

BY CRAIG ALTOBELLO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEB PORTER-HAYES

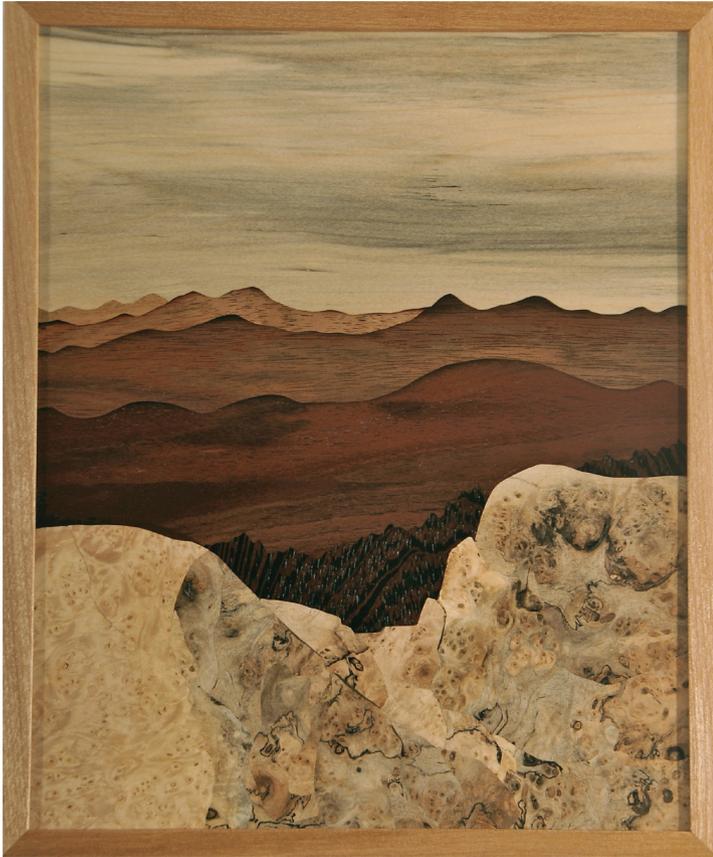
Beauty REVEALED



Dragonfly, 6.5" x 8.5"

A giant sugar maple in Brattleboro, VT splits open during an autumn storm. The tree contains a large burl: a hard, woody and rounded deformity in the tree caused by an injury to the bark. A logger cuts the burl and delivers it to a local woodworker. The woodworker dries the burl in his shed for several years, then uses a chainsaw to make several slices through it. He offers the sections for sale.

I work wood's diverse color, grain and texture, patiently and meticulously, to reveal the 'inside story'.



Cliff Side View, 8.5" x 11". By sawing my own veneer, I'm able to use woods from local New Hampshire trees, scraps from other woodworkers, and lumber that has been milled from storm-damaged trees. For example, the sky in this mountain landscape is salvaged from a 2x4. The blue-gray colors are naturally occurring mineral stain in the wood. The first two ridges of mountains are black acacia salvaged from a storm-damaged tree from Berkeley, California. I don't use stains or dyes; only the natural color of the wood.



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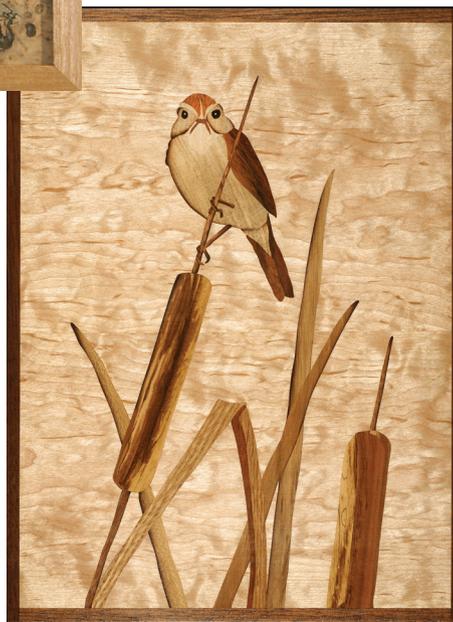
hen I arrive to purchase a slice of burl from the fallen maple, my eye is drawn to the dark veins running through the jumbled grain. To me, the wood suggests granite. I see boulders, ledges, and cliffs in the swirling pattern. The burl becomes the inspiration for several pieces of marquetry: the art of assembling thin slices of wood to form an image.

I was first introduced to woodworking in 1978, during a workshop with designer/craftsman Thomas Moser. I've been making furniture for my family and friends ever since. My specific path to marquetry can be traced to teaching middle school science in Henniker, New Hampshire where my students and I often documented our explorations through art and writing. While experimenting with cut paper collage, I saw a fascinating connection between images with painted papers and the unique character of wood. I decided to travel to the College of the Redwoods in California to study marquetry.

Last September, I saw a notice posted that a giant sugar maple in Francestown, NH was broken by Hurricane Irene. The wood was being offered to League of New Hampshire Craftsmen artists. Knowing what a treasure the old tree was, I responded right away. I found several small burls on a damaged limb, removed them with my chainsaw, and set them to air dry under my porch.

Now I look forward to giving the wood a second life, inspired by the beauty in my surroundings: hikes up Mount Monadnock, songbirds on Temple Mountain, the Fremont Conservation Land in Peterborough, NH, a sky full of migrating birds.

Like people, trees respond to what happens to them. What they live through creates their character. Sunlight and soil, ice and wind... all these things leave their unique mark on the inside. I work wood's diverse color, grain and texture, patiently and meticulously, to reveal the 'inside story'. And like people, the story hidden beneath the bark is beautiful, unique and forever astonishing.



Swamp Sparrow & Cattails, 9" x 12"

There is a remarkable range of color and grain in wood. Sycamore resembles the feathers of a bird. The swirling pattern of sweet gum suggests clouds.

For a studio appointment or commissions, contact Craig Altobello at 603.924.8522.