

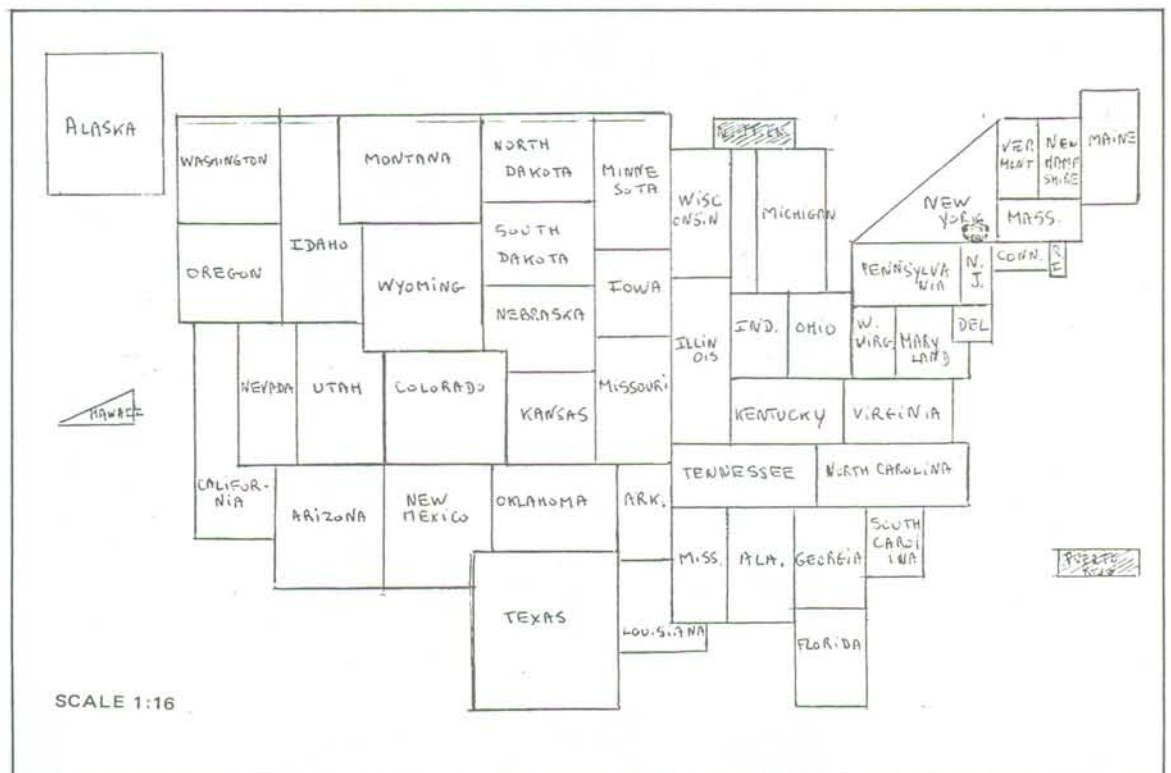
Woodwork in Search of Beauty

This seventh grade adventure sprang from the conjunction of three disparate elements: a cumbersome map of the United States left behind by a French visitor, a longtime love for Louise Nevelson's work, and a storage room overfilled with old lumber. The map was hanging above my dresser. One morning when, from my distant bed, I was one more time weighing Nebraska versus Iowa for that pink square under Minnesota, I was struck by the idea of FIFTY. There were fifty of them, and we were fifty of us, fifty seventh graders and me. It was thrilling – even Louise Nevelson did not seem to have thought of boxing the United States. I leaped to my desk and began, with a godlike audacity, to straighten up frontiers and assemble a new square version of our country. The game was on!

Week 1 – I took my first draft to school. My four seventh grade classes were meeting that Wednesday. A few minutes after the preliminary explanations, the first group was drawing straws for California and New York State. The country, like a hunted beast, was ripped apart and fought over the whole day. The Indians of New Mexico, the music of Tennessee, Colorado's skying and Nevada's gambling were devoured instantly. Some of us, recalling an ancestor in Illinois or Ohio, fought for the family cradle; I snatched out on time Louisiana, Rhode Island, New Jersey and Delaware were evidently choice pieces for the lazy. Those who arrived late got the left overs.

I had taped the latest draft of my map on the blackboard and critics were piling up: too big, funny, not clear, unscaled, unrecognizable, strange, the discrepancy between West and the East was not fair; Florida should not lie down, it should stand up and where could we put it. I had already spotted a 14' x 7.5' space in the hallway. We only had to fit the sculpture into it. Jay, one of my students, offered his help; we spent hours working out dimensions. The USA grew bigger than the wall, then smaller again. We finally made the drastic decision of creating the Unisized States: the inflated western states would shrink and the eastern ones would expand. More problems arose: would Texas and Florida support the whole country? How heavy would that pile of wood be? How could we fasten it to the wall? Would it fall? What about Hawaii and Alaska? Besides all this, as I had taken Louisiana, there were now fifty one of us; Manuel, who had been sick on the selection day, proposed the addition of Puerto Rico. We would call the sculpture *The Fifty First State?*, and prepare it for the Festival of the Arts, six weeks away. It would consist of

The Fifty First State?



