

Driftwood by Design

In a tiny town on the coast of Maine,
a carpenter finds his muse in the
ocean's discarded treasures



Michael's process begins with the search for the perfect piece of driftwood.

If I'm not near the ocean, I'm downright miserable," says Michael Fleming, a native New Englander who lives in a cottage on a tiny peninsula in MidCoast Maine. "I am the proverbial fish out of water." Good thing, then, that his work requires weekly trips to the beach, where he searches for hours for the perfect piece of driftwood to be transformed into elegant home furnishings.

Though wood is plentiful along Maine's coastline, the exact shape and color that will inspire his next creation can be elusive. "I can walk through thousands of pieces of driftwood and pick up only a few," he says. "Sometimes I know when I see it exactly what it's going to be—a lamp, a table. Other times its use becomes evident later."

Fall is a big expedition time for Michael—the patina, or sheen of the wood, seems to be just right during the pre-winter months, he explains. Depending on his luck, the haul can be heavy, so Michael built a custom frame that he wears like a backpack as he hikes along the shore, stacking up wood as he finds it. He drags the driftwood off the beach and back to his property, where it dries for weeks or even months during the winter until it reaches the desired color. He then puts the wood in his solar kiln for a few more weeks to cure; when it's ready, he sorts out his collection by color and size in his barn studio, where it awaits his next project.

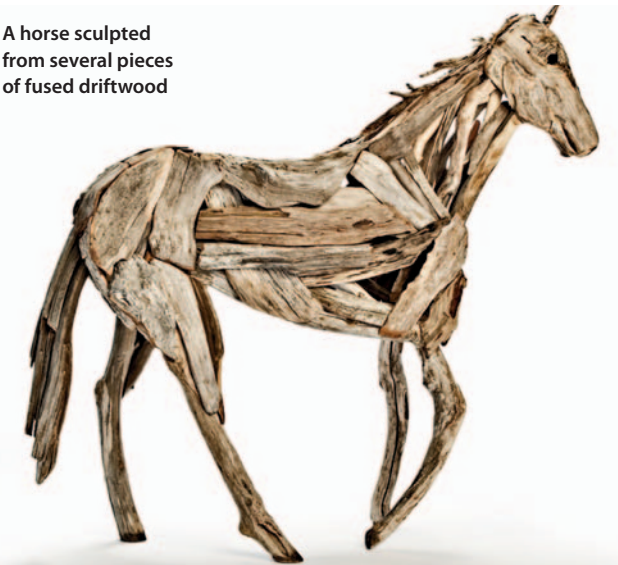
Michael produces his own designs and commissioned works, each one totally unique. Pre-made items range in price from \$350 to \$6,200; the cost of commissioned pieces varies, depending on the request. A small budget means no advertising, but business has been good, thanks to word of mouth and exhibits in art shows and galleries. Michael shies away from the "cute" style of driftwood designs, preferring instead to craft clean, substantially built furniture that just as easily could be found in a modern Manhattan apartment as it could in a rustic beach cottage in the Outer Banks.

Though his furniture designs have been called works of art, Michael's background is that of a carpenter—he spent years working on houses in Maine and the Caribbean. "A lot of the houses are old, which means custom craftsmanship is



Michael sculpts found driftwood the old-fashioned way: with a chisel and saw.

A horse sculpted from several pieces of fused driftwood



necessary, particularly during a renovation. Now, I take the same approach to my designs—the nuances inherent in each piece of driftwood require different skills than traditional furniture making," he explains. After all, it's not as though he can drive to the lumberyard and grab a ready-made plank for a headboard. "I search for driftwood that's the right size and has the right natural arch, and then join it with the side supports the old-fashioned way, with hand tools," he says. It's a painstaking process that Michael enjoys tremendously, working with a chisel and saw to create mortise and tenon joints that guarantee these pieces will last a lifetime. No glue, nails, or machinery are used in his work. "It's always a puzzle, a challenge," he says. "How can I make this piece fit with that one? That's where the satisfaction comes from."

Patience is a must, but Michael knows the rewards are well worth the effort. "The thing about driftwood is that every piece tells its own story," he says. "I never get tired of listening to what it has to say." 🌿

To see more of Michael's work, visit designsadrift.com.