





John Buck carving, 2012. Photo credit: Jeffrey Conger. Photo courtesy of Buck-Butterfield, Inc., Bozeman, MT

# John Buck: Born of Wood

## Linda Tesner

On John Buck's right inner forearm is a tattoo of a vintage pin-up cowgirl; on the same spot on his left arm is a hula dancer. Both images are rendered in a "Sailor Jerry" style of penmanship. And, by the way, the two figures are joined by a tattoo of Buck's restored J. H. Fay & Co. band saw on his outer right forearm. These three tattoos are iconic emblems that speak volumes about Buck's life.

Buck lives part of the year in Bozeman, Montana, on a working ranch that encompasses studios for him and his wife, sculptor Deborah Butterfield, as well as a print-making studio, a machine shop, and an expansive barn where Butterfield stables her horses and practices dressage. Buck and Butterfield raised two sons here, Wilder and Hunter Buck, both artists themselves—there is a creative current that palpably courses through the property. They first came to Bozeman as faculty members of the art department at Montana State University, but they quickly adopted Gallatin County, a sweeping valley in the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

Buck and Butterfield spend winters on the leeward side of Hawaii, the Big Island, not far from Kona, where their home is upcountry; in many ways, the surrounding ranchlands mimic their Montana landscape much more than a tourist version of balmy Hawaiian beachfront. Wild pigs, wild horses, donkeys, turkeys, and mongooses meander around their property; this is the land where Hawaiian *paniolo* (Hawaiian cowboy) culture evolved. Here Buck and Butterfield continue to work in their studios away from

the bitterness of Montana winters. And it is here where Buck pays tribute, in his artwork, to his love of Hawaiian culture.

Buck was born in Ames, Iowa, but for most of his career he has almost literally had one foot in the great American West and the other on the volcanic slopes of Hawaii. He has inculcated the visual culture of both of his adopted homes to such an extent that imagery from both cultures weaves in and out of much of his work. But more accurately, Buck *luxuriates* in the visual culture that surrounds him. He is an obsessive and curious collector of imagery, mostly in the form of objects. His studios and homes are cabinets of curiosities, filled to the brim with collections—first rate primitive Western landscape oil paintings found at thrift shops, Polynesian carvings of all sorts, taxidermied animals (including stuffed frogs poised as a mariachi band and a real two-headed calf), trophy fish, tramp art, cowboy regalia, a lepidoptera collection (from his youth), a world-class array of vintage guitars in the horse barn, and a vintage ukulele collection in Hawaii. These are specimens that not only delight Buck's eye; they are also artifacts in illustration of a compelling, yet ultimately unknowable narrative—a quality shared by the work Buck produces himself.

Wood is the essential element in all of Buck's work. Wood is literally fundamental to Buck's art, and his facility as a wood carver permeates everything he makes, whether the object is a freestanding sculpture, a relief panel, or a

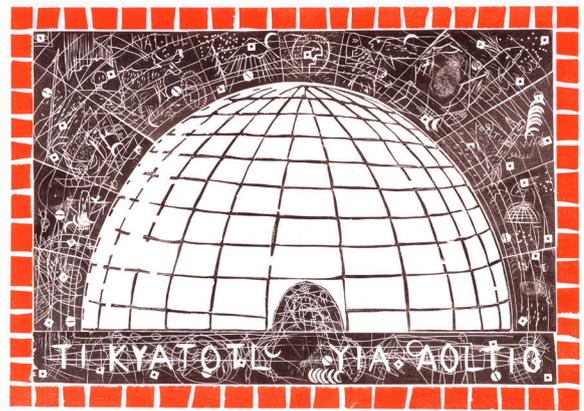


John Buck working in his studio, 2007. Photo credit: Dawn Ahlert. Photo courtesy of Buck-Butterfield, Inc., Bozeman, MT

4 woodblock print. His abilities should come as no surprise; both his father and grandfather were avid carvers. He uses a wood called jelutong, which was introduced to him in 1984 by a Montana carver of duck decoys. Lightweight, resilient, and easy to carve, jelutong allows Buck to work rapidly and spontaneously. Typically, Buck favors leaving the gouges and chip-carving patterns made by his chisel visible—if one looks closely at virtually any Buck work, one sees evidence that each piece was born of a piece of wood.

Buck says, “I think there is something about working with wood—the natural material; the surface of the wood has a quality unlike a manufactured surface. It is hard and soft. The grain moves in different directions. And when you draw and carve into it, it yields in different directions. There is an automatic and direct relationship between the nature of the wood and how I am able to work with it. In the carving of wood, there is a physical activity that is more about nature in the making—not just the concept of the image, but the actual *making of it* is connected to nature.”

