





Ron Bailey, *Martin Puryear in his studio, Chicago* (detail), 1987

# 1 A Craftsman at Heart

Abstract sculptures by Martin Puryear (born 1941) intrigue and surprise viewers with their puzzling shapes and forms. Born in Washington, DC, Puryear regularly visited the National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History as a child. These early experiences fostered his fascination with art, organic materials, and nature. The son of a postal worker who was a self-taught woodworker, Puryear began experimenting with wood as a teenager. He studied painting and printmaking in college and art school, but when he returned to the United States after living abroad for four years, he turned his attention to sculpture. Influenced by the many months he spent traveling the world, Puryear incorporates into his art the craft traditions of many cultures, including West African carving, Scandinavian design, boat building, basket weaving, and furniture making.

previous page: Martin Puryear, *Jackpot*, 1995, canvas, pine, and hemp rope over rubber, steel mesh, and steel rod, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Edward R. Broida



# 2 Working with Wood

An expert woodworker, Puryear makes his sculptures by hand with natural materials. Many of his sculptures show how they were constructed. Often the organic forms of his sculpture cannot be identified as specific objects, but they do suggest the shapes of animals, plants, or tools. This makes Puryear's sculptures appear both familiar and mysterious.



above: Martin Puryear, *Lever No. 3*, 1989, carved and painted wood, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Collectors Committee

right: Martin Puryear, *The Charm of Subsistence*, 1989, rattan and gumwood, Saint Louis Art Museum. Funds given by the Shoenberg Foundation, Inc.



**“The strongest work for me embodies contradiction, which allows for emotional tension and the ability to contain opposed ideas.” Martin Puryear**

### 3 Lever No. 3

*Lever No. 3* is a large sculpture with a heavy, massive body curving into a long, graceful neck that ends with a delicate circle. Puryear named this sculpture after the lever, a simple machine used to lift or move a heavy object by applying pressure at one point. Instead of looking like a tool, however, the sculpture resembles natural and biological forms. It might remind you of a plant tendril or an animal with a long neck.

Although at first glance it appears to be made of metal or stone, *Lever No. 3* is sculpted entirely of wood—Puryear’s favorite material—by using traditional woodworking and boat-building techniques. To make this work of art, he bent thin planks of ponderosa pine into rounded shapes and then joined them together to create an even surface. The base, or body, of the sculpture looks heavy and solid, but it is actually a hollow, thin shell. After assembling the sculpture, Puryear coated it all over with black paint. The dark color hides the seams where the wooden planks are joined, but the artist sanded away the black paint in some areas to show the pattern of the underlying wood grain.

**Consider:** How might this sculpture look different if it were painted another color? How would it be different if it were made from another material, such as steel or feathers?

**“I make these sculptures using methods that have been employed for hundreds of years to construct things that have had a practical use in the world.”  
Martin Puryear**

## try this

top: Martin Puryear, *Old Mole*, 1985, red cedar, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Purchased with gifts (by exchange) of Samuel S. White III and Vera White and Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. G. Chaplin, and with funds contributed by Marion Boulton Stroud, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kardon, Gisela and Dennis Alter, and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd.

bottom: Martin Puryear, *Thicket*, 1990, basswood and cypress, Seattle Art Museum. Gift of Agnes Gund © Martin Puryear



## Build a Wood Sculpture

**You will need:**

Spools, popsicle sticks, blocks, and scrap pieces of wood

Sandpaper

Wood glue

First, sand any rough edges so the wood is smooth and free of splinters. Then, experiment with arranging the pieces into an interesting composition. Be inspired by the design of something in the world, or create a sculpture from your imagination. When building a sculpture, an artist has to consider height, width, and depth, and how the work looks from many points of view. Weight and balance are important to make the work stable.

Make a sketch of your design or take some notes to remember how all the pieces connect. Then, glue the pieces to each other one at a time, waiting a little bit for the glue to dry.

Lastly, give your work an interesting title.



**"I value the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in any way representing them."**

**Martin Puryear**