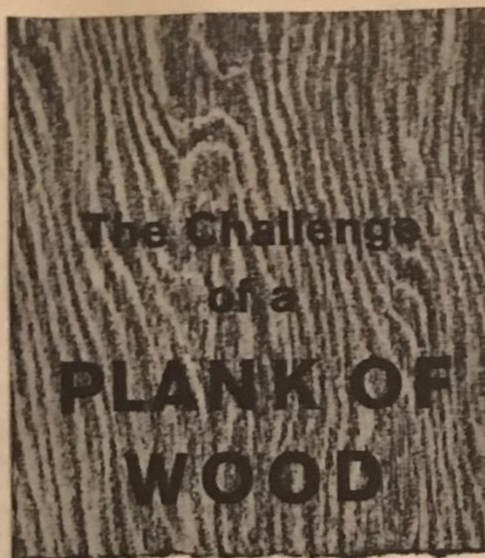


MAY
1966

American Artist



A sculptured relief in Philippine mahogany, five feet long, colored in umber stain, white oil and gold leaf. Collection, Mr. and Mrs. William Finkle, Wantagh, N. Y. Right: photo of the artist working on the relief

BY STANLEY KAPLAN



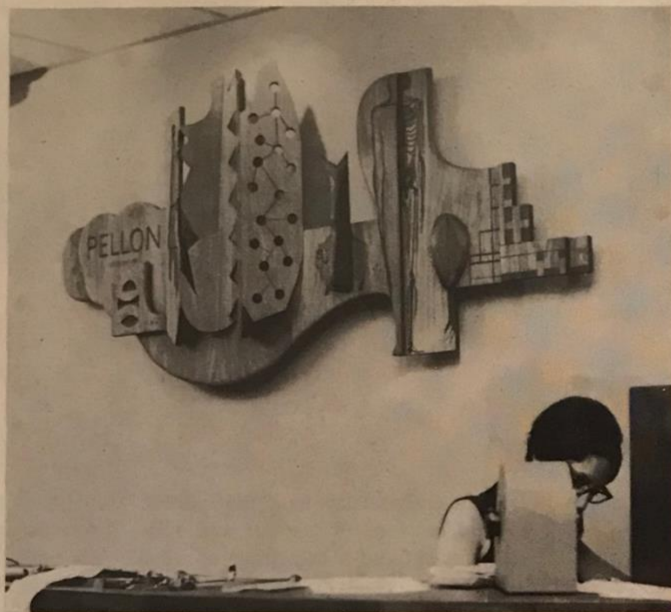
IN OUR AGE of concrete and plastic, we have to turn to the craftsmen of the "golden era of wood" for stimulating information about wood techniques. Wood is an extremely flexible medium for artistic expression and, in its plank form, the sculptural and painting possibilities are challenging for inventive spatial creations. Throughout the history of man, wood has been carved and painted in unusual ways for many different purposes. A study of Indian tribes and our own early American settlers reveals a tribute to man's ingenuity and skill with wood.

Today, alongside stone, metal, plastic, and concrete, wood holds a unique position. While it is no longer "King," it will always be in demand for its organic warmth and beauty. Now wood is chosen more for its own sake, with a modern eye for objective surface treatment in relation to space and other materials.

I started working with wood when printmaking became my medium of expression. For many years it was a means to an end: the print. In 1958 I read an article in this magazine about a woodcut mural by the Italian artist Marangoni. He carved his background areas and

allowed the design elements to stand in relief, which were inked with a brayer. His finished mural looked like enlarged wood-engraved prints. I had often looked at my woodcut blocks after they had been cleaned with turpentine and admired the blending stains around the carved areas. With Marangoni as a stimulus, I proceeded to form my own approach to a wood-carved mural.

My first attempt was for a library area, 5 x 30 feet. The September, 1959 issue of *AMERICAN ARTIST* carried the full story of the mural's evolution and completion. Briefly, the wall area was covered with foot-wide planks of one-inch-thick Philippine mahogany.



A sculptured relief in Walnut, 78 inches long, shaped, perforated, and overlapped accordion. Executed for the Pellon Corporation, N. Y., to symbolize its products

Deeply carved areas were stained with raw umber oil paint, and flat surfaces were painted with black and white enamel and gold leaf.

Subsequent commissions led me to experiment more with carving and staining techniques. It didn't take long to realize that I had a more flexible medium in the plank of wood than just its surface. I discovered that each subject undertaken called for a different approach. I began to envelop space by fusing the plank with sculptural imagery.

The photographs with this article best illustrate some of the different carvings I have created with the plank of wood during the past seven years. As a fine-art medium, the plank has the flexibility to be transformed into a desired image.



