

# Nature Made

Every object has an origin story. In museums—art museums in particular—the story of an object’s life is generally referred to as its *provenance*. *Provenance* literally means “place of origin,” but in museums it more commonly means “history of ownership,” often researched through historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> Yet, very few museum object provenances start at the true beginning, where the raw materials that became the object first existed in their original forms. In order to best understand a museum object, one must begin there.

The Key Marco Cat, for all the fervor it now creates with its charismatic hand-carved face, began as a simple plant. The plant, likely a native species of tree or bush still found in Southwest Florida, grew slowly in its natural habitat for years or even decades, surviving constant environmental threats to its existence, including hurricanes, wildfires, and pests. At some point, whether through sheer coincidence or a deliberate search, a human being encountered this plant, or its remains, and decided that it would provide the perfect material from which to carve the now iconic figure.

The question of who exactly carved it, however, is largely unclear—and on numerous levels. Uncertainty surrounding its age, as well as a lack of documentation from the pre-Columbian Americas, make identifying an individual artist impossible. While the artist’s European contemporaries were often credited individually in written records for their work, any knowledge of the Key Marco Cat’s artist and his or her creations was likely transmitted verbally, until it was ultimately lost. The best attribution at this point is made to a larger cultural group, typically the Calusa of Southwest Florida. However, given the uncertainties over both the Cat’s age and temporal distinctions between South Florida’s Native cultural groups, even that designation is potentially problematic.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter explores the very first of the Key Marco Cat’s “nine lives.” From its patient emergence into Florida’s pre-Columbian landscape, the

Cat's humble beginnings as a product of the natural environment eventually merged with the experienced hands of a skilled and motivated artist, setting the stage for its original intended use and sparking a fuse of intrigue that is still burning.

## Flo-Grown

The Key Marco Cat's modern-day popularity is fueled in part by the many mysteries surrounding it. The object is an excellent secret keeper—at times frustratingly so—of even the simplest facts. One of the most fundamental known and observable facts about the object is that it was carved from a single piece of wood. Speculation over the species, however, continues to this day. It is also unknown if the plant was local to Marco Island, although it is generally assumed to at least be local to South Florida, as the verdant environment would have provided no shortage of options to the opportunistic harvester.

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Marco Island is situated in the Gulf of Mexico, centered at N 25°56'13.5" and W 81°42'57", now part of Collier County, Florida. The region is considered subtropical, with defined dry and rainy seasons. Marco Island encompasses roughly 24 square miles, including 6 miles of beach and over 100 miles of modern waterways. It is part of what geologists consider the most morphologically diverse barrier-inlet system in the world. The island's unusual geological features, including aeolian (wind-generated) sand dunes soaring up to fifty-two feet—a mountain in South Florida—likely contributed to its attractiveness as one of the earliest known locations of long-term human settlement in South Florida.<sup>3</sup>

There are more than 300 native floral species growing wild on Marco Island. Botanists consider the island “unusual” in its plant diversity compared even to the nearby mainland. In its natural state, prior to its expansive development beginning in the 1960s, the island included seven primary types of habitats: mangrove swamps, saltwater marshes, freshwater marshes, pine-lands, dense xeric scrub vegetation, tropical hammock, and unaltered shell mounds, as well as a dynamic sand beach. The modern-day vegetation of coastal Southwest Florida is assumed to have been in place for the past 5,000 years and therefore analogous to that encountered by the Calusa and their ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

## Into the Woods

Wood was an important material to the person or people who created the Key Marco Cat. Likely an essential everyday material for all Southwest Florida people at the time, wood was also a popular medium of personal or societal expression. Wood, however, is generally underrepresented in the archaeological record due to its relatively rapid decomposition rate, particularly in South Florida's unforgiving climate. Ironically, if it were not for wood found in archaeological sites in South Florida, very little if anything would be known about its importance to Florida's pre-Columbian Native people.<sup>5</sup>

