



Family Guide

MARTIN PURYEAR

National Gallery of Art | East and West Buildings
June 22–September 28, 2008

Since I was small, I've been a maker of things of all sorts, including tools, musical instruments, boats, and furniture. MARTIN PURYEAR

Enter the world of Martin Puryear, a Washington-born artist who created the sculptures you are about to see. He makes many of his works from wood that he carefully crafts and coaxes into a variety of shapes and forms, as well as from unconventional materials such as tar, wire mesh, rawhide, and rattan. Puryear has lived and traveled all over the world and has a deep appreciation for time-honored ways of crafting objects by hand.

Be careful not to touch, sit on, or lean against the sculptures. Oils from your hands and clothing can damage them.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Find the artworks pictured. They are on view in the West and East Buildings. The symbol ✨ suggests a theme or idea to think about in relation to the artworks.

Notice shapes, surface textures, and materials. Are the works smooth or rough, curved or straight, opaque or see-through, painted/stained or natural, heavy or light, open or closed, spacious or confined?

Consider how things were made. Puryear uses fine craft and woodworking techniques to create his sculptures. Making things by hand in these ways takes time and requires a high degree of skill and understanding of materials.

Walk around sculptures where possible. They look different depending on where you stand. Look at them from many angles.

Make associations. Puryear's sculptures may remind you of boats, baskets, tools, faces, and other familiar things.

Think about **titles** of the artworks. Some are playful, historical, or may contain unfamiliar words. Titles give the works an identity and some ideas to think about, but don't explain them. Some artworks have no titles at all because the artist chose not to name them. They are labeled Untitled.



Its shape wavers upward, narrowing at the top to only one and one-quarter inches across, and it does not touch the ground!

1 1/4"

Because it becomes so narrow at the top, the ladder looks longer and the end farther away than it actually is. A ladder usually helps a person *climb* to a higher spot, whether to build something or fix it. It also might *symbolize*, or stand for, the idea of aspiration—the desire to achieve something difficult.

Read the paragraph about Booker T. Washington. **What were some of his aims and achievements?**

WHO WAS BOOKER T. WASHINGTON?

Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in 1856 near Roanoke, Virginia, and later recalled his lifelong quest to rise from humble beginnings in a book entitled **Up From Slavery**. Freed following the end of the Civil War in 1865, he pursued education for himself and became a proponent of education for black people. “I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study would be about the same as getting into paradise,” he wrote. In 1881 he became director of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which he grew into a center where students learned manual and professional skills needed to achieve economic independence. Some considered his views controversial because he advocated the pursuit of practical training and skills over academic studies, political empowerment, or civil rights as immediate means for black people to improve their lives.

ABOVE

Martin Puryear, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996, ash and maple, 431 7/8 × 22 3/4 × 3 in. (1097 × 57.8 × 7.6 cm); width narrows to 1 1/4 in. at top (3.2 cm), Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Ruth Carter Stevenson, by exchange. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo by David Wharton

* UP AND AWAY WEST BUILDING ROTUNDA

Find *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*

Let your eyes take you up the steps of this ladder. It is thirty-six-feet long and made from a single sapling, or young tree, which Puryear split down the middle and then joined with rungs. This is a simple, resourceful way to make a ladder that the artist observed while living in the French countryside.

* **BENDING WOOD**
WEST BUILDING
EAST GARDEN COURT

In a variety of cultures around the world, natural materials are thought to be imbued with life and spirit. To work with wood, for instance, requires a respect for that material and its unique properties. Making something from it is a process of coaxing and training the material into the desired form.

Find Untitled (pictured below)

Puryear bent straight pieces of wood into rings without breaking them by using green wood recently cut from a tree, which is fresh and flexible. He then slowly bent the wood into the shape he wanted.



The rings in this room may look similar at first, but study them closely and you'll see how different they are.

**Which rings have smooth surfaces?
Rough ones?**

**Which are painted or stained a
different color?**

**Can you find rings assembled from
different parts and glued together?**

While living in Sweden to attend art school, Puryear met a master furniture maker who encouraged him to be attentive to the qualities of different types of wood while deciding how to work with it.

Being attentive means watching and listening carefully. **What do you think it means to listen to an object made of material that was once alive? What might it tell you about itself?**

TO THINK ABOUT

In Japan there is a cultural appreciation for small marks of imperfection, or flaws, in fine art and crafts. These marks are considered to represent “the humanity within the object.” Puryear’s travels in Japan may have led him to appreciate this idea.

