

WOOD YOU BELIEVE IT?

Painted Wood from RAM's Collection

September 23, 2026 – February 21, 2027

From colorful opaque layers that dramatically transform the surface to thin washes or stains in natural colors that emphasize the grain, painted wood can take a variety of forms. The practice of applying paint to wood has historical roots. Whether decorative or utilitarian—or both—painted wood has long served in an array of public and private contexts, such as Medieval devotional sculpture, Renaissance altarpieces, and American folk art furniture.

Through both traditional and experimental approaches, *Wood You Believe It?* brings together furniture, art jewelry, sculpture, and wall-hanging works from RAM's permanent collection to explore the wide range of possibilities that emerge when paint meets wood. Whether turning, sculpting, carving, or constructing, the included artists stretch the boundaries of how we understand this familiar yet versatile material.

Biographies from Selected Artists

Drawing inspiration from a plethora of subject matter, including cabinets of curiosity, natural history dioramas, American folk art, and automata, **David Beck** (1953 – 2018) created witty and otherworldly sculptures.

Beck's practice combined woodworking, painting, and miniaturist sculpture techniques with unconventional materials to create pieces that are never quite what they seem. For example, he often incorporated secret elements not initially visible to the viewer such as windows, levers, and hidden compartments. Other works make use of mechanical elements or sound to perplex audiences, much like automata would have done for an eighteenth- or nineteenth- century audience.

Self-taught **Kéké Cribbs** (1951 –) builds fantastical imagery through varied, multi-media processes. For example, in *Señor Cuervo (Lord Raven)*, she combines an inlaid etched glass surface alongside sculpted and painted wood. Cribbs is best known for her use of vitreous enamel on glass to create colorful, imaginative scenes.

Inspired by the history and architecture of ancient dwellings and towns she encountered while living in Ireland and Corsica, as well as her time in the American Southwest where she was influenced by Mimbres art, Cribbs draws on the narrative potential of dreams, the past, and mythology to create elaborate narrative forms.

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"Forms carved to suggest cloth recur in many of my pieces. By tradition, cloth has been widely used to conceal and shroud objects in practices ranging from advertising to church rituals. Covered forms are often more evocative—with a sense of mystery absent from the uncovered object by itself."

Tom Eckert (1942 –) uses traditional woodworking processes, such as lamination, bending, and turning, to sculpt basswood, linden, and limewood into ethereal, and sometimes ghost-like, forms. Eckert's work is entirely sculpted from wood and emphasized with a layer of waterborne lacquer, effectively creating deceptive depictions of cloth which fool the eye.

Woodworker **Giles Gilson** (1942 – 2015) experimented heavily throughout his career. He is best known for integrating color into his pieces using automotive lacquers and pearlescent paint which he applied directly to the surface. While more traditional woodworkers would not fathom covering up the beauty of natural wood grain with paint, Gilson used color and painted graphics as a way to emphasize the sculptural form of his pieces.

Aside from color, Gilson also integrated other surprising materials into his work—such as flocking applied to the inside of his vessels for an unexpected element of texture or the use of mechanical parts and metal components as a reference to his interest in engineering.

Most of **Ron Isaacs's** (1941 –) work—a combination of two-dimensional imagery and cut and sawn wood—operates in an in-between space that he identifies as "*trompe l'oeil* painted constructions." *Trompe l'oeil* (French for fool or deceive the eye) artwork is regarded by some as the manipulation of materials with highly technical skill.

There is a kind of humor implicit in the object's creation knowing that the viewer will likely have a moment of surprise or disbelief. Isaacs maneuvers his media so that a viewer does not question what they are seeing until their brain catches up with their eyes. Isaacs does this as he convincingly makes wood and paint appear to be fabric, plant matter, and numerous other things.

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Drawing on the history of *retablos*—religious devotional works—**Nicario Jimenez** (1957 –) uses a mixture of boiled potato and gypsum powder formed into a plaster, along with wood, to create sculptural compositions depicting everyday, historical, and religious events, as well as scenes of cultural struggle. Like their historical predecessors, Jimenez's *retablos* are portable—in essence, they are narratives on a small-scale which close neatly into a box.

To create the miniature details, Jimenez uses only a wood pick the size of a toothpick and a kitchen knife. While *retablos* are a cultural component in many Latin American countries, his particular techniques can be traced back to traditional styles from Andean culture.

Master carver and member of the Squamish Tribe and Coast Salish Nation, **Jacob B. Lewis** (1955 –) is best known for his elaborate, painted hand-carvings. He primarily works in yellow cedar to produce poles, plaques, bowls, masks, boxes, and reliefs.

Lewis's designs often take the form of an animal with smaller hidden figures integrated into the composition and then inlaid with *pāua* (abalone) shells from New Zealand. His original designs have gained renown for their balancing of traditional and contemporary forms, combining established motifs from Indigenous art with modern aesthetics.

"I see furniture as a archetypal object that can also be expressive of the times. Furniture is capable of setting a certain mood and reflecting common ideals in our lives."

As one of the first women to break into the male-dominated field of studio furniture, **Wendy Maruyama** (1952 –) challenged traditional ideas of what furniture could be. While other artists of the time were mainly interested in achieving technical precision, Maruyama believed that furniture should also be expressive, incorporating humor, unexpected color, feminist ideas, and social commentary into her functional and conceptual work. Present throughout her studio practice is reflection on her heritage as a third generation Japanese American.

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"From a heavy lot of timber to a light, thin vessel, negative spaces interlock with solid surface. The color, grain and natural look of the wood all reflect the principle of Yin and Yang. My work comes from memories, culture, Zen mind[set] and my own thoughts. Negative spaces inspire me, as they represent the unseen weight of the unknown, which I use to take the viewers into my work."

Raised in Vietnam, **Binh Pho** (1955 – 2017) escaped to the United States as a refugee after the rise of communism. Pho created colorful narrative and conceptual woodwork—sometimes autobiographical, sometimes fictional. He is known for his intricate piercing—drilling patterns, lattices, or holes completely through the surface—to create negative space within the work.

"Working most[ly] in wood, I see my efforts in relation to the vernacular traditions of carved religious figures, ship's figureheads, and the so-called 'show figures' found outside shops in the nineteenth century. However, as a contemporary artist, I want to use this tradition as a point of departure for satirical commentary on the workings of money and power in America today."

Beginning his career as a furniture artist before gradually moving to sculpture, self-taught craftsman **Bob Trotman** (1947 –) uses humor and irony to address societal expectations and critique capitalism. His work is primarily figurative, focusing on businesspeople, especially suited businessmen, as a metaphor for power, privilege, and greed.