

Constitutional Woodworking

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I . Process and Effort

For my term project, I decided that I wanted to create something out of wood since woodworking is one of my hobbies. When I was thinking about what to create, I had several ideas including turning some sort of bowl, making a cutting board, or something else that is pretty commonplace for beginning woodworking. What I ended up doing was turning a fountain pen and building a case for it with some engravings relating to the Constitution. The process of making both the pen and its case was relatively manual. The pen was made using a lathe and pen mandrel using some cherrywood. After shaping the pen, I sanded it and finished it with some teak oil. Making the pen case itself was a bit different. To fit the theme of the Constitution and how it has stood the test of time, I wanted to use some older wood that had unique features that made it recognizable as old. I ended up finding an old piece of barn wood that has some spalting and cracks and looks like it could be from quite a while ago. To turn this piece of wood into a pen case, I cut in half and chiseled out a channel that the pen fits into, sanded the wood, applied some teak oil as a finish, and attached some hinges so the case can open and close. The final step in the creation process was using a soldering iron to hand burn in two quotes that I found into the wood.

The aspect of this project that makes it stand out as a Constitutional piece is the engravings that I burnt into the case. One aspect of the Constitution that I find especially interesting is the different ways that a persona can interpret them. From my prior knowledge and time spent in this class, I know that a person can interpret the Constitution via modernism, textualism, structuralism, and a variety of other methods. From what I have seen, it seems like there is a clash between modernists and textualists in regards to interpreting the Constitution. Knowing this, I set out to find some quotes that I felt represented these ideas and eventually found two that I feel capture the ideas that both schools of thought represent. The quote that I found relating to textualism comes from Justice Scalia and states “The text is the law and it is the text that must be observed.” The quote that I found relating to modernism is directly tied to the Constitution but it still captures the same idea. The quote given by Jose Andres is as follows: “The modernity of yesterday is the tradition of today and the modernity of today will be tradition tomorrow.”

I I. Inspiration and the Learning Process

I am not an incredibly artistic person especially when it comes to drawing and painting which seems to be an area that is more heavily influenced by the Constitution. Political cartoons and paintings representing different aspects of American life and the Constitution are quite common, but when it comes to famous artists that use wood as their medium to convey a message, there aren't many to be found. With that being said, I feel like physical objects that convey a message can be just as powerful. When I was thinking about what I was going to for this project, I thought of all the monuments and statues that have been erected to convey a message or save a part of history and realized that most of them have some sort of physical engraving. The first monument that comes to mind is the Lincoln Memorial in DC. There is something incredibly powerful about having text engraved into granite and marble where it will be able to stand the test of time for hundreds of years. From personal experience and through research, it seems like nearly every great monument has some sort of engraving in order to further its message.

Carrying these ideas into my personal art project, I decided that I wanted to do something similar, but not exactly the same. Instead of creating a physical structure to convey a message, I wanted to make something a bit more abstract that allows for a variety of interpretations. In regards to a monument, the general idea is to preserve the memory of someone or something and the text is usually either a description of the sculpture or some famous quote that they gave that summarizes their contributions to society over the course of their lifetime. My art project isn't aimed at a particular person or specific aspect of the Constitution, it's an abstract creation made to provoke thought about how someone can interpret the Constitution. Although the engravings are quotes from real people, the author of the quotes is insignificant, the ideas behind them being the main point to focus on.

I II. Constitutional Ideas

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, this art project was not created in order to pay tribute to a specific person or idea within the Constitution, it was created to abstractly represent how anyone might interpret the Constitution. The most obvious portion of the project is the quotes that are engraved into the pen box. The first quote given by Jose Andres states "The modernity of yesterday is the tradition of today, and the modernity of today will be tradition tomorrow," referencing modernism, but not modernism in direct relation to the Constitution.

However, the idea behind the quote applies perfectly to the Constitution and its interpretations. When looked at through a Constitutional lens, the quote now expresses the idea that any given point in time can be considered modern considering the frame of reference of when that point in time is being viewed from. For example, when the founding fathers created the Constitution, they were living in modern times when looked at through their perspective. Using this kind of logic, someone could argue that the founding fathers wrote the Constitution in a modernist fashion, and that if the framers wrote the Constitution in this state of mind, then the Constitution should be interpreted in this fashion today. Now, the logic isn't entirely concrete along this path, but it does lay some sort of basis into the validity of a modernist view on the Constitution.

The second quote engraved on the pen case is one given by Supreme Court Justice Scalia, a devout textualist who firmly believes in using the physical text in the Constitution to make decisions. The quote is as follows: "The text is the law and it is the law that must be observed," directly relating the idea of textualism to the Constitution in this case. This quote was deliberately placed next to the pen in the pen case as a way to symbolize that under the philosophy of textualism, once the words are put on the page and ratified, they must stand the test of time and be interpreted exactly as they are written. Although both of the quotes are engraved, the fact that the quote specifically relating to textualism is also engraved into the wood symbolizes how the text is permanent and how it again, must stand the test of time, and that in order to change the text, a great deal of effort would have to be made to remove the engraving and engrave something new. As a textualist, one can make the argument that when the Constitution was created, a great deal of thought and effort were put into making sure that what was written down was intended to be there.

As mentioned previously in the discussion about creating the pen and case, I decided to choose an older piece of wood that had already been used previously. This was intentional for a couple of different reasons. Firstly, using an older piece of wood symbolizes the passage of time of the Constitution. As wood gets older, it tends to start to show some wear especially if it is not maintained properly. Applying this idea to the Constitution, depending on how the Constitution is interpreted, certain sections can appear to degrade or have less meaning than others. From a modernist approach this happens when the entirety of the Constitution is viewed through a modern lens. History is extremely important when viewing the Constitution and can teach us a lot about how the different decisions that were made during its creation had an effect on the

United States. From a textualist standpoint, the Constitution can start to show degradation when only the words on the page are considered. Language evolves with time and the exact meaning of words written down may have changed from the 1700's to the present day. There can also be some issues that arise with selective incorporation plus if a textualist believes that only words written in the Constitution have Constitutional meaning especially when considering fundamental rights.