*Left: Christal with Oregon
Right: Marc and Missouri*



*Left: Richard with a
Wisconsin shirt, working
in Iowa.*



*Right: Joey arriving with
Wyoming.*



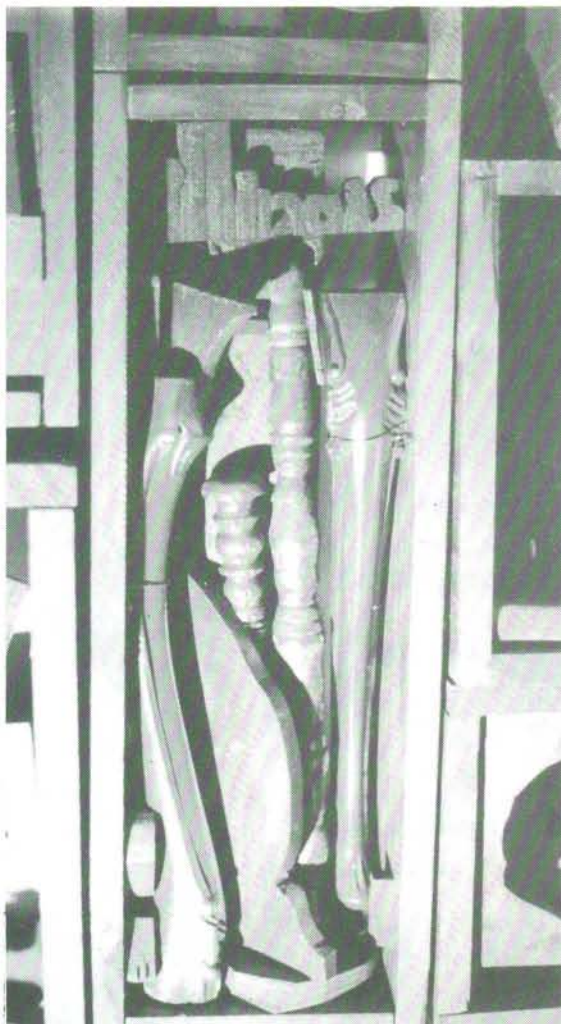
fifty-one boxes, filled artistically with scrap wood by each state owner.

Week 2 – the following days, door open and sneezing, I took the long-stored board down and ripped them to 6". When the students arrived, they were asked to look at the size of their states on the final map which was drawn to a scale of 2" per paper square. My senior helper and I would crosscut the sides on order; with classes meeting once a week and the Festival so close, there was no time to cut and square by hand. The building of boxes using outside measurements was explained and illustrated: two long sides, and two short ones minus two thicknesses – or the opposite. Beware the wood thickness! Everyone understood or said so. We started to cut and build the box frames. Storage became a problem right away. The shop shelves could however accommodate a linear USA with a labelled place for each state.

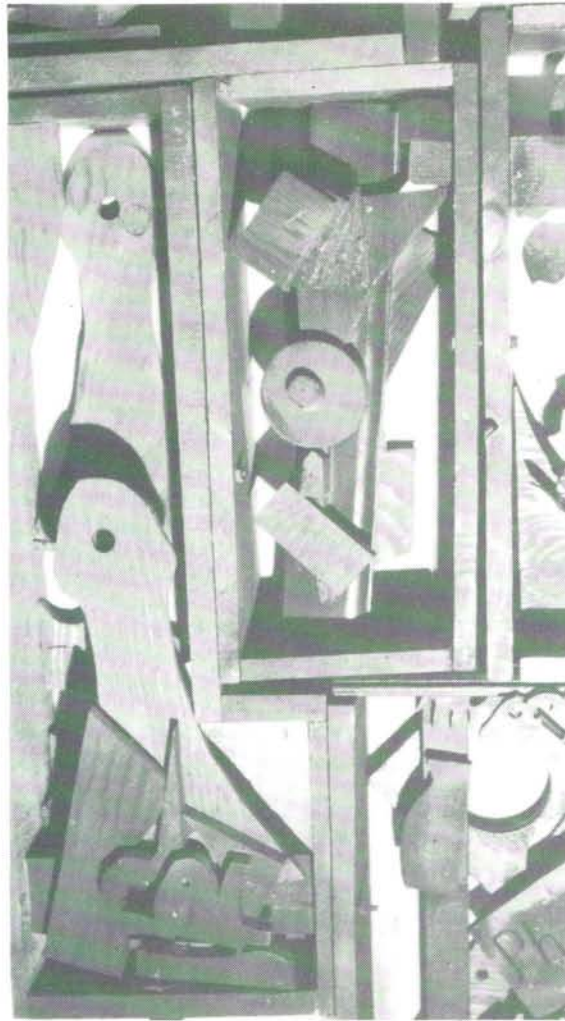
Week 3 – enthusiasm was down. The wood was dirty and uneven, and we had already twenty-one miscalculated boxes that I insisted on dismantling. I was deluged with comments: 'Why are we doing this? We can't take it home!', 'I am allergic to dust'. 'Me too', 'I can't make this, Ms. Camus, my boards are warped'. (which was true), 'What's Dakota known for? Is it known?'. We left discouraged and angry. I felt myself carrying the whole country in my arms. Would it ever reach the hallway?

