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## AT RANDOM POSSESSED

# Artist's love of wood goes deeper than mere veneer

By Kathy Flood

Special to the Tribune

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Breeze VerDant makes you want to hug a tree. He opens up a wild world of woods when he reveals what's beneath their rough bark or gnarly burls.

Brazilian tulipwood has streaks of scarlet on a buttery background. Royal purple graces the kingwood's robes. Cocobola makes its ravishing red better than Clairol. Narra trees produce woods in pumpkin orange.



These are some of the exotic veneers VerDant uses sparingly in his art.

As a master of marquetry, he creates images -- "paints" pictures -- with woods. It's painstaking work of high detail using veneer (ultrathin slices, 1/40th-inch thick) to create elaborate designs on boxes, guitars, jewelry and small tabletops.

## A passion for wood

Breeze VerDant (actually "T. Breeze," for Tom, a root relic of the name he was born with) has a passion for wood that's contagious. The "landscape" varieties of rosewood he uses could make anyone fall in love at first sight: Their grain patterns mimic the vistas of desert America, with highly defined, naturally occurring images.

"The patterns that show up in these woods look like the mesas and ridges of the Southwest -- just as clearly as if you painted them yourself," VerDant explains.

No matter how exotic the woods VerDant chooses, they retain down-home simplicity in his hands as he creates his marquetry. He says the objects he fashions add peace and harmony to life.

I found the artist-musician-writer-peace activist in a scenic spot ([www.tbreezeverdant.com](http://www.tbreezeverdant.com)) on the information superhighway. Could he create a Christmas brooch? I asked. The pin he made, with Paua abalone and tiny, fine-metal dots as ornaments, was hard to grasp at first sight.

You can't comprehend that the patterns aren't painted on, they fit so seamlessly together. The repertoire of woods he used also was striking, especially one: scraps of San Francisco "sequoia burl" -- originally a 15-foot growth (like a huge wart) on the side of a 3,000-year-old tree likely caught in a mudslide. The burl lay pickling in California clay until excavation work began on a parking garage there.

"I ran into it while talking to a guy in Denver who sells veneers," VerDant says of the "huge, precious" burl shipped first to Italy because it required special cutting equipment.

One of the most expensive woods VerDant knows of is Amboyna burl.

"It comes from Southeast Asia, including the island of Borneo, and sells for \$25 a square foot of 1/36th-inch veneer," he says. The straight-grain tree trunk of the narra tree produces the same pumpkin-orange wood more affordably. (Burl is rarer and more expensive.)

Marquetry lets him work with the finest rare woods without consuming much. "Little material travels through my studio doors," he says. "I like to work with veneers because there's no sawdust, no waste."

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They're sliced, not sawn. A piece of wood 1-inch thick produces 40 slices of veneer. I can create the greatest amount of beauty from the least amount of wood."

Boxes are VerDant's specialty. "I'm drawn to boxes because they're small, personal, conceal mysteries," he says. He is nature's Will Rogers, never meeting a tree or flower he thought was ugly.

"Particularly interesting are trees that survive under adverse conditions," he observes. "Like tenacious people, they are equally complex behind their bark. Even amidst apparent chaos in nature, balance, beauty and symmetry prevail."

Thus, VerDant says, his marquetry isn't about money -- "the operative word's love" -- and after 15 years, the thrill still isn't gone.

"I still have the same experience I had when I ordered my first box of random veneers: I get nearly nauseated looking at these mind-blowing woods," he says. "The average person has never seen the likes of what's out there."

VerDant knows what's out there but can't help dreaming about more -- exotic woods that may or may not even exist.

"I'd love to see a freak variety, something like a quilted ebony with extremely dense, convoluted black fibers, like sea waves seen from a low-flying plane," he says.

As a lover of trees, the artist in wood doesn't see destruction of the rainforests as an abstract concept: "Every individual plant is a distinct miracle greater than anything we've ever produced, so plants that are lost may have taught us much."

Never kills trees

Therefore, it's not surprising to learn VerDant won't kill trees.

"They give us air, filtering and moisture. They model total vulnerability, standing with their throats exposed for us to slice into," he explains. He hunts windfall twigs, buys veneers and uses scraps and recycled bits to, as he puts it, "make magic" in marquetry.

Early on, VerDant learned that something about being around trees made him feel better about himself -- more extroverted, more rooted in life.

So when he was a young boy called Tom Burns, it was no mystery to his mother how to reach him for dinner: "She'd stick her head out the kitchen door and yell -- upwards."

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