

# Brazilian artist to transform salvaged wood into furniture for Vancouver Biennale

Hugo Franca will be carving stumps and logs on Spanish Banks for next two weeks

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN    APRIL 4, 2014



Brazilian artist Hugo Franca (in red), along with crew member Jailton Procoipio, attempt to move a large piece of driftwood into position at Spanish Banks as part of a Vancouver Biennale project. The driftwood will be carved and shaped by Franca into outdoor public furniture.

**Photograph by:** Jason Payne, VANCOUVER SUN

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The wood speaks and Hugo Franca listens.

The Brazilian designer and artist was doing a lot of listening to a 4,100-kg Douglas fir stump at Spanish Banks Friday morning. Weathered grey, the stump had a massive root that cascaded on the sand to one side.

The stump was telling Franca what it wanted to be shaped into. That's the poetic way of describing what Franca was doing. Practically, he was looking at its form to figure out how to transform it into public furniture for the Vancouver Biennale.

During the past 30 years, Franca has built an international reputation for his furniture made from burned and salvaged wood, mainly pequi — a dense, gnarled wood from the tropical rainforest of

Brazil. Now in Vancouver, Franca is carving for the first time in an entirely new species from the temperate rainforest of the west coast of B.C.

Franca said working with new types of wood means constant surprises. Earlier this week when he was carving in Squamish for the biennale, he was working with his assistants on another Douglas fir stump. When it was flipped over, it broke in two because of an unseen rotten section inside. He simply adapted to the new situation by turning what was going to be one piece of furniture into two.

At Spanish Banks, Franca spent a good part of the morning helping his assistants flip the big Douglas fir stump so he could get a better view of its entire shape. It's one of five stumps and logs he plans to shape into furniture.

"I already have some ideas for the pieces," he said through his business manager and translator, Tais Ribeiro.

"These logs already gave me an idea of what they want to be. It's a very intuitive process based on a creative dialogue with the raw material."

Anyone in the vicinity of Franca and his team will be able to see them transforming salvaged wood into new shapes for the next two weeks. They'll be working outdoors to the west of Spanish Banks East. On Sunday, April 13, the biennale will hold an open house at the site from 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Franca didn't start out making furniture from salvaged wood. As a student in Brazil, he was imprisoned and tortured under the country's former military dictatorship. By the early 1980s, he was working as an industrial designer with a computer firm in Sao Paulo but felt something was missing.

He left it all behind to live in a small fishing village in Bahia called Trancoso. Now a popular tourist destination, it was so undeveloped in the early 1980s it didn't have electricity or piped water.

Franca started carving canoes abandoned by the Pataxo, the indigenous people of the area. For his own use, he turned them into furniture such as chairs and tables.

He started using charred pequi wood that had been burned to clear the land for farms and cattle grazing. Franca found value in wood considered worthless. Sometimes he was able to find a dead tree 45 metres tall. He prized those because a single tree of that size could be turned into an entire collection of furniture.

"I had the idea of bringing back the tree to live with people," he said. "If you carve furniture, you bring back the idea of the tree and the natural shapes."

A gallerist from Sao Paulo on vacation in Trancoso saw his work. Franca's career began to take off after the pieces were shown in the Raquel Arnaud Gallery. His work is now used by some of the world's top designers, such as Philippe Starck. A dining table by Franca can sell for as much as \$100,000.

Franca said carving for the Vancouver Biennale means leaving a legacy for the people of the city to enjoy.

“Here in Vancouver, the biennale gives me the great opportunity to produce public art, public furniture,” he said.

“I can reach more people by carving for the public.”

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## IN THE BEGINNING

A non-profit organization, the Vancouver Biennale is an attempt to “transform the urban landscape into an open air museum.” The first event kicked off in October 2005 at a cost of about \$4 million.

## THE FUNDS

The biennale is paid for through grants, corporate sponsorship, gifts in-kind, philanthropic donations and the sale of art after each event.

## THIS YEAR

The third biennale will include 20 public art works in parks and open spaces in Vancouver, North Vancouver, Richmond, New Westminster and Squamish. Exhibits, which are in the process of being installed, will be on display for two years.

## GUEST OF HONOUR

This year’s event will include a sculpture by China’s Ai Weiwei, a world renowned sculptor, photographer, architect and activist.

## THE LEGACY

More than \$2.5-million worth of public art remains in Metro Vancouver thanks to donations following previous events. The most famous piece is A-maze-ing Laughter, which was donated to the city by Chip and Shannon Wilson.

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