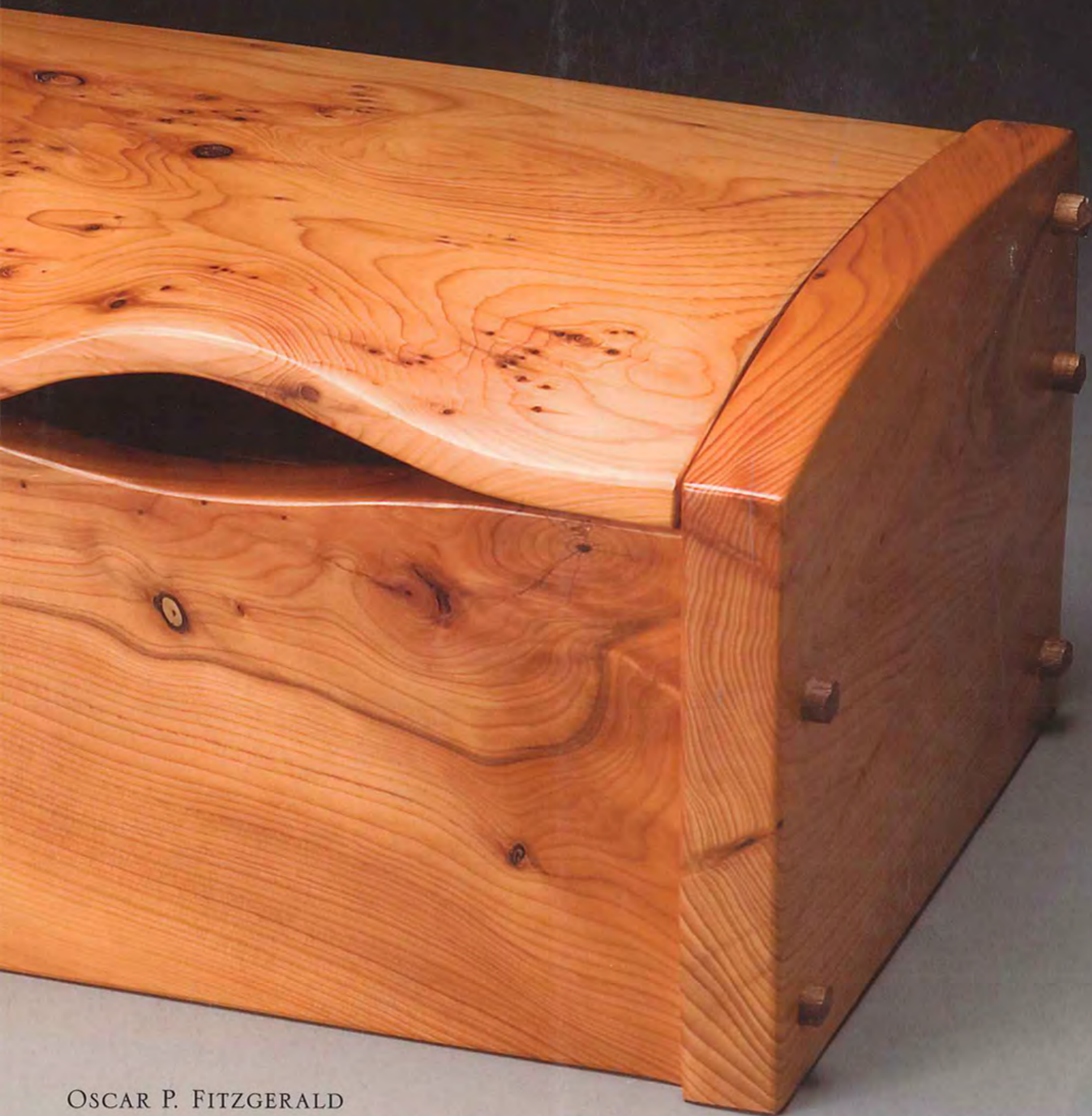


NEW · MASTERS *of the* WOODEN BOX

EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF BOX MAKING



OSCAR P. FITZGERALD



JEAN-CHRISTOPHE COURADIN

Born: 1961, Dijon, France

Visual Emotions, Tactile Pleasures

Water Sculpture. It is unusual for Jean-Christophe Couradin to name his work because he wants viewers to bring their own narratives to the piece. In addition to the title, it is numbered K-29. Because he makes about a hundred pieces a year, he assigns one hundred numbers to each letter. Thus, this is his 1,129th piece since he began marking his work in 1998.

Couradin is not a furniture maker, nor a box maker, nor a turner. He is an artist who makes sculpture that is meant to interact with the viewer.

For Couradin, the title evokes rushing water over a rock; perhaps the waters of the Ouche and the Suzon rivers that come together and flow through his boyhood home in Dijon, France. But could it be the stylized head of a dolphin gliding through the ocean, or perhaps a helmeted biker speeding through the Alps? And then the top pivots open and the image is transformed. The viewer's focus shifts from the abstract shape to what could be inside the tiny box.

Couradin is not a furniture maker, nor a box maker, nor a turner. He is an artist who makes sculpture that is meant to interact with the viewer. The pieces that do not open as boxes nonetheless invite the viewer to touch and feel their smoothly polished curves. The rough-cut wood itself often suggests the final shape. He uses the traditional sculptor's arsenal of chisels, gouges, rasps,



ABOVE

Jean-Christophe Couradin in his home studio.