Buck’s first woodblock print is auspiciously titled *My First Print*; it is a visual precursor to the many prints that have followed. He made the print in 1980 during an artists’



John Buck, *My First Print*, 1980, three color woodcut printed on Sekishu paper, edition 6/13, 26 x 34 inches. Printed by Visual Arts Center of Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer. Photo credit: Strode Photographic LLC

residency in Alaska. Buck took advantage of having access to a press and created this piece that incorporates all sorts of symbols that one might stereotypically associate with the North—a narwhal, a kayak, caribou, and so on—with a central image of an igloo. In an example of his cheeky sense of humor, the text on the print means absolutely nothing; Buck confesses that it is simply made-up words that might “sound like Eskimo language.” Here Buck establishes what will become a career-long trope, the pairing of



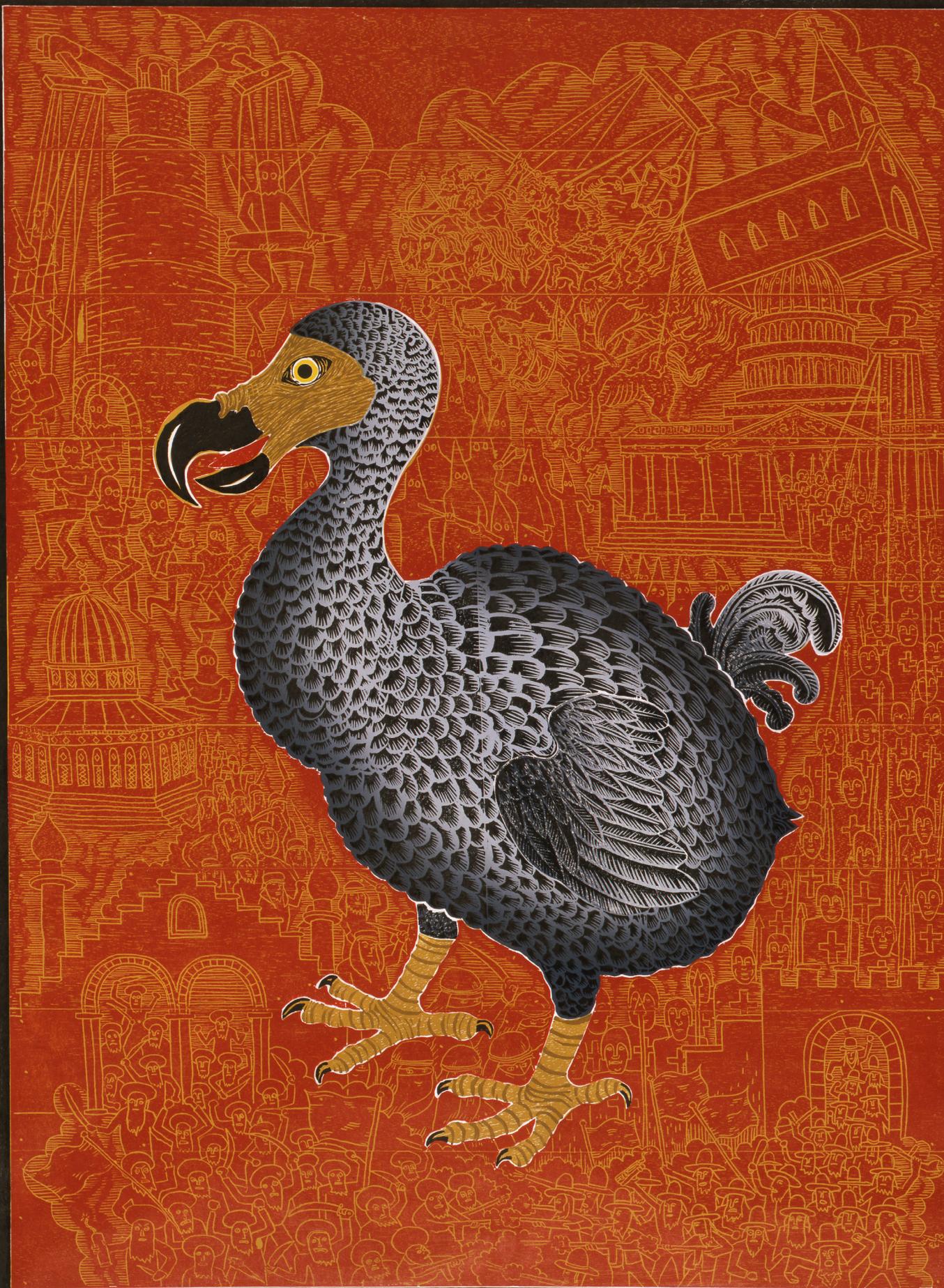
John Buck, Woodblock for *Phoenix Rising*, 2006, jelutong wood. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer



