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RARE WOODS

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· RARE · WOODS ·

SUCH masterpieces as the noble choir of St. Paul's or the splendid library of Trinity College, Cambridge, do much to quicken one's appreciation of wood as a means of artistic expression. Not only the architectural genius of Wren and the technique of Grinling Gibbons impress the visitor; but also their mastery of their medium, their ability to create with wood whatever effect the imagination conceived.

In the range of woods available in the early eighteenth century there was little inspiration. There were only oak and walnut, supplemented by mahogany, after Gibbons had discovered its rare beauty and rescued it from a practical if poetic existence as a shipbuilding material. But to-day the variety of strikingly different woods at our disposal is wide enough to kindle the imagination of the artist.

No part of the world is remote and inaccessible enough to escape our drafts upon its forest riches. From impenetrable Ceylon, from the depths of Bornean forests, from the savage Andaman islands, from the unexplored west coast of Africa, from Australia, come successful



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rivals of Cuban and Mexican mahogany and woods until lately unknown to the trade of the world. From the South American forests we get woods still hardly known by name. From the Philippines and from the Hawaiian islands come other wonderfully rich woods.

Every one of these new woods has a matchless quality of its own and new methods of finishing, based on a better knowledge of the structure of the various kinds of woods, are revealing the beauty of woods never before considered for decorative purposes and finding new charm in some that have served with honor for centuries.

Constant association with wood cultivates an interest in whatever is responsible for its individuality—the size and arrangement of the pores, the color contrast of the annual rings and particularly the nature of the pith rays or medullary rays—the layers of cells radiating from the pith toward the bark. Almost invisible to the naked eye in some woods, but very conspicuous in others, these rays give to quartered oak and sycamore their beautiful, silvery, flaky appearance.

One of the greatest fascinations about wood is the wilful perversity with which Nature gives or withholds its surpassing traits of beauty. Our delight in the most conspicuous and ornamental figure in wood is often heightened by its rarity, by the fact that it is never exactly duplicated, since it is due to accidental irregularities of growth.

These rich gifts of Nature, pure treasure trove, often



English Oak

occur in burls, abnormal growths or excrescences common to all trees but valuable only in a few. Those of greatest value are usually found at the root collar, just below the surface of the ground; those occurring in the upper part of the trunk are likely to be injured by insects or decay. Trees producing burls are usually dwarfed and stunted and grow in open, exposed places rather than in dense woods. Gnarly old trees of little use for lumber may reward some fortunate speculator with veneers worth thousands of dollars. The graceful "wavy grain" pattern, so sought for in mahogany, is another of these delightful irregularities. It occurs near the junction of large limbs or roots where growth produces a folding of the bark which moulds the soft tissue of the new wood to correspond with its own corrugations.

Though there is now a nearly unending variety of woods to choose from, certain kinds have served so long and so well as to have established for themselves an almost sentimental regard.

First among these well tried woods is oak, rich in historic associations, reaching back to the times when "the monarch of the forest" played an important part in religious and civil ceremonies, and when oak chaplets were the reward for civic merit. The British passion for the tree, perhaps traceable to a Druid ancestry, has made the word a synonym for strength and courage as in David Garrick's lines:

"Hearts of oak are our ships,
Hearts of oak are our men"



Colima Oak

“Walls of oak” was the half affectionate term for the British navy before the days of steel ships. “Solid oak” has a meaning as definite as “solid silver” and the very terms “oak paneling” and “oak wainscoting” evoke delightful associations of mellow old English interiors.

Real English oak is still coming to this country, cut from the estates of great English landowners. For strength, for beauty, and for the superb finish it takes, what rivals it? Is there anything more wholesome for daily company than its pale brown heartwood strewn with darker spots and enriched by the pattern of the annual rings defined by pores? And what a definite character is given it by its broad, prominent, irregular pith rays, often an inch or more wide, many inches long and almost as hard as horn! These rays are brought to plainest view by quarter-sawing, which, about 1865, opened a new era for oak.

And beside oak stands mahogany with its suggestions of grace and elegance. Mahogany, like oak, has gathered associations of its own. Though it was noticed by a carpenter on Sir Walter Raleigh’s ship in 1595, for its great hardness and durability, and was used for years as a shipbuilding material especially in the Spanish navy, its value as a cabinet wood was long overlooked.

The decorative value of mahogany is due to a combination of figure, richness and warmth of color, durability and working qualities. The figure and grain are not only beautiful in themselves but are particularly



Figured Walnut

adapted to receiving stains and finishing processes. Staining in imitation of the darkening effect of age is easily accomplished.

No wood has been so generously favored by nature with those irregularities of growth, producing special marks of beauty. Pieces cut from a crotch show graceful "curls" sometimes thirty-six inches long. When this figure breaks out in flame-like tufts it is called "feather". The large symmetrical patterns—secured by the reverse matching of such figured pieces—are incomparably rich.