The most famous example of wood preservation in Florida comes from Key Marco, a spectacularly prolific waterlogged site on what is now Marco Island, excavated by Smithsonian anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing in 1896. The eponymous Key Marco Cat is so called because it was found at the site, just one of *hundreds* of ancient wooden artifacts preserved there in an oxygen-free environment. In reporting the finds, Cushing notes that "articles of wood far outnumbered all others" and attributes possible species identifications to several. Amongst his identifications are artifacts of buttonwood, cypress, ironwood, mangrove, and "spruce." His identification of spruce, a non-native tree, may be chalked up to improper nonlocal vernacular. All the wood and plant material recovered from the site is assumed to be indigenous to South Florida.<sup>6</sup>

At least two botanical studies of the Key Marco collection have been conducted during the past century.<sup>7</sup> Cypress and pine are the two most abundant genera of wood represented, both softwood conifers. Less prolific species described in artifacts at Key Marco include mangrove (whether black, red, or white is not denoted), buttonwood, gumbo-limbo, saffron plum, *lignum vitae*, mayten, stopper, black gum, Florida privet, and mahogany, all hardwood dicots. There are likely other presently unidentified plant species in the assemblage. Cushing also notes the presence of modified palmetto, the source of plant fiber netting found at the site.<sup>8</sup>

The thirteen species found at the Key Marco site generally align with those more thoroughly investigated at Pineland (a major Calusa site some fifty miles north in Lee County), which include cypress and pine in relative abundance, as well as black mangrove, red mangrove, gumbo-limbo, saltbush, wild lime, saffron plum, wax myrtle, wild coffee, and grape. Modified sea grape wood has not been identified at either site, but experimental artifact replication with shark-tooth tools demonstrates it as a possibility. Of the taxa described at Key Marco, all but one (*lignum vitae*) still occur naturally on Marco Island. Of the

seven additional taxa described at Pineland (black mangrove, red mangrove, saltbush, wild lime, wax myrtle, wild coffee, and grape), all still grow wild on Marco Island, as does sea grape.<sup>9</sup>

The “ironwood” that Cushing describes is not found in either the Key Marco or Pineland assemblages. He uses the term interchangeably with *buttonwood* when describing timbers and pilings that he believed were “mooring posts” and part of “pile dwelling” structures, stating that “some of them were more than four inches in diameter, and were made of tough mangrove and buttonwood or ironwood.” He also identifies a single-hole atlatl with a rabbit carving on one end as “ironwood,” saying “it was made from fine, springy hard wood—like rose wood in appearance—probably the heart portion of the so-called ironwood of the region.”<sup>10</sup> Florida’s native black ironwood, or leadwood, has not been found in Southwest Florida archaeological contexts, but can grow a trunk between four and ten inches in diameter, making it another possible candidate for the Cat’s source wood.<sup>11</sup>

Cushing describes the Cat as being “carved from an exceedingly hard knot, or gnarled block of fine, dark-brown wood.” He similarly describes the wood of a shell tool handle from the same collection, calling its “hard, dark wood, like madeira [mahogany] in appearance,” but stops short of providing an identification. Expedition artist Wells Moses Sawyer (1863–1960) supports Cushing’s assertion about the Cat, calling it “very hard,” but differing in his opinion about its coloration, calling it “light,” revealing the inherent subjectivity of any analysis by coloration.<sup>12</sup> The object’s hardness is thought to be a major contributor to its current state of preservation, which, in comparison to other objects from the same collection, is exceptional. The consensus of a hardwood likely rules out softer woods like cypress, of which many identified artifacts have since visibly deteriorated more significantly than the Cat.

## Seeds of Hope, Seeds of Doubt

One of these twenty-two species of indigenous flora may well be the source of the wood used to carve the Key Marco Cat. Narrowing it down further, however, proves troublesome. In the case of Key Marco wood identifications performed at the FLMNH in 1988, small thin sections were taken from select artifacts—sections so small that one might hardly detect their absence.<sup>13</sup> This is a process that archaeologists and museum professionals consider *destructive analysis*, in which an object—or part of an object—is destroyed in order to gain new knowledge that could otherwise not be obtained. There is no

guarantee that this would work on the Cat, though, as the formerly saturated object's cell walls might be compromised and therefore unidentifiable.<sup>14</sup> Given its fragility, rarity, and unusually high public profile, destructive analysis of the Cat at any level is unlikely, leaving more questions than answers about its floristic origins.