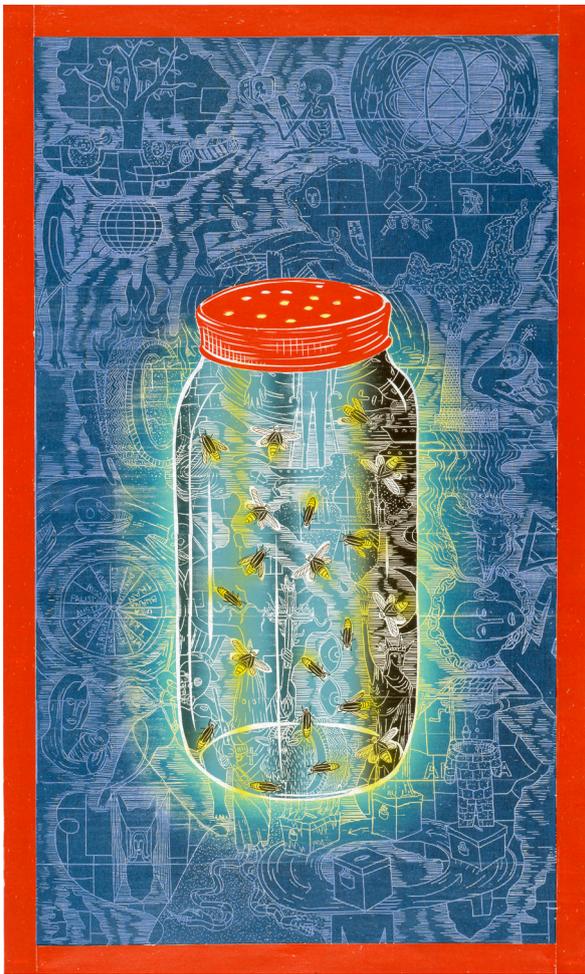
Phoenix Rising A.F.

John Buck 2006

John Buck, *Phoenix Rising*, 2006, woodblock rubbing, 50 x 37 inches; Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer



John Buck, *Phoenix Rising*, 2006, seven color woodcut with pochoir printed on White Thai Mulberry paper, edition 1/10, 50 x 37 inches. Printed by Shark's Ink., Lyons, Colorado. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer. Photo credit: Strode Photographic LLC



John Buck, *The Lamp*, 1994, twelve color woodcut with rubber stamp and hand coloring printed on Sekishu hand-made paper, Archive Impression 1/1, 62 x 37 inches. Printed by Shark's Ink., Lyons, Colorado. Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation



John Buck, *Idaho Potato Jar*, 1997, blown and lampworked glass, 30 x 10 x 10 inches. Photo courtesy of Buck-Butterfield, Inc., Bozeman, MT

8

a central image with background line drawings that support, either visually or conceptually, the central motif.

Buck's prints are legendary large, challenging the parameters of the printmaker's technical abilities. His palette is bold, the central images are hefty, and the surfaces are heavily worked. Because of the scale, the artist must frame rows of one-by-four inch planks to create a smooth, expansive surface on which to work; the plate for *Phoenix Rising* (2006) is an example. In order to incorporate as many colors as Buck likes to introduce, he cuts up the plate into jigsaw-like pieces. Individual elements can be lifted out and inked separately, then reassembled like the pieces of a puzzle.

Buck's methods for printmaking are unique and were developed through the artist's trial and error. He initially draws directly onto a wood panel—he literally uses the block like a big sheet of paper, incising line drawings into the surface. He does not prepare any conceptual sketches; his compositions develop as he draws. After the entire panel is filled with imagery, he decides on a central

iconic image which will be overlaid onto the field of line drawings. Buck says that this central motif occurs to him as the background drawings are developed.

Buck credits a trip to China in 1981 as the inspiration to further engage with the printmaking process. While he was in Xi'an, Buck witnessed Chinese craftsmen making temple rubbings from gigantic stone tablets in the Xi'an Stele Forest. Buck determined then that as he makes woodblock prints he would simultaneously make rubbings from his woodblock plates.