Orchestra. Relief in pine, 48 inches high, overlapped pieces colored in umber stain and white oil. Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Sal Scutaro, New York



Sunflower. Carved in four poplar boards, joined in accordian fashion, 48 inches high, stained in color. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul MacLean, Louisville

Genesis. Sculptured relief in several planks of Philippine mahogany, highly colored by oil stain and gold leaf, 48 inches long. Photo shows relief on the wall in home of Mr. and Mrs. Stan Siegel



The violent and often electric absorption of non-Western art has influenced the artistic revolution of the past sixty-five years. Exploration and expansion of formal imagery under the impact of new concepts of space, time, and psychology have also contributed to what is called modern art.

While I always admired Indian and American folk art, only recently have I felt the need for closer investigation of these areas. Fortunately, I found many excellent reference books and museum collections. I find I have much in common with the Indian artist. He sought the essence or spirit of nature, appreciated natural shapes, created with simple tools, was concerned with detail, and spent much time and labor with his techniques.

However, it is with the Indian of the Northwest Pacific coast that I find most in common. His was a wood culture, and his craft a carver's art. Wood was used with flexibility and inventiveness in making masks, rattles, clubs, dishes, storage boxes, small figures, totem poles, and buildings. The unique practice of making storage boxes I found most interesting. A plank of cedar wood was divided into four sections with V-shaped grooves. After steaming, the wood was bent at these grooves into right angles. The ends were joined by sewing with spruce root. For the top and bottom of the box, planks were grooved to receive the four sides snugly. It was then carved upon and painted.

Like that of the Northwest Indian, my style varies from the realistic to the abstract. As a contemporary

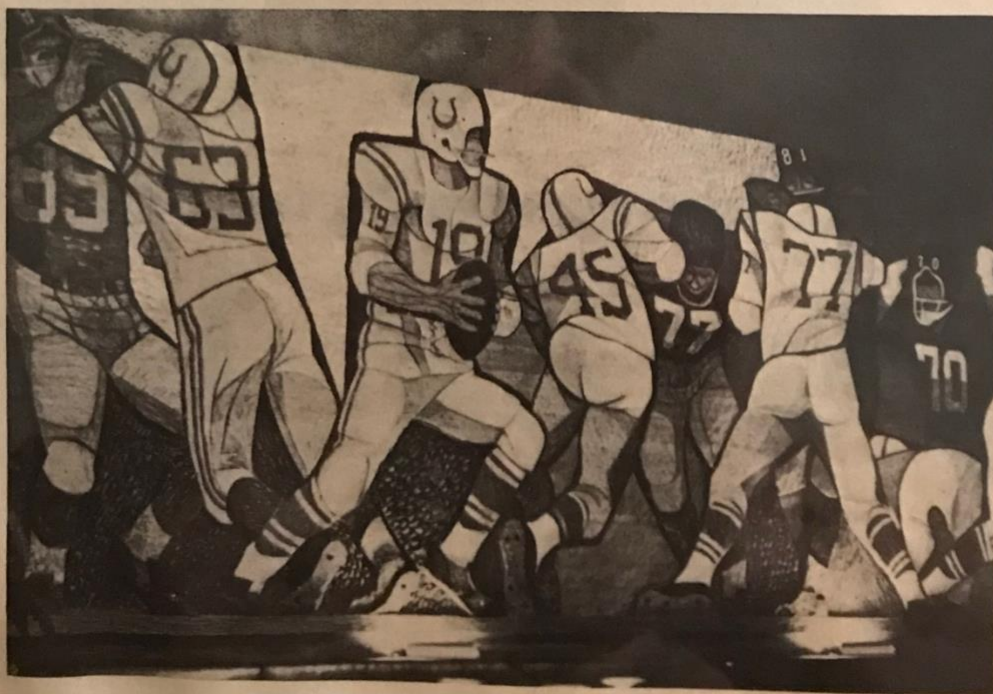
STANLEY KAPLAN



Aesop's Fables. Carved in cookie-mold style, in four panels and framed as a group. Executed for Wood-Mosaic Corporation, New York

artist influenced by cubism, I am particularly fascinated by their ability to express multiple and x-ray views of their animal symbols. It was with great interest that I studied their totem poles and masks. They beautifully combined basic primary colors in some areas, and the warmth of natural wood in others. Natural grain and texture were fully exploited by their tools. Shapes seem to interlock and flow in simple movements. The crisp differential between concave and convex was combined with subtle and complex curves. With apparent ease, they juxtaposed low relief and round sculpture. On wood that wasn't painted, a dark tone was rubbed into the carved areas to bring out the carving. When paint was used, it usually followed the carved planes and enhanced the form.