Assuming the Cat was carved from “head to toe” in parallel with its source branch or trunk, it might be possible for an expert to examine its cellular structure with a hand lens.<sup>15</sup> Until that happens, however, deductive reasoning using physical observations, comparative analyses, and experimental archaeology seem to be the only methods of further winnowing an identification. New methods of observation might include evaluating the Cat's coloration with a Munsell test, as has been performed on other wooden artifacts from Florida, or studying the Cat's density, particularly in comparison to other artifacts and equally sized wood samples of the species listed here.<sup>16</sup> *Lignum vitae*, for example, is so dense that it sinks when placed in water, as does South Florida's black ironwood, “the heaviest of all” native species and 30 percent heavier than water.<sup>17</sup>

Cushing speculated that the object was “either saturated with some kind of varnish, or more probably had been anointed with the fat of slain animals or victims.” Either may have altered the original color or density of the wood, but likely contributed to the object's preservation. As Cushing reports, “it is still relatively heavier, harder, and less shrunken by drying, than any other specimen of like material in the collection.” It should also be noted that the Cat likely underwent an undocumented treatment, possibly with preservative wax, in all likelihood making the object denser and heavier than it was in its found condition.<sup>18</sup>

While exceedingly rare, similar specimens suitable for comparative analysis *have* been found in Florida. Twelve of comparable dimensions and composition are known from Florida, eight of which are from South Florida—three alone from Key Marco. The Millar Figurine, a humanlike carving found near the shores of Lake Okeechobee, is thought to have been carved from *lignum vitae*, although other accounts identify the wood as black mangrove. The Millar figurine is depicted in a fashion similar to the Cat: a seated position with its hands resting on its knees. The famous Padgett Figurine, also from South Florida, is carved from pine roundwood and is similarly postured.<sup>19</sup> The geographical proximity of these sites to Key Marco brings to mind the possibility of a shared regional wisdom, harnessed and communicated across generations lived in South Florida. Perhaps it was common knowledge or practice

that lignum vitae or other dense woods were used exclusively in the production of certain figures.

Experimental archaeology—the practice of experimenting, often through replication, “in order to provide data and insights that aid in the interpretation of the archaeological record”—might also offer clues to the Cat’s secret identity.<sup>20</sup> Robin Brown has ably demonstrated the value in replicating shell and shark-tooth tool technology in his attempts to re-create artifacts similar to those found at Key Marco.<sup>21</sup> Brown’s experimentation with woods such as cypress, basswood, gumbo-limbo, oak, hickory, and red mangrove offers valuable insight into the technology and skill required to create an artistic masterpiece such as the Key Marco Cat. Perhaps it is as simple as carving twenty-two replica Key Marco Cats out of the species listed here for direct comparison—although that is far easier said than done.

Of course, there is also the possibility that the wood used to carve the Cat is *not* amongst the twenty-two identified candidates, nor even indigenous to the region. For example, inkwood, a native species known for its density but not reported in any South Florida archaeological context, was found growing wild on Marco Island in 1966.<sup>22</sup> The prospect of imported wood, perhaps by long-distance trade or tribute, is tantalizingly posited at the Pineland site, where archaeologists have found possible evidence of spruce, a genus typically endemic to the Appalachian region. Perhaps Cushing’s mention of “spruce” at Key Marco was, intentionally or not, correct after all. The notion that a known “special” wood, imported over a great distance, would be allocated toward the production of what may have been an item of spiritual significance seems reasonable. It is also possible that driftwood was the source of some carvings, as suggested by a figurine carved from non-native brazilwood found in northeastern Florida.<sup>23</sup>

In recent years, the Key Marco Cat has been prematurely, and perhaps erroneously, identified as buttonwood. This identification has not been verified but has spread rapidly through the proliferation of online digital media. Given that Cushing confidently identified several specimens as distinctly buttonwood, it is noteworthy that he did not even make the *suggestion* of such an identification regarding the Cat.<sup>24</sup>

For now, the Cat’s wood type remains a mystery. Should a tiny piece of the object, perhaps from its base, ever be subjected to destructive analysis, a definitive identification might finally be made, also opening up the possibility for AMS radiocarbon dating, DNA sequencing, plant proteomics (the study of plant proteins), or strontium analysis, which could also potentially identify the wood’s region of origin.<sup>25</sup>