OPPOSITE

Water Sculpture, 2008. Madagascar rosewood; H. 7" W. 12" D. 8½".



ABOVE

Untitled, 2007. Honduran lignum vitae; H. 9¾" W. 25¼" D. 11¾". Lignum vitae is one of the hardest woods. Couradin uses only traditional chisels, gouges, rasps, and scrapers—no power tools.

LEFT

Untitled, 2008. Mozambiquan ebony; H. 23½" W. 11¾" D. 9¾". For a scientist this might conjure up the complex folds of DNA. To a nature lover it would evoke vines hanging from trees in a dense forest.



and scrapers to shape his abstract forms. Each piece is then sanded and polished with wax, using an old buffing tool that he saw on a tour of a tobacco-pipe factory in northeastern France.

During the thirteenth century, when the Dukes of Burgundy took up residence in Dijon, the city flourished as a cultural and artistic center. But after the union of Burgundy with France, the city lost its cultural prominence. Following World War II, it flourished as an industrial center. Couradin's father worked as a technician who installed X-ray machines around the city. His son had little exposure to art, much less woodworking.



Then a chance encounter changed the course of his life. His sister and her American husband came visiting. The couple lost a wallet full of cash during their travels, and the family offered to help their son-in-law earn some money by making them a coffee table. A trained carpenter, he bought some simple tools and proceeded to fabricate some furniture. Couradin watched, helped, and found he liked that kind of work.

In 1979, at the age of eighteen, Couradin left home. He had shown the coffee table to some friends, who thought they could make a living reproducing it. He and his six companions moved to Trieves, a picturesque area of rolling farmland and forests surrounded by the French Alps about thirty miles from Grenoble. There, the group rented a house and set up a cooperative studio to begin making furniture.

After two years in the country, the group began to go their separate ways, so Couradin moved back to Dijon where he took jobs working in furniture and cabinetmaking shops, all the while refining his woodworking skills.

By 1984, Couradin began giving classes in a local woodworking program. While teaching there, he produced his first sculptures—chess sets—and he made his first wooden boxes to hold the pieces. These boxes were rustic affairs carved out of scrap wood, their lids decorated with two-dimensional carving and attached with leather hinges. He also began to produce card cases, pencil boxes, and wooden games to sell at local craft fairs.

In 1986, Couradin met his partner, and the next year the couple returned to the French Alps to live in the country not far from Grenoble. His partner, a psychologist, had gone to school there. They both love

Untitled, 2008. Brazilian rosewood; H. 9¾" W. 19½" D. 15½". Couradin's smaller sculptures can be set in a number of positions, achieving his goal of "variable geometry."



Untitled, 2007. Lignum vitae; H. 9¾" W. 11¾" D. 7¾". Couradin started with boxes and moved on to sculpture, but most of his work still opens to expose tiny compartments.

the mountains and skiing. About six years ago, the family moved into the town of Le Touvet, where their two children had easier access to school. Working from a studio in his house, Couradin is inspired by the natural beauty of the Alps.

In 1989, Couradin visited Guiana, on the northeastern coast of South America. While in Guiana, he discovered the exotic woods that grew in the dense tropical forests.

When he returned to France he received his only art training, a couple of drawing and sculpture classes at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Grenoble. Almost overnight, the character of his work changed, from utilitarian items to sculpture.

His favorite woods now include highly figured lignum vitae from South America, cocobolo from Mexico, snakewood from Guiana, Macassar ebony, and pink ivory

Couradin was inspired by sculptor Henry Moore's metaphorical description of the tactile attraction of sculpture.

wood from South Africa, rosewood from Brazil, mahogany from Cuba, and boxwood from France. He starts with a beautiful piece of wood and makes a cut. The design begins to evolve, and the form emerges as he shapes the wood to enhance the richness of the wood figure.



His work has a pleasant, tactile quality heightened by the contrast between sharp edges and smooth, highly polished curves. It is not surprising he has a blind client who enjoys his work by touch. Although he thinks of each piece as a sculpture rather than a functional object, most of his designs open as boxes with chiseled out drawers that pivot open on pins. By building complex drawers into his sculptures, he highlights the conversation among craftsmanship, art, and function. The drawers also encourage an interaction with the viewer. Although most of his creations are the size of small boxes, he has made pieces up to four feet in height that also contain drawers.

Couradin freely acknowledges the influence of the mid-twentieth century sculptors Constantin Brancusi and Henry

Moore. He was inspired by Moore's metaphorical description of the tactile attraction of sculpture: "There is always something that lives under the skin of a piece of sculpture." In addition to the biomorphic, abstract shapes that characterize their work, Couradin shares their interest in nature and how the natural material shapes the art. Like them, he lets the grain of the wood dictate form.

Since 1990, Couradin has exhibited in galleries around France and beginning in 2001, galleries in England, Switzerland, Los Angeles, and Miami. His fervent hope is that his work will "arouse visual emotions that will lead to tactile pleasures."

Passion, 1997. Madagascar rosewood, various inlays; H. 39½" W. 19½" D. 15½". *Passion* was purchased by the town of Grenoble near where Couradin resides. An example of his "variable geometry," the piece is a smooth interplay of curves until a touch reveals angular parts that peel off to expose exotic inlays.