

## MILLING HARDWOOD PANELS FOR PAINTING

Peter Layne Arguimbau, a classically trained artist, is now milling old growth urban hardwoods that were headed to the dump. He bought a portable mill and convinced local landscapers cutting down these beautiful hard wood trees to cut them into 10 or 12 foot straight lengths and he would come pick them up. He feels it is a shame to throw these valuable trees in the dump, especially when he could use them for the finest quality panels to paint on.

By milling urban hardwoods, Arguimbau is able to complete one of the most difficult facets of achieving a true Flemish Technique--- the hardwood panel. Layne makes his own gesso and lead grounds to control their absorption, cooks the Flemish mediums, grinds his own powdered pigments, and now paints on tradition hardwood panels.

Modern methods of speeding up the growth of tress, cutting trees younger, fast drying in kilns, and processing veneers have rendered lumber and plywood unsuitable for painting. Not even hardwood plywood veneers hold up against checking. The trend for artists and even house painters alike is towards a reliance on composite board for painting to resist checking and cracking.

The traditional Renaissance panel were made of oak. As time passed other wood like poplar, birch and then linen and even paper were used for painting supports. Every wood has different characteristics and is treated differently. Both red and white oak were preferred for panels for painting, fruit woods were not. White oak coats very well with white lead with linseed oil and quickly forms a fine isolation for painting. Red oak is full of tannin, and should be coated with an iron sulfate solution, creating a blackened barrier coat that pickles the panel and makes it brittle, but stabile. Poplar is popular because of its large widths, fine grain, and makes an excellent isolation with gesso.

The Renaissance procedure was to store the logs in a river bed for two years to draw out the tannins, then the logs were quarter sawn. A quarter sawn log is cut at a 45 degree angle to the heart, helping to prevent cupping and splitting as the planks dry. The planks are stacked and separated by 1" strips for air circulation and covered in the shade for six months to dry, (not forced dried in a kiln). The truest planks are selected and passed through a 20" planner, until a smooth surface is achieved. Larger widths are planned to 5/8" and smaller panels of under 12" wide are planned to 1/4 " thickness.

These planks are rolled with an iron sulfate solution on both sides and dried. The iron sulfate is absorbed in the pectin layer of the grain and dries the sap and resin, making it inert, which helps to stabilize the panel from twisting and cupping. Then, they are coated with 2-3 coats of rabbit skin glue gesso, sanding between coats and finally sealed and toned with a coat of mostly glue size and a tint of yellow ochre. This light yellow tone refracts the light, creating luminosity in the transparencies of a finished oil painting. The planks are then cut into preferred sizes and stacked ready for use. Panels such as these have always been the preferred painting support because of their durability and fineness for detail and luminosity. Canvas became the obvious support as the need for larger decoration developed where wood was too unmanageable.