Look for marks or signs of a human hand on the artworks as you walk through the exhibition:

Staple marks

Rough surfaces

Patches

Drawing or scribbles



 **IT'S ALIVE!**

Find Sharp and Flat

Do artworks in this exhibition remind you of animals or living things? They may seem to have heads and bodies like giraffes, birds, or even dinosaurs. Puryear's art has often been described as *biomorphic*, which means "in the shape of a living thing."

Sharp and Flat has a long neck. Can you think of other animals with long necks?

Sharps and flats are musical notations. Can you think of musical instruments that have bodies and necks?

LEFT
 Martin Puryear, *Untitled*, 1982, maple sapling, pear wood, and yellow cedar, 59 x 66 x 5 in. (149.9 x 167.6 x 12.7 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Promised gift of Judith Neisser and Family in memory of Edward Neisser, B.A. 1952. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Martin Puryear

ABOVE
 Martin Puryear, *Sharp and Flat*, 1987, pine, 64½ x 80 x 30 in. (163.83 x 203.2 x 76.2 cm), Collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy McKee Gallery, New York

WHO IS THE ARTIST?

Martin Puryear was born in 1941 and raised in Washington, DC. His father was a postal worker, his mother a schoolteacher. The Puryear family is African American, and during the time of racial segregation had to make special efforts to find places that offered opportunities for Martin to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. One of them was the National Gallery of Art. Another was the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. Puryear's family also encouraged his artistic inclinations, arranging private study with an art teacher for him from early childhood.

Puryear's early interest in how things work, and why they take the form they do, led him to develop his woodworking and other manual skills. He later turned those skills into sculpture-making techniques.

Puryear also has always been intensely interested in nature and natural sciences. His early ambition was to become a wildlife illustrator. He studied the bird "portraits" of John James Audubon (1785–1851) and himself became extremely skilled at drawing wildlife. At Catholic University in Washington, DC, he studied French and biology and later switched to a major in painting. While still a student, Puryear had his first exhibitions—of paintings and prints—in a Washington, DC, gallery and at the Baltimore Museum of Art.



* THE GREAT ESCAPE

Find *Old Mole*

Its shape might remind you of a burrowing animal, or a bird wrapped up in a package. Except you don't know for certain because all you can see is the outside. Maybe the inside is empty and the outside is just an abandoned shell?

Puryear animates the empty space, or *volume*, inside the sculpture with a sense of life or spirit.

The items listed below are containers, coverings, or spaces for living things. Some are man-made, and some are natural and part of a creature. **Can you think of three others?**

turtle shell

tent

coat

fenced yard

feathers

house

birdcage

cave

skin

INTERESTING TO KNOW

February 4, 1992, was declared Martin Puryear Day by the District of Columbia government to honor the achievements of one of Washington's finest locally born artists.

LEFT

Martin Puryear, *Old Mole*, 1985, red cedar, 61 x 61 x 34 in. (154.9 x 154.9 x 86.4 cm), 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. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

RIGHT TOP

Martin Puryear, *Reliquary*, 1980, gessoed pine, 42 x 47 1/2 x 9 in. (106.7 x 120.7 x 22.9 cm), Collection Gayle and Andrew Camden, Detroit © 2008 Martin Puryear

RIGHT BOTTOM

Martin Puryear, *Believer*, 1977–1982, tulip poplar and pine, 23 1/4 x 23 3/8 x 17 3/8 in. (59.1 x 59.4 x 44.1 cm), Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago



▲ This sculpture is made from pine planks constructed like a crate.

✿ WOOD AND MATERIALS

Find *Reliquary* (pictured top) and *Believer* (bottom)

One of these sculptures has an inside; the other does not. **Can you tell which one? How?**

HINT: *Reliquary* has “air holes” in the top!

Nearly everything in the exhibition is made from materials found in nature, like wood. **Which words do you think describe something natural?**

- clean plastic smooth
- dirty geometrical
- imperfect shiny electric
- painted digital
- rough alive



▲ The knobby part of this sculpture is a section of a tree trunk that was charred in a fire. The artist inserted the red piece, which he made, into the top of this form.

WHO WAS JIM BECKWOURTH?