Typical of Buck is his use of repeated images that recur again and again in his work. The human figure, the Tower of Babel, the United States Capitol, a bird cage form, a globe, butterflies, and moths—these are just a few examples of literally hundreds. But the image of a glass jar has become an important central icon in a great deal of Buck's work. He first invoked the glass jar image in the print, *The Lamp* (1994). This is a complicated twelve-color woodblock print, with captured fireflies as the central image surrounded by densely-packed line drawings typical of Buck's hand—a



John Buck, *The Reef*, 2014, fifteen color woodcut printed on bleached Thai Mulberry paper, edition 7/15, 60 x 37 inches. Printed by Megan McGaffigan. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer. Photo credit: Aaron Wessling Photography



John Buck, *The Inside*, 1998, blown and lampworked glass with carved wood elements, 20 x 13.75 x 13.75 inches.  
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

junky shooting up, a skeleton watching TV, a Virgin and Child, a burning tire, and a Russian hammer and sickle.

The jar image became entrenched in Buck's lexicon of imagery after his first of three residencies at the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington. During his first residency, in 1997, both Buck and his wife were invited as guest artists. When they arrived in their bungalow in the forested site of the school, they discovered that a previous resident had put a potato on the kitchen table and forgot about it, and a profusion of potato foliage spilled out over the tabletop. At Buck's direction, the resident gaffer fabricated a supply of glass jars in the Pilchuck hot shop. *Idaho Potato Jar*, a hot-sculpted glasswork consisting of a blown jar and a lampworked sprouting potato, became a sort of souvenir of the Pilchuck experience.

From this point, Buck began to vigorously experiment with the concept of a glass jar as a container for imagery. His next print to incorporate the glass jar was *Argosy* in 1998, the year after his Pilchuck residency. The title refers to the fantastic creature of Greek mythology, Argus, who had one hundred eyes. The term "argosy" also means a fleet of merchant ships or, by extrapolation, any embodiment of riches. The central image of the print is a potato sprouting in a glass jar, the eyes of the potato recalling both the mythological figure and the term "argus-eyed," which means to be keenly observant. The potato eyes also suggest themes of "Big Brother watching" or even "feast or famine." The densely drawn background reveals the subtext—a vindictive Mickey Mouse holding money bags outweighing a community schoolhouse; the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument being carted away by a Bambi-like fawn; the Statue of Liberty in a shopping cart being pushed by a figure of death; and a smiley face on a television screen. In the lower left side is a skeleton jumping on a pogo stick, apparently stomping on children, and in the lower right corner is a homeless figure with a sign "will work for food"—presumably an artist, as the figure is dabbling at a painting palette.

Several prints in Buck's oeuvre invoke the glass jar as container; *The Reef* (2014) is an example in which the entire visual field is housed within the jar. At the top of the image is a cityscape while the lower portion contains a coral reef littered with artifacts of urban decay and outdated technology—a typewriter, a telephone receiver, a metronome, an electric lamp with an old-fashioned light bulb, and a juke box. There is even a discarded wine bottle with "Walla Walla, WA" on the label—a nice self-reference, as

Walla Walla Foundry is where Buck and Butterfield have their bronze sculptures cast.

The jar symbol became prevalent in Buck's three-dimensional sculpture as well. *The Inside* (1998) is a free-standing sculpture formed of a blown-glass jar filled with various carvings, including a seahorse, a lioness, a pearl within its shell, a book, and a classical column. The jar form suggests the metaphoric vessel of the human imagination. Buck likes the fact that the carvings within the jar are loose and therefore move and readjust as the sculpture is moved about, presenting a composition that is always changing—a visualization, perhaps, of thoughts jostling about in one's mind.

Of course, Buck's wall reliefs are closely related to both his woodblock prints and the freestanding sculptures. As an assiduous collector of images, he has an ever-increasing vocabulary of shapes, figures, and emblems that he uses to develop compositions in shallow relief. *Taj Mahal* (2003) is an example. Here, the panel combines an image of a sprouting potato in a jar; a hand holding a stick, whacking at a wasp's nest; two globes (one with an outline of a map of the United States); the Taj Mahal; a carving of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; a drawn map of Manhattan; a beard; and amorphous shapes that suggest modern sculpture.