Where, as often happens, the fibres of mahogany are arranged spirally instead of straight and then are cut lengthwise, as in a board, a splendid figure with light and dark stripes is exposed. This effect, which is called "roe", is due, not to any real difference in color, but to the way the light falls upon the pores, just as the long pile of a rug looks glossy or dark according to the point of view of the observer.

No other wood varies so in quality as mahogany. No two trees are alike; yet we tell at a glance whether a specimen is hard, heavy, dark and richly figured enough to be the slow-growing product of poor southern Florida limestone soil or is from the moister, richer but still favorable soil of Cuba or Honduras.

The renewed interest in walnut calls attention to its wide distribution. In the trade, the timber from southern Russia, Turkey and Persia, its original habitat, is termed Circassian Walnut and is most highly prized,



Circassian
Walnut

while that grown in western Europe is classified as French, Italian or English according to its general resemblance to the type of wood generally produced by these countries, variations in soil causing considerable modifications.

The beautiful markings, the fine texture and smooth even grain that give walnut such pronounced individual character are at their best in wood grown in poor, upland, hilly soils. The finest comes from misshapen dwarfed trees more than one hundred years old, rarely with a clear length of more than twelve feet, and the most beautifully veined part is found in roots and burls, especially in trees near the Black Sea. Such growths are so twisted and interwoven as to produce curious and irregular features, giving the wood a value beyond mahogany for matched veneering.

When more abundant, Circassian walnut was used for coach-making, carpentry, ordinary furniture and for wooden shoes. During the wars of the eighteenth century, it was used so extensively for gun-stocks that even at that early date the shortage became serious and in 1720 France prohibited its exportation. The wood of 12,000 trees was required for this purpose alone early in the nineteenth century. In consequence, large forests were planted throughout England, France and Germany. One, started in 1818 near Boulogne, France, contained about 30,000 trees.

The prevalent idea that American black walnut is



East India
Mahogany

now extinct is far from true. Though used for the beautiful furniture of the William and Mary period, its possibilities as yet lie undeveloped. Recently its chief use has been for gun-stocks for the armies in Europe.

Among woods that have been highly prized since time immemorial, ebony and teak—"the oak of India"—are notable. Of ebony, the best comes from trees native to southern India and Ceylon, having black, charred-looking bark beneath which the wood is perfectly white except the fine-textured, intensely black heartwood which alone is used, and this chiefly for inlay. For veneers another Indian variety is employed—Coromandel with its close grain, great hardness, and fine hazel color, mottled and striped with black.

Besides these time-honored woods, there are many others to choose from, equally beautiful, if not so well known. The so-called East India mahogany or vermilion wood, white mahogany, tiger-wood or Congo walnut, Peruvian walnut, Colima oak—scarce just now on account of Mexican disturbances—koa wood called Hawaiian mahogany, kamagon or marblewood from the Philippines, various kinds of satin-wood, as well as a wide range of native woods, are practicable, available and susceptible to beautiful finishing.

Though at times there has been a tendency to overlook the artistic possibilities of wood, today the response to the opportunity it offers is keen and the skill and feeling displayed in using it is highly developed.



Honduran
Mahogany

Murphy Varnishes for Rare Woods

The object of issuing this brochure is not alone to illustrate some of the beautiful woods with which the architect creates his fine effects, however interesting they may be, but also to call attention to Murphy Varnishes as the most suitable for beautifying and preserving his work—for preserving it indefinitely.

This is important. The inherent beauty of most woods is revealed only by the finishing process; the charm of other woods is intensified by it. The mellow tones of age are forced for immediate effect by staining; but the varnish gives depth of tone. It also preserves the beauty of the wood for all time. Not only the beauty of the wood, but the life of the wood—its very structure—is preserved. Fine varnish seals it against the absorption of moisture, which would cause swelling and warping, and it guards against shrinkage. But it must be fine varnish.

In these days there are many “largest varnish manufacturers in the world”, all of whom claim to make “the best”. Also the number is legion of small concerns without facilities or experience, who think knowledge of the melting of gum is all that is needed. The architect is, indeed, beset with uncertainty.

It seems desirable to say that a concern may be large and not make the “best”. That is frequently true. Quantity does not always imply quality. In the



Kamagon

varnish business a concern must be large enough to have the proper facilities for selecting and purchasing materials, making, testing, storing, ripening, etc.

But more important than these, there must be the desire to excel and that desire must permeate the entire establishment. It cannot unless the head is dominated by it. It cannot succeed unless all hands have pride in it. The finest, for the sake of the finest, must be the motive. There are such concerns—not many—and, when the architect finds one, he should specify the particular varnish he needs made by that concern. He should not say that varnish “or equal”, for in the ideals we are thinking of there is no such thing as “equal”. All this may seem very trite, but there is occasionally “the ideal” in every business.

If a concern, through fifty years of effort, establishes a reputation for quality, and if the management remains unbroken, that reputation is a safe guide to fine varnish. Therefore, it is to the interest of the architect that he know his varnish-maker and stick to him.

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