pigmented stains, lacquer mixed with graphite, nails or steel wool soaked in vinegar.

One of the most intense practices of coloring wood black is the process of Japanese lacquer (*urushi*). The urushi culture of Japan has a history dating back 6,000 years. Made from the sap of a tree, this process requires great skill and considerable time to achieve the rich black, wet-looking color. The processed sap, with the addition of either iron or carbon black, creates this effect.

Today black is the most widely used color in urushi, either alone or in combination with other colors or materials such as powdered gold and silver.

The impact of the blackening often depends on whether the wood is colored with dyes or pigments to achieve the effect. Think of the use of pigments as painting—small particles of color mixed with binders—while the use of a dye is much like dying fabric. Dying generally gives greater depth of coloring and more clarity, as the material is absorbing color rather than just having it floating on its surface as is the case with pigments. Each approach has its practitioners and each has its strengths and weaknesses. If you make use of pigments, the color of the wood has not quite the same factor of darkness as dye stains.

The downside of pigments is that they tend to obscure the figure and natural color of the wood more so than dyes, but this might be desirable. With dyes there tends to be more clarity, if applied well, and more control over the shading of the color. Each new coat tends to darken the color, even black, whereas multiple coats of pigments, once a good base is established, will be the shade of the original pigment—remember pigments are just tiny particles of the same color. The inherent color of dyed wood contributes to the overall effect—whether desired or not. For example, the same colored dye on maple will look quite different over a red mahogany. The pigment approach will tend to color both woods more uniformly, with one great difference—maple tends to look sploshy from pigments, but looks great with dyes. A lesson to be learned when you try to color wood: Different species of wood, and sometimes individual pieces of wood, often react differently to different techniques.

The challenge for artists working in wood is to use black effectively, given its many forms and variations, the many reactions it can evoke, the variety of techniques—all point to the depth and range of this color. Explore this special exhibit slowly and methodically—and be prepared to experience the richness of black with a new appreciation.

"**Lagniappe**" by Gorst du Plessis is part of the *Basic Black* exhibit. African Blackwood and turquoise; 7½×3".

"Black is the absolute color where form rules."

– Gorst du Plessis

Photos: Tib Shaw/AAW

"**Inner Rimmed Vessel**" by Liam Flynn is one of the pieces in the *Basic Black* exhibit. Oak; 13×8". In this piece, carving adds patterns but also changes the way light plays along the surface of the blackened work. "At its most basic, black works for me because it removes any distractions from material. What interests me primarily are form and texture, and how the grain structure interacts with the line of the vessel. The blackening process that I use does not obliterate the grain; instead it brings the structure of the wood into a sharper focus."

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