Beckwourth was an American adventurer who lived during the 1800s. His mother was a black slave and his father was white. He was born in Virginia, and because of his mixed ancestry, his legal status was that of a slave. When he was older he traveled with his father to St. Louis. He continued his journey westward and eventually lived among the Crow Indian tribe in what is now Montana. Later, he served as an interpreter and guide for settlers heading west and for US troops during the Cheyenne War of 1859.

* WRITING ON THE WALL

Find *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth*

Read the information about Beckwourth in the box to the left.

Look carefully at the work, its materials, and its colors. Think about:

How the colors might relate to Beckwourth's life

How the rawhide strips, or lines, may relate to his story





LEFT

Martin Puryear, *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth* (detail), 1978, twisted rawhide, 272 in. (690.9 cm), Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

ABOVE

Martin Puryear, *Self*, 1978, stained and painted red cedar and mahogany, 69 x 48 x 25 in. (175.3 x 121.9 x 63.5 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha. Museum purchase in memory of Elinor Ashton. © 2008 Martin Puryear

* FIND YOURSELF

Find Self

Puryear has called the work above *Self*. He has said that he thinks of the self as a “seamless entity, as a secret, hidden place.” *Seamless* means smooth. *Entity* means many things gathered into one, to make a complete whole.

What is the secret hidden place in this sculpture? If you were a shape, what shape do you think you would be?

INTERESTING TO KNOW

Puryear has borrowed from boat-building techniques known as cold-molding and strip-planking to create the curving, rounded surfaces of some of his wooden sculptures, such as *Self*. He carefully shapes and glues thin wood strips to a framework he has built, stapling them into place until they dry, and then removes the staples and the underlying framework.

* WHEELS KEEP ON TURNING

Find Desire (cover image)

Its enormous wheel is attached to a cone-shaped *spindle*, a rod around which something revolves. (*Spindle* comes from the word *spin* and is also a device used for thousands of years to spin yarn for knitting or weaving).

Imagine if the wheel began turning around the spindle. Do you think the wheel could make a full circle in this gallery?

The sculpture’s title, *Desire*, means a wish that is unfulfilled. What do you think the sculpture might want?



LEFT

Martin Puryear, *Dumb Luck*, 1990, wire mesh, wood, and tar, 64 × 94 × 36 in. (162.56 × 238.76 × 91.44 cm), Collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

RIGHT

Martin Puryear, *Lever No. 1*, 1988–1989, red cedar, cypress, poplar, and ash, 169 × 134 × 17¾ in. (429.3 × 340.4 × 45.1 cm), The Art Institute of Chicago. A. James Speyer Memorial Fund, UNR Industrial Fund in honor of James W. Alsdorf, Barbara Neff Smith and Solomon Byron Smith Funds. © 2008 Martin Puryear

BELOW

Martin Puryear, *Confessional*, 1996–2000, wire mesh, tar, and various woods, 77⅞ × 97¼ × 45 in. (197.8 × 247 × 114.3 cm), The Cartin Collection, Hartford, Connecticut. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

RIGHT BOTTOM

Martin Puryear, *Deadeye*, 2002, pine, 58¼ × 68⅙ × 13⅜ in. (148 × 172.9 × 34 cm), Collection Agnes Gund. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy McKee Gallery, New York. Photo: Michael Korol, New York



✿ OPEN AND SHUT

Puryear used wood and wire mesh painted with tar to create the sculptures in this room. They may seem heavy and bulky at first, but look closely. You can see through them. They are *permeable*, meaning light and air can pass through them.

Find *Dumb Luck* and *Confessional*

Dumb Luck looks like a padlock, which secures something, keeping it inside. Also the word *dumb*, in the title, can mean silent.

Examine each from the “front” (the flat section) and from the sides. Take turns describing the features of each.

**Which one would listen to your secrets?
Which one would keep them?**



* SET SAIL

Find *Lever No. 1*

Sometimes boats are called vessels. The word can mean any form with a hollow inside and an opening. Vessels are often used as carriers: ships or boats can carry people or goods; vessels like buckets, water bottles—or even your blood vessels—carry liquids.

The vertical portion of *Lever No. 1* may remind you of a boat's mast or a lid that, if closed, would shut this vessel tight!

