

by James Ziral

Bermuda's first 350 years of economic development were intricately tied to *Juniperus bermudiana*. Luxuriant cedar forests sprawled across sloping hills and into shallow valleys, and well into the 20th century they remained the stage for cicadas, or, as locals called them, "singers," whose high-pitched arias heralded the twilight. That environmental picture changed virtually overnight.

BERMUDA CEDAR and Its Carvers



Cedar carver Garen Simmons makes cedar tables, chairs, rocking horses, and masks in a shed he built himself. Photo by James Ziral

The unwitting introduction of the oyster shell scale (*Lepidosaphes* sp.) and the juniper scale (*Diaspis visci*) insects in the 1940s set loose a tiny marauding horde that reduced the forests by 97 percent. The legislative protection on current growth has also contributed to a scarcity of suitable logs for sculpting.

The nature of the wood itself contributes to this scarcity as well. Cedar should be cured for at least three and preferably for ten or twenty years before it is carved. Its strong, wood-musk-scented oils must be completely dried out to prevent the sculpture from "bleeding."

Whether with a Chesley Trott female abstract, a Roy Boyer crab, or a Garen Simmons mask, cedar's grain varies inconveniently, although beautifully, not only from piece to piece, but often within the piece itself. "There is no easy way to [work with] cedar," says Boyer. "One slip and the sculpture can be ruined." Where many talented carvers fail is in the art of "finishing." "Cedar is like a jewel, a precious stone. Anyone can learn to carve, but finishing is a whole different ball game.

[Sometimes] you can look at a carving and still see sandpaper scratches or something that throws it off. Because of its beautiful grain, cedar needs to be polished smooth," Boyer says.

From time to time, fine pieces can be found in local shops. They intrigue visitors, costing hundreds, even thousands of dollars. But after being purchased, some of these pieces crack during the first chill of a North American winter; Bermuda cedar, with a rich boat-, home-, and furniture-making history, is not always at home away from home. (To prevent cracking, experienced carvers will use turpentine and linseed or tung oil during finishing before applying a thin coat of lacquer.)

Interestingly, no cedar sculptures are known to have been produced before the 20th century. Only within the last four decades has there emerged a woodcarving culture, which is now evolving from a focus on abstract designs to the representation of realistic themes.

James Ziral is a freelance writer and television producer who is writing a book about Bermuda's cedar carvers.