

# 20<sup>b</sup> Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996

The titles of Martin Puryear's sculptures might best be considered as metaphors that expand rather than limit the meaning of his works, which are spare, carefully crafted, evocative, and profound. Like poetry, much is lost in the interpretation. When his sculptures are titled after historic people, it is especially easy to misread them. In *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, Puryear chose the title only after he had completed the sculpture. To think of the title as a frame for the sculpture would be backwards.

Puryear's *Ladder* reflects handcraft techniques he honed abroad while studying in West Africa and in Scandinavia. The side rails, polished strands of wood, are fashioned from a golden ash sapling that once grew on Puryear's upstate New York property; and the ladder's now sinuous, now sharp, rails, connected by round, lattice-like rungs that swell in the middle, reflect the wood's organic cycle of growth and change. Puryear says that he "forced" the perspective of the ladder. Although the rungs begin at a respectable 1 1/4 inches wide at the bottom, the distance between them diminishes as they climb upward thirty-six feet. Their span narrows to a dizzying 1/4 inches at the top of the ladder, giving the illusion of much greater height. Suspended about three feet above the floor and anchored to its surroundings by almost undetectable wires, *Ladder* seems to float precariously in space.



**20-B** Martin Puryear (1941–), *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996. Wood (ash and maple), 432 x 22 3/4 in., narrowing at the top to 1 1/4 in. x 3 in. (1097.28 x 57.785 cm., narrowing to 3.175 x 7.6 cm.). Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Ruth Carter Stevenson, by Exchange.

Like Puryear's sculpture, the legacy of the man for whom it was named is open to interpretation. Booker T. Washington, an eminent but controversial leader of the African American community, was born into slavery in the Piedmont region of Virginia around 1856. At the age of twenty-five he rose to prominence as the founder and first president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In the years following Reconstruction, the promised gains for African Americans were slipping away, and as an educator, Washington insisted that blacks be skilled both vocationally and intellectually: "When the student is through with his course of training, he [should go] out feeling that it is just as honorable to labor with the hands as with the head." At Tuskegee, the curriculum was founded on the tenet that work in all its manifestations was "dignified and beautiful."

Under Washington's guidance, Tuskegee became a successful and respected institution, and Washington himself was revered by many blacks and whites. However, his stand on civil rights was highly criticized by other African American leaders, such as W. E. B. DuBois, as being subservient. Washington thought that blacks need not campaign for the vote. The goal as he saw it was to establish economic independence before demanding civic equality, even if that meant using white assistance. He drew on his own life experience, recounted in his autobiography *Up from Slavery*, to exemplify his conviction that hard work would be sufficient to propel African Americans to success and acceptance. Although Washington quietly supported anti-segregation, he did not speak out openly against racism until the end of his life.

Puryear has used the concept of a ladder not easily ascended more than once — most spectacularly in an eighty-five-foot cedar and muslin spiral staircase created in a Paris church in 1998–1999. This artistic metaphor dovetails seamlessly with the contradictions inherent in the often contentious legacy of Booker T. Washington. The association of ladders with ambition, transcendence, danger, faith, and salvation, deeply woven into the Judeo-Christian tradition, was certainly a vital part of the educational leader's life. The title of Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* is a direct reference to an ascent to a richer existence, both materially and psychologically. The spiritual "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" was one of Washington's favorites (it was also sung by the Freedom Marchers from Selma to Birmingham, see 19-B).

Puryear's finely crafted ladder resonates with Washington's belief in the dignity of manual labor expertly accomplished. But the artist leaves the final explanation of his construction open. As critic Michael Brenson has stated, "Puryear has the ability to make sculpture that is known by the body before it is articulated by the mind."

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look carefully at this sculpture, noting where it begins and where it ends.

### DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M

What is this object?

*It is a ladder.*

How is it different from most ladders?

*It curves and gets narrower at the top.*

### E | M | S

Have students describe the side rails and rungs of this ladder.

*The side rails are crooked, like the organic shape of the trees from which they were made. The rungs are thicker in the middle.*

*The whole ladder is polished and assembled with fine craftsmanship.*

### E | M | S

What does this ladder rest on?

*It does not stand on the floor. It is suspended from the ceiling and held in place by very fine wires. It seems to float about two and one-half feet above the floor.*

Ask students if they can see the wires holding it in place. Notice the shadows created by the ladder.

### M | S

Ask students what illusion Puryear creates by making the ladder narrower at the top than bottom.

*It makes it seem even taller than it is.*

Remind them of the African American spiritual “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” Does this ladder seem tall enough to reach to the heavens?

### INTERPRET E | M | S

Ask students if they think the ladder would be difficult to climb and why.

*It would be very difficult because it is long and curving and it gets very narrow at the top.*

### E | M | S

Discuss with students what ladders can symbolize. Remind them of phrases like “climbing the ladder to success” and “getting to the top.” Call attention to the title of this sculpture, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*. The title of Washington’s autobiography was *Up from Slavery*. Ask why this ladder is an appropriate symbol for this title. (Students should understand that the climb from slavery to attaining equal civil rights was as difficult as it would be to climb this ladder.)

### M | S

How does the fine craftsmanship of this ladder represent some of Washington’s beliefs?

*In addition to intellectual skills, Washington believed that students should learn manual skills, like the woodworking represented by this ladder, in order to support themselves.*

### M | S

Where does the ladder lead?

*It leads to the light.*

What might the fact that the ladder is raised off the ground symbolize?

*You have to pull yourself up to the place where the ladder starts.*

Have students discuss how a person might climb this ladder to success, and where it might lead.

### CONNECTIONS

**Historical Connections:** slavery; Reconstruction; civil rights; Pan-Africanism

**Historical Figures:** Booker T. Washington; W. E. B. DuBois

**Civics:** Fifteenth Amendment; Voting Rights Act of 1965

### Literary Connections and Primary

**Documents:** *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry*, Mildred D. Taylor (middle); *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington (secondary); *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison (secondary); Atlanta Address of 1895, Booker T. Washington (secondary);

Emancipation Proclamation (1863), Abraham Lincoln (elementary, middle)

**Arts:** abstract art