Nature’s Alchemy – Petrified Wood

Edited by Glen Joffe



Massive petrified wood root along the edge of a forest in Java, Indonesia. · Photo credit: Glen Joffe

Imagine walking deep into a forest. All the noise of the modern world fades away, leaving only the sounds of nature whispering in your ears. A stream murmurs nearby, the wind whistles through the trees, and leaves flutter in lengthy sighs as birds call out to one another overhead. There is no path where you walk, only trails marked by barely visible animal prints. Squirrels scurry up the bark of trees, insects buzz, and butterflies flutter to and fro behind wild bushes. The ground suddenly dips under your feet, leading you down a steep incline of packed soil cushioned by vines and fallen leaves. You find yourself at the bottom of a wide, shallow ravine dotted with large polished stones. You surmise a river must have once run there, but all that’s left is the path it forged – a dried overgrown riverbed in a lost world.



Petrified wood stool or side table

Item #A0407-045

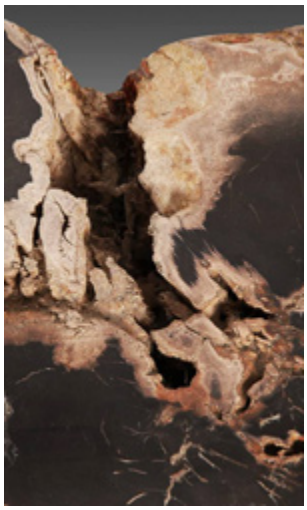
As you walk in the direction of what you think was downstream, you come across an unexpected sight just around a bend: an ancient tree trunk nestled against the bank of the river. Yet, unlike other fallen logs, this one does not appear hollow, covered with moss, or freshly fallen even though the wood looks intact and the fine lines of bark are visible. It is half protruding from the ground. In a strange way it looks preserved. Moving closer, you clearly see something is different. Parts of the log appear reflective, polished and veined. Moving even closer you look inside a deep notch, and to your amazement you witness the shimmer of rich red, yellow and green stone. In an instant you are washed with amazement. You have discovered petrified wood.

The word 'petrify' comes from the Latin term *petra,* meaning to 'become stone.' While the mythological Medusa can turn anyone who meets her eyes into stone in a matter of seconds, in nature the process takes far longer. Some estimates say it takes between ten to several hundred million years for wood to turn to stone or more accurately, fossil. To put this in perspective, some of the petrified wood we see today grew alongside the dinosaurs. In fact, like prehistoric creatures, many species of petrified wood are now extinct.



Petrified wood stool or side table

Item #F1406-012



Stool or Side Table · Java, Indonesia · Indeterminate age · Petrified wood · 20 L x 14 D x 18 H inches

Item #F1404-012

Petrified wood begins its life by being buried underground or beneath volcanic ash. Deprived of oxygen, the wood is effectively prevented from decomposing in a regular fashion. Instead, over extreme periods of time minerals in earth and water seep into the wood, gradually replacing the organic matter of the wood with silica, or quartz crystals. In essence, these crystals fill in the cells of the wood leaving the original structure intact, and although quartz may be colorless, impurities such as carbon, copper, iron and manganese oxides produce the saturated colors that can be encountered in petrified wood.



Slice of petrified wood made into a side table

Item #F1406-050

One of the most beautiful aspects of petrified wood is the preservation of its original form, down to extreme microscopic details such as tree rings and cellular structures. Although it is often called fossilized wood, unlike many fossils petrified wood is a complete representation of the tree's natural shape as opposed to a partial impression or fragment of the original organism; for example, the impression of a leaf or a skeleton. No one who sees petrified wood can think of it as 'just wood' – especially if you've tried lifting one! In Indonesia, where much of PRIMITIVE's collection originated, it takes construction cranes and massive tractors to haul the petrified wood from where it is found. Some of the pieces are monumental in size: ancient roots three to four times the height of grown men and trunks almost the length of a football field. Many are simply cleaned and polished, admired as natural sculptures, the handiwork of the artist known as nature. Others are sliced with diamond-tipped saws and hand-polished to be made into one-of-a-kind stools, side tables and tabletops for contemporary interiors. You might say it took millions of years for petrified wood to be recognized as high design and for nature to be recognized as a brilliant artist.

The appreciation of natural art forms has been a long-standing tradition in the East, but it is only in recent decades that Western designers and collectors have embraced this collecting category. As modern lifestyles become increasingly urban, it appears more and more people are feeling the desire to reconnect with nature in their lives and homes. As a result, petrified wood is now considered a collectible, and because it is a scarce commodity worldwide its

value is increasing. Crafted and preserved by the hand of nature, pieces of petrified wood can be evocative and inspiring. Each piece seems to carry with it the history of the natural world and all such recognition may conjure. Place your hand on one and let it engage your imagination. You will be instantly filled with wonder. The entire history of mankind is a fleeting moment in the life of the object beneath your fingers. It is nature’s alchemy.



Select petrified wood bowls
Item #A1406-114, 115 and 116