

MIRIAM CARPENTER

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

BY MARK SFIRRI

Feathers are remarkable, especially when they're made of wood, like the feathers made by Miriam Carpenter. Experienced woodworkers are impressed by the skill and patience necessary to make something so delicate. But whether one views Carpenter's exquisite feathers as works of art or simply as beautiful objects, their appeal is universal. It's best to experience these feathers in person, so you can see them in three dimensions and feel that they weigh almost nothing.

CREATIVE ROOTS

Carpenter grew up in a busy and creative family. Her grandmother taught her to bake bread, make jam and sew. Her grandfather designed and built a smoke house and woodshop, where he carved duck decoys. He didn't teach her to carve, but as a little girl she spent time in his shop, watching him work. When he died in 2011, she inherited his carver's workbench and carving tools.

Carpenter's father is a math teacher, singer, French horn player, organist, pianist and master gardener. Her mother is a language specialist and speech pathologist, as well as a singer and pianist. Singing is a family enterprise: Her father is the musical director of "Mostly Motets," twelve singers (including Carpenter and her mother) who perform sacred and secular music a capella in and around Princeton, N.J. and Bucks County, Pa.

Engaging, energetic and a classic over-achiever, Carpenter was the editor of her high school newspaper, a member of the Honor Society, the valedictorian of her class—and she lettered in three sports.

In order to make time for her main interest, she took art classes at Moore College of Art for three summers. Arguing that she was already playing sports the entire year, Carpenter negotiated with school administrators to waive the required physi-



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cal education classes so that she could study woodworking.

She wrote her own curriculum and made mostly small wooden pieces, including trivets, cutting boards, boxes, and turned bowls, some of which were segmented. These two experiences helped her



Three Feathers (2012); white oak, burnished with graphite powder; 4" x 1-7/8" x 1/4".

to develop the creative and technical skills that led to her acceptance in the Industrial Design program at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

Carpenter's classes at RISD exposed her to more sophisticated woodworking techniques as well as to other materials such as metal, and gave her an understanding of how to combine them. Among many other projects in her four years there, Carpenter used steel, brass, glass and wood to make a scone for a course titled "Lines in Space" and explored bent-laminated forms to create an adjustable bench for the course "Tension and Compression."

A CALL FROM MIRA

Burdened with debt after leaving school, Carpenter took a job for a year teaching emotionally disturbed and autistic students at an elementary school in Bucks County, near where she grew up. But she wanted to make things and work in the field in which she had been educated. So she scheduled an appointment at George Nakashima Woodworker, S. A. (also in Bucks County). When told there was no opening for a designer, she left her portfolio for creative director Mira Nakashima to review.

A few hours later, Nakashima called to ask if the pieces in the portfolio had been designed and made by Carpenter herself. Reassured, Nakashima immediately arranged a meeting and their conversation lasted for hours. Initially hired to document the standard designs being produced and to create standards if none existed, Carpenter has been working for the company as an assistant designer for the past six years and has played an important role in developing new furniture designs. An exhibition highlighting George Nakashima Woodworker's new line premiered at Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia in the fall of 2013. One of the new pieces, *Carpenter Coffee Table*, is named for her.



Top, and bottom left: *Feathers* (2012); white oak, burnished with graphite powder; 3" - 4½" x 1½" - 2" x 1¼" - 1¾".

Bottom right: *Feather* (2012); lacewood, burnished with graphite powder; 4¼" x 1½" x 7/8".

NOT A DECOY

In 2012, Emma International Collaboration invited Carpenter to be a participant in its ninth biennial symposium in the Boreal Forest in Saskatchewan, Canada, and to create work for *Decoy*, an exhibition to be held in Saskatoon. She wanted to make something that was interesting, challenging and could be made with limited facilities: in her apartment, using her grandfather's bench and hand tools. Her grandfather's duck decoys immediately came to mind, but, being who she is, Carpenter wanted to do something different. She kept distilling and simplifying, and thought, "How about just a duck feather?"

If I were thinking about carving a feather, I'd try basswood or some other soft wood that would be easy to work with. But Carpenter imagined the wood's grain and its structure to be an integral part of the finished piece, so she sought wood with open pores and strong medullary rays. Her first choice was white oak, which she continues to use for most of her feathers. An attempt in lacewood (sheoke) failed when the perfectly quartersawn medullary rays began flaking off as she tried to carve into them.

Carpenter sees the interweaving of the grain and medullary rays as the warp and weft of fabric. Each feather is glued up using three pieces of wood, the middle

one being the feather's thin spine. She rakes out the pores on the outside of the feather, so as it's shaped thinner and thinner on the inside, one can begin to see through it. She rubs graphite on them—disguising, though only somewhat—the fact that they're wood. Using what seems



For *Poplar Culture*, an invitational exhibit mounted in 2012 to benefit the Wharton Esherick museum, Carpenter carved and inked this 10½" x 7¾" x ¾" poplar block to create the woodblock print *Karnapidasana*.

like an illogically hard material to create a delicate realistic object, Carpenter distinctively reinterprets a familiar form, from the feather's sharp quill to the downy wisps on the edges of its shaft at the base. She makes her own tools by reshaping razor blades to scrape the inside of each form. The other tools she uses include a rotary tool, a carpet cutter, a utility knife and dental tools.

Carpenter's original feather was well received at the Emma exhibition, and subsequent feathers were featured at three other exhibitions, receiving awards in two of them. At *Craftforms 2012* (the annual national juried craft show at the Wayne Art Center in Wayne, Pa., near Philadelphia), Carpenter's feather received an Honorable Mention. Her feathers were also largely responsible for her selection as a resident in the prestigious and competitive International Turning Exchange (ITE) for 2014. Sponsored by the Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia, this upcoming ITE includes a coffin maker from Ghana as well as more furniture makers than usual. Also unusual is that most of the residents will be women.

BEYOND FEATHERS

Before conceiving and developing her feathers, Carpenter began creating woodcut prints, in an effort to do her own



Miriam Carpenter (at right) and Mira Nakashima. Carpenter works as an assistant designer at George Nakashima Woodworker, S. A.



Carpenter Coffee Table (2013); Claro walnut burl, American black walnut; 15" x 48" x 18" Named in honor of Carpenter, this table is part of a new line of Nakashima furniture that debuted in the fall of 2013.

artwork outside of her job. These prints demonstrate her artistic sensibility as well as her impressive drawing, design and carving skills.

It should come as no surprise to learn that Carpenter has other interests as well. She particularly enjoyed studying solar technology at RISD, where she learned that current photovoltaic technology is based on inefficient monocrystalline cells, and that quantum dot nanocrystal technology is far more efficient and adaptable. So, with the help of professors

at nearby Brown University, she developed an architectural window shutter with significant potential—she wants to come back to that. She's also interested in structures and space, which could influence her future projects.

Now thirty years old, Carpenter is beginning to make her presence known as a designer and maker. It will be interesting to see how her work is shaped by her experience with the ITE residency. She has plans to make a much larger feather—nearly five feet long—from a log of sas-

safras that she salvaged from Hurricane Sandy. Successfully completing such a feat seems unlikely, but if anyone can do it, Miriam Carpenter can. Whatever directions she takes next, if she brings the same level of thought and dedication to the concept and execution of those ideas as she has to the feathers, the results will be equally strong and intriguing.



Concentra (2008); mahogany; 4" x 13" dia.

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Concentra (inverted) (2008); mahogany; 4" x 13" dia.

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Warped Cube (2004); welded, oxidized steel; 5½" x 5½" x 4"

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