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Why do I use color?

Color is exciting, stimulating, and dramatic! Bright colors make us smile and lift our spirits. I have always been drawn to the energy of color.

The vivid colors in art glass really get my attention. A brightly colored piece seems to command a larger space than its physical size. Bright color shouts at me from across the room to come and look closer.

When I apply the color to my work, as opposed to working with the natural color of wood, I control the end result. Dyeing wood allows me the expression of painting on a canvas, with the natural grain of the wood also playing a part in the final composition.

Boxelder burl is beautiful, relatively inexpensive, comes in large pieces, and is very pleasant to work with. Discovering that Boxelder's plain white color and soft consistency allow it to take the dye colors very well has opened another door for me in the world of woodworking. I am pleased to be able to make exciting and dramatic pieces that are more affordable and yet make a strong statement on display in a room.

The Process

The dyes that I use are described as "metal-acid", or "metalized", dyes. This new technology produces the most light-fast and color-fast dye made today. What it means is that my colored pieces are more likely to retain their color through the years than natural wood pieces are. It still is best to keep direct sunlight away from any wood pieces, and to avoid extremes of temperature or humidity.

Starting with a light-colored burl vessel that has been roughed, dried, and then turned to its final shape, I apply the first coat of dye. This will be a darker color to accentuate the wood grain. Dissolved in alcohol, the dye penetrates into the surface of the wood, soaking deeper into some areas of the grain than others. This first coat is almost completely scraped off, leaving dye in only the areas where it penetrated the deepest. This first color enhances the burl wood figure and gives dimension to the grain of the wood. Subsequent color applications might be completely or partially sanded off, once again leaving color in some areas of the wood grain and not in others. To blend colors, I spray the surface with denatured alcohol. After the piece is completely sanded, a final dye coat is applied using the lightest color to provide a background.

By combining colors in different layers, the colors mix and change from how they would have looked alone, giving me exciting color and depth of pattern on my burl wood vessels and bowls. Because the dye colors react differently to the wood each time, every piece is unique. I enjoy being able to choose the color combinations, but I don't try too hard to control the result. The spontaneity of the process reveals a finished piece with a lively, colorful personality!