Find *Deadeye*

The word *deadeye* refers to a piece of sailboat hardware through which a rope passes in order to control the boat's sails. Like many of Puryear's titles, it is an *evocative* and *metaphorical* word—meaning it is rich with possible symbolic meanings—when connected with the sculpture you see before you.

Notice the sculpture's smooth and softly rounded form. It might look like it was carved from a single piece of wood but is in fact fitted together from many. Look carefully and you can see the assembled blocks of wood it is carved from.



Find Untitled

This sculpture may make you think of a dinosaur skeleton at a natural history museum (The Smithsonian Natural History Museum in Washington, DC, was a place Puryear liked to visit when he was young.) A dinosaur skeleton was, millions of years ago, covered with skin and was part of a living animal.

The insides of old machines, like a sewing machine or car, may also be exposed if the outside shell is gone. **Imagine this sculpture coming to life. Would it swing the ball around? Do you think it would be a machine or an animal?**



Find *A Distant Place*

Throughout his life, Puryear has traveled to many distant places with different kinds of architecture and monuments, some of them ancient. Standing in front of *A Distant Place*, you notice that the sculpture is very tall, much



bigger than you. **What about its appearance and title may make you imagine a structure even larger?**

What does the sculpture remind you of?

flagpole unicorn

earth miniature house

greek temple boulder

block of marble

place of worship needle

FAR LEFT

Martin Puryear, *Untitled*, 1997–2001, pine, cypress, ash, and rope, 143 ½ × 132 × 44 in. (364.5 × 335.3 × 111.8 cm), The Newark Museum. Purchase Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Richard P. Goodbody

NEAR LEFT

Martin Puryear, *A Distant Place*, 2005, basswood, yellow cedar, white pine, and maple burl, 180 ¾ × 35 ¾ × 35 ¾ in. (458.2 × 90.8 × 90.8 cm), Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

RIGHT

Martin Puryear, *Ad Astra*, 2007, various woods (ash, Sitka spruce, hickory, and pine) and found wagon wheels, 756 × 74 × 104 in. (1920.24 × 188 × 264.2 cm), Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Imaging Services (photo John Wronn)



 TO THE STARS
EAST BUILDING

The *Martin Puryear* exhibition continues in the East Building. To get there, take the elevator or stairs to the Concourse, and pass through the gift shop and the long connecting hallway. Take a breather in the Cascade Café, opposite the gift shop, if you need a snack and a break.

Find *Ad Astra*

It's the largest sculpture in the exhibition! Imagine launching yourself out the window and into the sky on it. **Does it look like a machine that would take you to the future or to the past?**

HINT: Visit the Mezzanine for a different view.



* TRADING PLACES

Find C.F.A.O.

This wheelbarrow is bearing an unusual load! The large face is a recreation of a mask from the Fang culture in West Africa. The mask bristles with wood scaffolding built up around it. If you were standing behind the wheelbarrow's handles to pick it up, you would be facing the inside of the mask, as if you were wearing it.

Wheelbarrows are a simple means (and form of vessel) for moving materials from one place to another. This wheelbarrow, which Puryear found in France, and the sculpture's title suggest that objects from different cultures move around and take on different meanings through the eyes of different people.

How is a face like a mask?

How is it different?

Find Maroon

Like many other of Puryear's works, the title has a double meaning. *Maroon* means to strand or isolate, like being marooned on a desert island. Also the Maroon *people* are descendants of escaped slaves who live in Suriname, South America, and the West Indies.



* BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Find Brunhilde

Brunhilde is like a large animal taking a big breath and then blowing out. The artist has captured the air inside the wooden framework, like a ribcage, to create a sense of volume.

Take a big breath in and out and watch how your stomach expands and contracts. Does your stomach curve in or out when you blow air out?

LEFT TOP

Martin Puryear, *C.F.A.O.*, 2006–2007, painted and unpainted pine and found wheelbarrow, 100¾ × 77½ × 61 in. (255.9 × 196.9 × 154.9 cm), Courtesy the artist and Donald Young Gallery, Chicago. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Richard P. Goodbody

