



What excited me about [the piece] was that the length of it was such that you wouldn't really be able to tell whether you were looking at something that had been manipulated or whether it was in fact truly receding into space through sheer length.

MARTIN PURYEAR

Martin Puryear

Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996

Wood (ash and maple)

432 x 22 ³/₄ (narrowing to 1 ¹/₄ at top) x 3 inches

Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Ruth Carter Stevenson, by Exchange

Made of a single ash sapling trunk split in two and joined by maple rungs, Martin Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* hangs suspended in midair. Puryear was fascinated by the undulating trunk of the ash tree before making the ladder. Around the same time, he became intrigued by the homemade ladders he saw in the French countryside, and decided to create a ladder himself. Puryear's ladder, however, differs from these utilitarian homemade ladders... not only in dramatic length, but also in width. The ladder is human-scale width at the bottom, but shortens to 1 ¹/₄ inches at the top. This heightened sense of perspective – the sense that the ladder recedes into an enormous distance of space – is exaggerated by the difference of widths at the top and bottom. When standing in front of the ladder, the viewer feels as if it has the ability to transport people great distances. Puryear's title also suggests a great ascent. Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in 1856, and later, after slavery was abolished in 1865, he sought out an education and eventually became known as one of the nation's foremost black speakers, writers, and educators. Puryear's ladder should not strictly be read under the umbrella of Washington's life, but perhaps as a metaphor for any progress or movement that comes from hard work. Puryear, never one to be verbose about his artwork, has said, "I come from a generation where the work is itself the information."