Buck's panels are similar to paintings, as they are examples of the artist's attention to the formal considerations of creating a work of art. The composition of each panel is carefully determined by the artist, who strives to create a visual balance of imagery as the eye moves across the panel. Buck, who is most comfortable whittling an object in his lap, draws from hundreds of carved forms, sometimes using carvings from an inventory of previously made elements and at other times carving a component that fills a compositional need. Always important to him is a "conversation" between the elements within a panel, how one shape might relate to or complement another, like a visual rebus. Often the conceptual association between objects is less important to the artist than the way in which the carvings relate in the eye of the viewer. Buck's panels are visual essays, but completely non-narrative ones; maybe a better term would be visual poetry resistant to any sort of "message" that one might wish to extract. The wall reliefs are more appropriately viewed in the spirit of surrealism or dream content in which Buck always invites the viewer to develop his or her own associations with the proffered imagery.



John Buck, *Taj Mahal*, 2003, jelutong wood and acrylic paint, 48 x 48 x 2.75 inches. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer. Photo credit: Aaron Wessling Photography

Buck is a master—no, a *wizard*—with wood. It is likely that he can carve virtually any object that he might conjure in his imagination. His deft ability at whittling form out of a block of jelutong is legendary. But Buck blanches a bit when his work is compared to folk art or outsider art, which it inevitably is. His brilliant kinetic works share *something* with whirl-a-gigs, tobacco store Indians, and wooden mechanical toys. Yet his use of wood, a medium more associated with craft tradition, elevates the medium to extremely sophisticated ends. He is also an artist whose eyes are wide open to world events, social and economic injustices, the history of art, and his own personal history. Everything he experiences is absorbed, allowed to percolate, and then filters through his keen abilities into a distilled observation of the human experience. Buck's work is sometimes funny, sometimes punny, sometimes acerbic, sometimes politically critical—but always poignant.

In a contemporary art world overridden by conceptual art, new media, social practice, and time-based performance, such hand-hewn work as Buck's wood sculpture and woodblock prints have been largely overlooked by curators and critics in favor of slicker, more fashionable work. But his work is singular in both execution and expression, and it advances a venerable tradition of American sculpture and printmaking that deserves more careful examination. Buck is not concerned with surfing the vicissitudes of fickle contemporary art chic. He is too busy absorbing visual information from worlds both natural and manmade, discerning current events, and parsing his vast visual vocabulary into compositionally complex and emotively provocative sculptures and woodblock prints.

**Linda Tesner** is an independent curator and writer living in Portland, Oregon. She has served as the interim director of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University and as the director and curator at the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College (1998-2019). She was formerly the assistant director of the Portland Art Museum and the director of the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington. Her recent publications include essays for *Mark Ryden: Anima Animals* (Cernunnos, 2020), and *Daniel Duford: John Brown's Vision on the Scaffold* (Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Portland State University, 2020). She wrote the catalogue essay for *John Buck: Recent Sculpture and Woodblock Prints* (Hoffman Gallery, Lewis & Clark College, 1999) and her monograph, *John Buck*, was published in 2014 (Marquand Editions).

For the past four decades John Buck has been creating prodigious woodblock prints and intricately carved wood sculptures that stand apart from any art movement or trend. Since 1983 Buck has primarily collaborated with Bud Shark at Shark's Ink in Lyons, Colorado to print and publish his woodblock prints. His prints and sculptures can be found in the collections of major museums across the country, among them: the Albright Knox Art Gallery, Denver Art Museum, Museum of Modern Art in New York, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and Whitney Museum of American Art. Buck is represented by Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago, Robischon Gallery in Denver, Imago Galleries in Palm Desert, Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle, and Anglim/Trimble in San Francisco. He received an MFA from the University of California, Davis where he was mentored by Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri, and William Wiley. John Buck and his wife, artist Deborah Butterfield, reside in Bozeman, Montana and Kona, Hawaii.

14



John Buck working in his studio, 2007. Photo credit: Dawn Ahlert.  
Photo courtesy of Buck-Butterfield, Inc., Bozeman, MT

**Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery**

***John Buck: Prints and Sculpture from the Collections of  
Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation***

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51

**Front cover:** John Buck, *Argosy*, 1998-1999, eight color woodcut  
printed on White Thai Mulberry paper, edition 10/15, 62.5 x 37 inches.  
Printed by Shark's Ink., Lyons, Colorado.  
Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

**Back cover:** John Buck, *The Times*, 1991, eleven color woodcut with  
ink and rubber stamp printed on Suzuki handmade paper, edition 2/15.  
Printed by Shark's Ink., Lyons, Colorado.  
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