BELOW

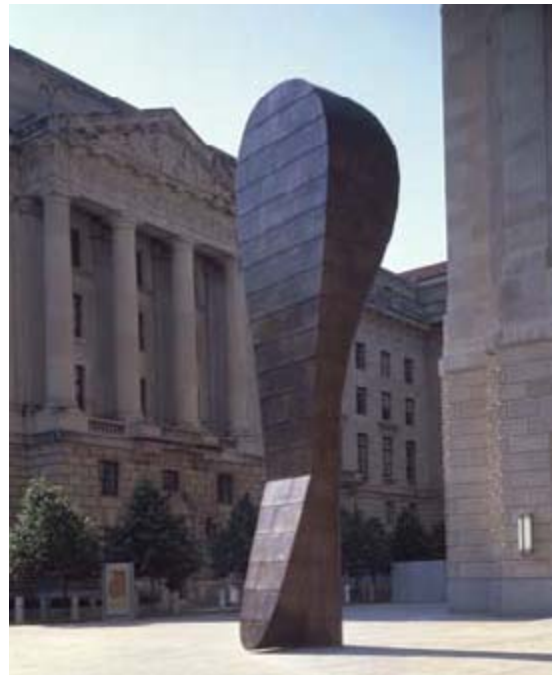
Martin Puryear, *Brunhilde*, 1998–2000, cedar and rattan, 96 × 112¼ × 74 in. (243.8 × 285.1 × 188 cm), Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Richard P. Goodbody

RIGHT

Martin Puryear, *Bearing Witness*, 1994–1998, hammer-formed, welded bronze plates, 40', Installation at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington, DC. Commissioned by the General Service Administration's Art in Architecture Program. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo by Robert C. Lautman

LEFT BOTTOM

Martin Puryear, *Maroon*, 1987–1988, wire mesh, pine, yellow poplar, and tar, 76 × 120 × 78 in. (193 × 304.8 × 198.1 cm), Milwaukee Art Museum. Gift of the Contemporary Art Society. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Milwaukee Art Museum



Bearing Witness (1994–1998) is a 40-foot high outdoor sculpture sited at the Ronald Reagan Building, a government office building at Pennsylvania Avenue and 13th Street, several blocks west of the National Gallery of Art. The face-like form Puryear uses recurs in this sculpture, hammered from bronze plates. Puryear has said, “For myself, I wanted my work to be directed toward people rather than toward the government. In a true democracy, people talk back to the government.” The form also suggests a receptor.





TRAVELING THE WORLD

The places Puryear has lived and explored have fed his curiosity and imagination.

1 *Sierra Leone, West Africa:* After college, Puryear joined the Peace Corps and spent two years teaching English, French, biology, and informally, art, in the town of Segbwema. There he observed and exchanged ideas with local craftsmen, who with few resources or electricity at their disposal, made everything by hand—houses, boats, cloth, pottery, and baskets. Puryear was struck by their ingenuity and the pride they took in crafting objects for everyday use.

2 *Stockholm, Sweden:* Puryear attended the Royal Swedish Academy of Art after completing his Peace Corps service. He took printmaking classes by day and created sculpture at night.

3 *The Arctic Circle:* After graduating from the Royal Swedish Academy, Puryear and his brother traveled to the Swedish and Norwegian portions of Lapland, where they encountered the culture of the local Sami people. He took note of the architectural forms—such as enclosures and ladders—that developed in response to available resources, the climate, and culture.

4 *New Haven, CT:* Puryear attended graduate school at Yale University, concentrating on sculpture.

5 *Japan:* Puryear spent a month traveling through Japan. There he studied shrines and traditional wooden architecture and crafts, which rely upon an intricate system of joinery that does not use nails or other fasteners.

6 *Nashville, TN; Chicago, IL; College Park, MD:* places where Puryear taught visual art at universities.

7 *Saché, France:* Puryear spent six months with his family on a residential artist's fellowship in the former studio of Alexander Calder, an expatriate American artist famous for creating mobile sculptures.

This exhibition was organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The *Martin Puryear Family Guide* is made possible by the generous support of Melvin Henderson-Rubio.

Written by the Department of Education Publications and produced by the Publishing Office, National Gallery of Art. © 2008 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

The exhibition is sponsored by The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

Generous support is also provided by Glenstone.

Additional support is provided by Lannan Foundation.

FRONT COVER

Martin Puryear, *Desire*, 1981, pine, red cedar, poplar, and Sitka spruce, 192 × 384 in. (487.7 × 975.3 cm), FAI Fondo per l'Ambiente Italiano, Villa Menafoglio Litta Panza, Varese. Panza Collection. Gift, 1996. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo copyright Giorgio Colombo, Milan