

*—This essay was written for the catalog of the exhibition,
GOOD WOOD: Furniture and Objects from Sustainable Materials,
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Conservationists by Nature

by Scott Landis

Woodworkers are, by vocation and inclination, conservationists. According to Webster, the creation of fine furniture can be a conservative exercise, as it represents the “wise utilization of a natural product so as to prevent waste and insure future use of resources that have been depleted.” But as designers and makers of wooden objects, our artifice relies on the harvest of living organisms for the fulfillment of our purpose. The wood we buy determines which trees get cut and, sometimes, which ones get planted. Our decisions about materials influence forests, habits and indigenous people far from our own homes.

Society has only lately begun to grapple with this contradiction, but it is of long-standing concern to the woodworkers who inhabit the “cutting edge” between consumption and preservation. Fifteen years ago, a small group of artisans met in Massachusetts to explore new ways of working wood that were more than just technically excellent and aesthetically inspired. Like those hunters and fishermen who embrace an ancient tradition of respect for their prey, these woodworkers were motivated by two, sometimes competing passions: an appreciation for the infinite beauty and variety of wood and a responsibility to the source of materials on which their livelihoods and the quality of life on earth depend.

Their collaboration led to Conservation by Design, a groundbreaking, international exhibition of fine woodwork sponsored by the Rhode Island School of Design and the Woodworkers Alliance for Rainforest Protection (WARP). Almost incidentally, it also spawned a broader movement of independent forest certification that is just beginning to enter the mainstream of corporate and consumer culture. **Good Wood** represents another important marker along the path of this emerging tradition of conservation in woodworking.

The long-range effects of these initiatives are still far from being realized, but the immediate threats are quite real. The rate of elimination of the earth's natural forests and the eradication of species are unprecedented. Fine woodworkers play a very small role in this cycle of destruction, which is more fundamentally driven by a nearsighted consumer demand and pervasive economic inequities. However, it is the historical role of artists to inspire, delight and challenge the rest of us to see the world with fresh eyes. The experience of artisan activists over the last decade suggests that they can play a disproportionate role in shaping public perception.

More than half a century ago, Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*, "We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel...but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use."

Good Wood bears witness to the fact that more and more woodworkers are not content to fashion their own exquisite tombstones. They are far more interested in lending their sharp wit and honed tools to the pursuit of Leopold's "gentler criteria," building bridges to a sustainable future.

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