Week 4 – we had to fill the boxes. The requirements spoke of aesthetics and everyone was supposed to be inspired by the books on Louise Nevelson brought from the library. Each box was to include something pertinent to the state and a jig sawed name, if possible. Fortunately, I had plenty of scrap wood. It was suggested to work with layers of scrap, secure them with glue and brads on pieces of 2 x 2 cut exactly to fit the length or the width

*Left: Illinois with the legs of an old table.
Right: Arizona & New Mexico*



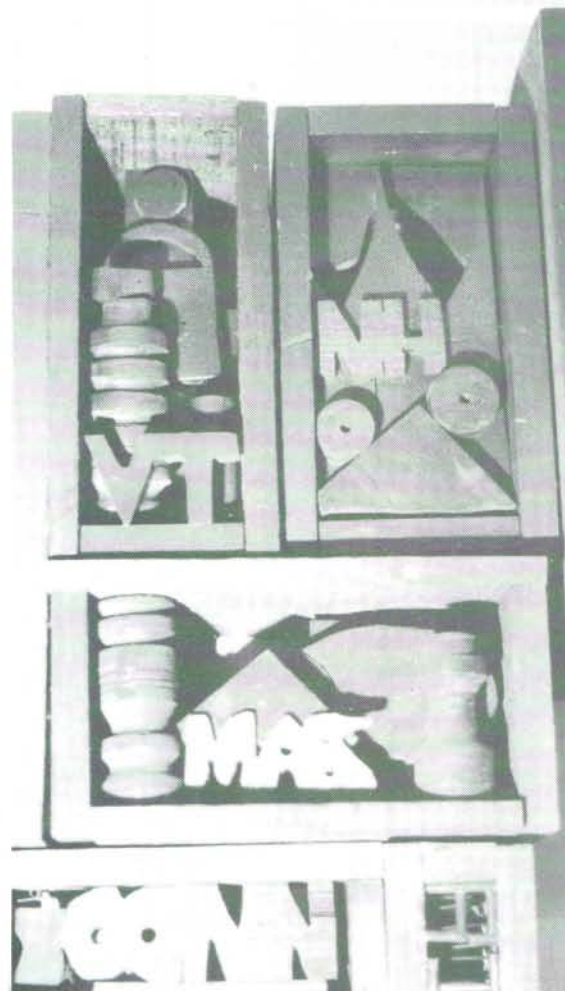
... the wine of
California and the
gambling of Nevada .



of the box, then nail these preliminary assemblies into the box. We could thus create an interesting depth effect and a solid construction. 'We don't understand what you mean!' 'I just don't get it!' (some never did). I demonstrated and re-demonstrated . . . and rushed to make a quick Louisiana for the following week.

Week 5 – somehow, spirits were high again. We had the World Almanac, and a better idea of the usefulness of certain faraway states. We also had cleared up the question of proper state name abbreviations. Everyone was busy exchanging squares, triangles and circles, stealing old lathe projects, making new scrap. 'I am going to put a big bottle in California!', 'I need a car for Detroit', 'See my palm tree!', 'I need something Indian!' Rhode Island, New Jersey and Delaware are finished, but the Texas and Alaska oil men were still lost in their derricks. Colour was also a problem. Black was too dark, grey too flat, bicentennial red-white-and-blue too showy. We settled on a light brown spray with a white backing,

Left: Vernon, New
Hampshire,
Massachusetts
Right: Utah



against which the shapes would be silhouetted. It turned out to be expensive; one can would cover not even two states of medium size, and we lost some paint to a spray battle and a defaced wall. However the day came when the states were ready.

Week 6 – most doubts now concerned hanging the map, and that was giving me nightmares and morning worries. I conferred with the maintenance crew, who offered their help. That saved the day!

We had only to attach each box, which had no backing, to three interlocking sheets of plywood. Simple! I remember two desperate week-ends spent on the floor between two benches on which laid the masterpiece, drilling holes for the screws that would secure each state wall. Expected assistance had fallen short. A friend finally came to my rescue and we shared the one hundred fifty screws by hand. When the maintenance men secured the three sheets on three beams of 2 x 4's on the wall, they used the electric screwdriver which I had not thought of.

The unveiling took place right away after the hanging. Somehow everyone was there to explain to

an increasing crowd that he or she made that one. Lengthy descriptions of state contents were given to any innocent bystander. Doubtful passers-by counted to see if there were really fifty. Guesses were made about unnamed states, and geography was refreshed. What a conversation piece! That big child of ours was crooked, but it had the pleasant smile of the ugly.

After six months, it is still there, with an occasional spiderweb or candy box in it, but much more respected than I had thought it would be. Loose parts are glued back and I spray it afresh for parents' nights. I, Louisiana, am at the bottom, among and underneath, cornerstone, and I like to be there in all togetherness, pain and pride. After all, this representation of the states may be just a little more than a sculpture!

Below: the completed sculpture

