

# Pati Stajcar Listens to the Wood

BY JUDY ARCHIBALD

Loggers in the Pacific Northwest who toss red cedar burl aside as trash would be surprised to see how Pati Stajcar transforms it into elegant flowing wood sculptures.

"When a tree gets an injury such as an antler rub," explains Stajcar, "a burl forms as a Band-Aid. Loggers want the grain to be plain and straight while the grain of a burl is swirly and exciting—which is exactly why I love it."

*Dance of Kings*, a graceful sculpture of two male peacocks standing back to back with both fans of feathers open, was a huge burl rotting in the woods until Pati's brother-in-law in Washington, who logs stumps to make roof shakes, threw it into the back of his pickup to save for her.

After she and her husband Dave hauled it back to their home in Golden, Colo., she cut into the burl with a chainsaw, then split it open with an awl. Only then was she able to start carving into the wood. "I've always wanted to do peacocks in full fan," she says, "and this piece was large enough and had grain that resembles feathers."

Listening to the wood, Stajcar allows texture, grain, color and size to influence the final shape and flow of every sculpture. For detailed work, she uses a soft basswood, while stylized pieces call for red cedar burl or yew wood, which Native Americans used in making bows for their arrows. "Loggers consider yew trash trees," she says, "but it's bright orange in the middle—just gorgeous."

Whether basswood, burl or yew, Stajcar lets the wood speak for itself and considers cracks and knots a natural influence to challenge her imagination. "When the wood forces me to change a piece, 99 percent of the time it becomes stronger," she says.

"Because the chunk of yew wood that became *Falcon Heart* was so 'punky,' it completely dictated the abstract shape of the sculpture," she says. "To get past the bad wood, I had to carve out the heart. Thus, the title."

## Circle of Life

In one of Stajcar's favorite carved burls, *Transitions*, a red-tailed hawk is about to devour a widgeon. However, instead of being a gory portrayal, she honored the raptor's role in nature by using the hawk's wings to caress the duck like a lover. "It's a circle-of-life piece," she says, "to show death as natural."

Stajcar grew up in Pennsylvania, drawing anything that would stand still "and some things that wouldn't." Instead of pursuing art she moved to Florida to take a position as a reservations agent for Air Sunshine, and eventually moved



*Dance of Kings*, red cedar burl, 48 x 38 x 41", two male peacocks



*Transitions*, red cedar burl, 15 x 20 x 18", red-tailed hawk on widgeon



Pati Stajcar works with barn owl rehabbing at the Raptor Education Foundation in Aurora, Colo.

Falcon Hunt, yes.  
44 x 14 x 14",  
gwfalcon

to Denver to work for Frontier Airlines, where she met her husband across the reservation's counter. It was only after taking a woodcarving class as therapy from her job that she found purpose. "Discovering sculpting was like playing clouds as a child," she says, "lying on my back on the ground gazing into the sky to discover a bunny or a whale chasing a fish."

Within two years of taking the woodcarving class she was selling finely detailed, painted songbirds at craft shows and winning carving competitions. In 1985, she left the travel world to become a full-time sculptor. At the first Marble Workshop in Marble, Colo., in 1989 she met internationally recognized wildlife sculptor Gerald Balciar, who took her under his wing as an apprentice for two years.

Versatile enough to sculpt abstract, figurative or animals, Stajcar is inspired by hawks, eagles and owls who are rehabilitating at the Raptor Education Foundation in Aurora, Colo., where she has volunteered for 10 years. In fact, she credits owls with teaching her to sculpt: "I did 15 great horned owls in the round to learn anatomy. Only then did I feel free enough to stop worrying about how many feathers they had on each wing. When anatomy became second nature I could play with the artistic." Now she enjoys the freedom of doing stylized works. "My contemporary pieces don't tell an entire story but allow the viewer to bring what they want to into the piece. It isn't all about me."

## Shuns Details

In the past 10 years, Stajcar has turned away from detail to concentrate on style, shape, design, flow and balance, creating a unique blend that is both abstract and representational. "These days," she says,

"the worst thing anyone can say about one of my pieces is, 'It's so realistic, I can see every feather.'"

An expert sculptor in wood, stone, clay or bronze, Stajcar lets the final design of each piece determine the media, though sometimes it is simply an engineering decision. For example, to provide support, birds sculpted with their wings spread are usually done in wood or bronze. While she has never used an original wood or stone piece to cast in bronze, she has created more than 50 different clay sculptures for bronze editions.





Darsh Wanch, red cedar burl, 25 x 20 x 15", great horned owl

With monumental works installed in several places, including the Hiram Blauvelt Art Museum in Oradell, N.J., and Cypress Gardens in Winter Haven, Fla., Stajcar also exhibits regularly in shows.

In a studio with 14-foot high ceilings and huge windows, which provide inspiring views of Pike's Peak, Stajcar works on seven to eight different pieces at the same time. Using nature as a guide, she draws an abstract design on paper, then makes as many as 15 clay "sketches" before deciding if a piece should be portrayed in marble, bronze or wood.

If she chooses stone or wood, she faces hundreds of grueling hours of physically demanding work with chainsaw, chisels and grinders, then dozens of days of hand sanding. "I have to put duct tape on my fingers to keep from rubbing off my fingerprints," she says with a laugh.

As smooth and elegant as satin, Stajcar's wood and stone pieces invite touching, which she strongly encourages. "I want people to feel what I did when I made a piece," she says. Stajcar doesn't have to worry. Viewers also feel her elegant sculptures in their hearts and souls. **BY**

*Sally Archibald is a free-lance writer living in Estes Park, Colo. Her work is the property of the artist.*