood's lines of grain with my own lines of pencil, I guide the blade of a band saw as it bites into my markings. The pencil disappears, a thin, black gap taking its place, and the body of the plank moves away from my body, all in one fluid motion.

This is how I work: I decide I want to do this *thing*, without having a real blueprint in mind. That alone gets me nowhere, and so I choose: either follow the path of hand-drawn lines or let the natural curvature of the piece jig and saw its own way.

I sketch a triptych of a scissor-backed chair to show myself where the legs intersect the seat, and each other, and how the seat is beveled. Art begets art, and I am ready to pass to the next level, which involves ascending a slatted staircase to the woodshop's loft. Up in the loft lie parallel stacks of wooden planks, long enough for mutineers to walk before delving into the depths below. Veins appear on every surface: the floors, the walls, the banisters, the stacks. My eye has no choice but to follow them, entranced by the sweeping lines that peter into distant dots. The lines run faster than the eye possibly can, leaving it behind in the dust.

*And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

*But oh ! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover ! ¹*

Coleridge wrote this "Vision in a dream: a fragment" immediately upon waking from an opium-induced slumber. His groggy mind meandered through a dulled thicket, contrasting the bright hills surrounding his valleys of thought. Drugs made aromatic cedar all the more alluring; nostrils flared as his eyes rolled back into his head, crawling for a warmer, darker place. The elixir circulated through bodily cavities that absorbed its potency, making the exiting product nothing more than a weak potion. It stuck inside him, graffiti on the mind.

*so much depends
upon*

wood.

In thinking about the artistic possibilities of wood, it is possible to ignore its physicality. Admiring its vertical grains (always vertical, never horizontal--cutting wood across the grain weakens the final product) does not necessitate contemplating the world of tensile strength, fluid transport, and lignification (by which live wood waterproofs itself). We combine pieces of wood, nailing and gluing and screwing them together to produce a final structure that is stronger and often more beautiful than each of the individual pieces alone. How often do we think of what is inside the wood, though, of the particles that work in synchronization, *now* increasing the stiffness, *now* increasing the strength, *now* absorbing and reflecting waves of light, now producing texture and color?

*Thus having prepared their buds
against a sure winter
the wise trees
stand sleeping in the cold. ²*

As wood matures, concentric layers of xylem and phloem hitch a ride on the backs of younger layers, increasing the sum total of durability. These layers conduct fluids up into the farthest fingers branching off tree arms. Wintry air cools the nutritious fluid moving up these capillaries and, like an under- turned over-nourished person, the tree becomes sleepy. Wood at rest makes me think of cracking; its lamination feels the urge to scream, to release a cold breath of vapor as the layers split apart. Under normal circumstances, though, the wood sits cool and calm and upright, masking the load it bears.

Walnut is the sultriest of hardwoods: its rich, reddish brown tone requires little other than a clear varnish to give its slopes and depressions a healthy glow. The wood nearest the core of the tree is oldest, darkest, and most lustrous. When the tree is turned inside out by the swings of an axe, I see that the center is solid chocolate and consider taking a bite.

Walnut stands for both life and death. Fact: its roots emit a noxious gas that may kill things growing in the soil above it. Belief, ancient Greece: walnuts thrown at weddings inspire fertility. Belief, Romania: add one walnut to one wedding gown to produce one more year of childlessness. ³

Did you know? Walnut is one of the few American species planted as well as naturally regenerated. ⁴ And whereas most species of hardwoods have only a few varieties of grain patterns, walnut's styles could fill the pages of a glamour magazine, catering toward both stick straight and curvy women. No matter the grain, it becomes more beautiful with age. Insert that into the aforementioned magazine, and walnut's readership multiplies. *Walnut has good dimensional stability*

⁵, so you need not worry that swelling or shrinking will keep it from fitting in places it usually fits. The variables engrained in every sixth grader's head--length, width, and height--are, by contrast, constants in the world of walnut.

How do I choose to use walnut? Do I glean its lustrous potential, even as it is confined within a four by who-knows-how-long beam, dusted by years of rest? Walnut: and then I help carry the length down those slatted stairs, the ones that have terrified me since I was below my mom's waist, when I knew a misstep would send me through to the ground. The beam runs perpendicular to those slats; it will not fall through, it is solid. My own strength, by contrast, is not so dependable; my arms tense so as to not drop my end, not to send the person at the bottom careening down with the force of the plank to boot. The grains are bi-directional arrows, pointing at and away from me, showing their tensile strength and compressive weakness, directing me here and there at once.

My maternal grandfather, Pa, retired from his sales position at the liquor company and started producing art, mostly wooden ducks at first. He made life-sized ducks that sit on the pedestals of table lamps. His two-dimensional geese hold coats and pocketbook straps and are branded "Welcome to Sara's/Andrew's/Shelley's ♦." Each animal has glassy eyes whose smoothness is unnerving in contrast to the surrounding, yielding wood. Those eyes and that branding remind me that the animal is manmade.

The human component to wood has the potential to be overlooked. Sculptures are not signed as paintings or drawings or lithographs are. My own method, perhaps inspired by Michaelangelo's in *From the Mixed Up Files of Ms. Basil E. Frankwiler*, is to make a mark on the bottom so as not to mar the figure. This technique separates those who truly care to know the sculptor's identity from the rest of the onlookers. Those interested can turn the piece over in their hands (given that it is not in a museum), reenact the carving that wore away at a block to produce curves, ridges, rounded edges, and visually scour the piece for a sign of ownership. The sculptor's identity is ever present yet does not intrude upon the artistic experience.

There is another visual link between Pa's ducks and himself, which is a photograph of each of his children and grandchildren holding a personalized goose. Offspring and artwork are framed in the photo, and even though he took the picture he still appears in it.

When I sand, my arms join together, forming a pendulum that runs parallel to the grain. They slide down the leg with increasing velocity until reaching the middle for a brief stop; then they increase in speed, and the sandpaper climbs the inner curve of the leg, caressing it to smoothness. This movement initiates a chemical reaction, switching the molecules from wood to satin. But no--the amount of energy poured in by human arms is not sufficient to catalyze such a change in chair legs. No, the molecules are still wood: cellulose, hemicellulose, lignin, and ash.

Even so, the chair is otherworldly. I have spawned a creation as ingenious, as radical, as impossible as the production of a human life. Three boards of wood, dusty, plain, and flat, are now smooth, curved, a slender collage.

It has been five years since my last affair with wood, but the reciprocal pressure of its flesh against the saw and against my hands is a tactile memory. The crevices of my brain store the roughness of splintering edges, but it is a pleasurable pain, one that connects me with my project. I have an uncanny ability to live vicariously. It is this ability that allows me to say I remain raveled up in wood, even after the curled shavings and splinters are swept up and disposed.

You need only apply a bit of polyurethane to draw forth the desired tone. Pour a bit onto a clean cotton rag and press into the wood using small, circular motions as if soothing a baby to sleep. Let your hand feel the newly shaped surface, free of the mediation of pencil or saw or paintbrush. Fingers feel the taut cloth pressed against firm wood; then the cloth disappears, and the hand touches bare wood.

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1. Samuel Coleridge, "Kubla Khan"; "cedarn cover" refers to a wood of cedars
 2. William Carlos Williams, "Winter Trees"
 3. Information from <http://www.hardwood.org/>
 4. *ibid.*
 5. *ibid.*