Their ceremonial masks were intriguing inventions. Some were with moveable parts. One mask literally opened up to reveal another under it. They also com-



Football Mural. Carved in Philippine mahogany planks glued together, 42 x 120 inches over all, polychrome oil stains and gold leaf, for Manuche's Restaurant, New York



City. A sculptured mobile of various planks of poplar, perforated, angled, and overlapped, stained in green and umber oil, 60 inches long. Suspended by wires at D. H. Price offices

bined hair, shells, and other materials inlaid into the wood. Designed forms are contained and interlocked within the over-all shape of the object.

All countries have a phase of spontaneous art expression called "art of the people." From about 1783 to 1865, there was in this country a need to express the vigor of a new nation. The eighteenth-century settlers came with the skills of many cultures and blended them with the techniques of the Indian. They attacked the vast and dense woodlands with mattocks, mauls, axes, hatchets, and saws. It was the "wooden age" of our civilization, and the golden age of carving. Every settler became adept with woods. He knew which were pliable, stiff, durable, and which took fine polish. Hardwoods were for pegging; soft, to cradle the load; and springy, to carry weight. He knew that wood breathes with the weather and devised a method of joining it with a green square peg inserted into a wetted round hole for all kinds of construction. He built his homes, ships, and furniture with an appreciation of the beauty of natural forms, a familiarity with ancient symbols, and a love of color. Certain objects from this age are of particular interest to me because they were carved, painted, and gilded.

The use of decoys as a hunting technique was learned

by the early settlers from the Indians. They substituted wood in place of feathers and twigs. These carvings took talent and a knowledge of wildlife. An exhibition of decoys reveals to the observer a collection of fine, sensitive sculpture. With seeming simplicity, heads, legs, and wings are attached to the body skillfully and expressively.

Sailing vessels of the period presented a figurehead that was placed just below the bowsprit. Each was usually a life-sized figure carved out of wood. Made by doweling several blocks together, the object appeared bulky. An American figurehead style developed, carried out with great pride. Designed to be seen from all angles, contour was more important than details. In unity with the bow—outstretched arms, lifted head, fixed gaze, and often with flowing drapery—it seemed to fly forward. Carved in pine, painted and gilded, the figurehead represents a folk art that flourished without academic training.

Early tavern and trade signs reflect some of our earliest forms of advertising. They were designed to tell a story and attract attention, and eventually they served as a status symbol. Painted in bright colors and gilded on wood, solidly constructed, they were hung

from wrought-iron brackets. Competition caused these signs to be made larger, with bas-relief carving for greater effect and dimension. The next step would seem a logical development: life-sized three-dimensional wood-carved figures were placed in front of stores. By 1860, there wasn't a tobacconist shop in the country that didn't have its cigar-store Indian. Roughly hewn from a log with a chisel, arms were attached to the basic trunk. Although painted before leaving the woodcarver's shop, itinerant restorers had to repaint them regularly. Each was a "white-man's Indian," with its own fanciful detail and invention. The carver tried to make the figure realistic and animated with its raised arm. However, the result was a static, musclebound figure, and its attractiveness is not its superficial realism, but the ornamental character of its design and effective use of pattern. Like the figureheads, these represent a phase of native sculpture that functioned in everyday life.

The carousel show-horse and spectacular circus wagon would fit into this category also. I was especially interested in the construction of the

carrousel animal. Some are made of sections of carved planks that fit together like a puzzle and give the appearance of one solid form. The circus wagon was elaborately carved, painted and gilded to stand out against drab backgrounds. The style was eclectic and followed the trend of the period. Relief carving was on the side of the wagon, and carving in the round was for the corners. The carver did not waste his efforts on undue refinement. He tried to impress, to make his work appear rich and opulent. As a result, we get a boldness combined with literal detail, simply edited.

Stimulated by both the Indian and American folk art, I plan to incorporate into my future work: a freer use of color, deeper carving, steaming and bending techniques, moveable parts, inlay, the use of dowel and peg, and more intricate fitting or interlocking of pieces into one another. The use of wood by other cultures will also be studied.

Since the Renaissance, sculpture has been on the decline and separated from painting and architecture. However, in the twentieth century it has been revitalized. Interest in form,

space, and light; new and old materials; and contemporary art concepts are reunifying the three visual arts.

Today's sculpture appears to fuse surrealist and constructionist imaginations. Forms are organic and allied to nature in conception and structure. The basic preoccupation of the sculptor is with the relationship of mass to space. In this context, I see the plank of wood playing a new and vital role. From the past, we are reminded that it can be treated with loving care and inventiveness, to express and excite human emotions.

The photographs of my work reveal the wide range of expressive images and emotions I have attempted to achieve with the planks of wood. From cityscape to plant growth, boats to music, fable to novel, persons to products—all are compatible with the medium. The flat, geometric plank is transformed into airy, soft weightlessness on the one hand, and earthy, physical impact on the other. It is also capable of artistic creations that are easily adaptable to interior architectural needs.

