In 1989, Martin Puryear was singled out not only as the first African American artist to be chosen as the official United States representative in the São Paulo Bienal in Brazil, but the then forty-eight-year-old artist also won the acclaimed international exhibition’s first prize. That Puryear achieved these honors working in a tradition considered old-fashioned makes his accomplishments more pronounced. In contrast to some contemporary sculptors who favor industrially and workshop-made art, Puryear works by himself, primarily in wood, using his own hands, producing consummately crafted abstract sculptures that are elegant, accessible, and full of allusion. A supreme example is the Art Institute’s Lever #1, 1988-89. [See slide 18]

“I have a hard time thinking of myself as dictating to others how to do my work,” Puryear once said. “And I think it has to do with where I came from in society, where I fit in ... the fact that my people were always executors, workers, their hands were always busy, their backs were always bent. It would be very hard for me to turn into the kind of person who is giving orders for the work to be realized by somebody else. I guess I don’t trust that.”

The Washington, D.C.-born sculptor came of age during the tumultuous civil rights era of the 1960s, when barriers were broken down, and different cultures sought to assimilate. His work—an evocative combination of sculpture, craft, and architecture; of modernist aesthetic and other cultures’ shapes and techniques—very much reflects this period. After graduating with a degree in art from Washington’s Catholic University in 1963, Puryear began the peripatetic existence that has informed his art. “I think of moving as a kind of saving grace,” he has said.

From 1964 to 1966, Puryear served in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, Africa, where he learned to have great respect for the mastery of African craftsmen. A 1967 fellowship to Sweden introduced him to Scandinavian design and woodworking, as well as to Arctic quillwork and basketry. Although Puryear had built objects since he had been a child—“If I became interested in archery, I made the bows and arrows”—it was in Scandinavia that he combined his vocation with his avocation. “At a certain point, I just put the building and the art impulse together. I decided that building was a legitimate way to make sculpture, that it wasn’t necessary to work in the traditional methods of carving and casting.”

More studies, travel, and homes continued to cross-fertilize his art. He received an M.F.A. from Yale University in 1971 and has lived, worked and taught, at various times, in Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York City, and upstate New York. In 1982, a Guggenheim Fellowship took him to Japan. There, the words of Soetsu Yanagi, founder of a Japanese crafts movement, could aptly describe the philosophy underlying Puryear’s quietly compelling work: “The thing shines; not the maker.”

* designates entry in Biographical Glossary
The Art Institute’s 1982 sculpture reveals this supreme emphasis on workmanship and respect for materials. [See figure 20] Entitled Sanctuary, the work consists of a wooden cube perched atop two spindly branches that end in clawlike feet riding astride a single wheel. The sculpture humorously recalls the rickety balance of a unicyclist, who lurches forward, then has to lean back to regain stability. The “head”—or shelter—of this sculpture is, in fact, attached to the wall, leaving the prospect of any real motion an impossible dream.

Sanctuary is among a group of works dealing with, in Puryear’s words, “mobility, and a kind of escapism, of survival through flight.” The artist made these works after a 1977 fire gutted his studio and adjoining apartment. “The fire was followed by a period of grieving,” Puryear recalled, “and then by an incredible lightness, freedom, and mobility.”

Characteristic of all of Puryear’s work, and embodied here, is what Neal Benezra, former Art Institute curator, calls “the embrace of opposites.” The work is both freestanding sculpture and, in its attachment to the wall, a relief. Puryear pairs his exquisitely crafted woodwork with rough and natural tree saplings, and the geometry of the cube and wheel with asymmetrical tree branches. Above all, there is the thematic contradiction reflecting Puryear’s own contradictory yearnings. As Benezra explains: “Puryear’s art suggests a continuing search for ... spiritual balance—between freedom and mobility on the one hand, and the stability of a home to provide physical and psychological sustenance on the other.”

Puryear continued to probe opposites and equilibrium throughout the 1980s. Elegant and emphatic in its simplicity, Lever #1 consists of a long and very narrow open vessel and a tall arched lid, shaped like the opening below. Resembling a tongue or shoehorn, the lid seems precariously balanced, on the verge of slamming down shut. Its dynamic verticality contrasts
with the prone, more passive horizontality of the form below. Does the work represent a coffin just before burial, the final closure? Or, with its opening and upright member, does it allude to sexual union, with its connotation of birth and life? The sculpture also suggests ancient cultural artifacts, such as a storage vessel or a ceremonial throne.

These ambiguities enliven the sculpture, as do the visible traces of workmanship. Clearly evident are bits of glue and staples used to hold the strips of red cedar together. These undisguised workings of the creative process differentiate Puryear's simple, direct work from the minimalist tradition, whose impersonal, geometric, and industrially fabricated forms of the mid-1960s had a strong impact on the artist. In addition, Puryear's eloquent forms and masterful craftsmanship recall the pioneering modern sculpture of Romanian Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), who also used the age-old techniques of woodworkers and stonemasons to create his elegant, streamlined work. [See figure 21]

Figure 21. Constantin Brancusi, Golden Bird, 1916, pedestal c. 1922. Bronze, stone, and wood. The Art Institute of Chicago. Partial gift of the Arts Club of Chicago; restricted gift of various donors; through prior bequest of Arthur Rubloff; through prior restricted gift of William Hartmann; through prior gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold H. Maremont through the Kate Maremont Foundation, Woodruff J. Parker, Mrs. Clive Rumells, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson, and various donors. 1990.88

Lever #1 was one of the eight works Puryear exhibited in the previously mentioned São Paolo Bienal; it was also included in the major travelling retrospective of Puryear's work organized by The Art Institute of Chicago on view in 1991-1992. Puryear's poetic, handmade sculpture ranges in scale from small gallery-sized works to large public installations, whose biomorphic forms remain infinitely suggestive. He continues to receive awards, exhibitions, and public commissions. Currently, his work is included in numerous public collections, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the National Gallery of Art, both in Washington, D.C.; and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Martin Puryear is considered one of America's finest contemporary sculptors. "He remains something of an outsider, with one foot outside the mainstream," said New York Times critic Michael Brenson. "But he has one foot comfortably in it as well. Many blacks feel too alienated from the mainstream, or too angry at it because of its continuing failure to make room for black artists. Puryear is very conscious of this history of exclusion. But he has never excluded mainstream art, and his willingness to test himself against the best of it is indispensable to his success."
Slide Eighteen: Martin Puryear

1. Have students compose a diamante poem for Lever 1. The format of a diamante poem is as follows:

   Line 1: a single word that describes the work of art
   Line 2: an action phrase based on something you see in the work
   Line 3: a comparison between something in the artwork and something else in the world
   Line 4: another word that comes to mind when looking at the work of art

2. Puryear builds, rather than sculpts, his works of art. Have students explore this distinction in working methods, comparing his sculptures with those in this manual by Barthé, Perkins, and Hunt.

3. Look at the sculpture entitled Sanctuary. What is a sanctuary? Why might Puryear have given this sculpture its name? Have students create their own sanctuaries in sculpture and discuss their choice of materials and design.

4. As an artist, Puryear has chosen not to address African American subject matter. His heritage, however, has affected his work and his philosophy as an artist. How? Ask students to consider how their cultural and/or racial backgrounds have influenced their values and lives.