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Masonite is Discontinued

On March 1st, Masonite International announced it would permanently discontinue production of its popular range of hardboard products. The closure of its Danville, Virginia plant, employing 172 people, would be effective March 25th, 2004. The Danville plant had been making hardboard under the trade name Duron for 38 years and was Masonite's last remaining hardboard facility. No plans were being made to manufacture the product off-shore.

The company had been burdened with class-action lawsuits relating to the performance of a house-siding product it had marketed. But it also found it difficult to compete with foreign manufacturers bringing lower-quality, cheaper boards into the market. And too, the uses for hardboard have dwindled in the construction industry as other higher performance engineered-wood products have come along. Nick Pavlovitch, national sales manager, said that the largest remaining market for its Duron product was interior store fixtures and furniture. The company was purchased recently by the world's largest prefab door maker and will continue to market doors under the Masonite name.

This brings to a close a long-running American manufacturing success story. William H. Mason founded the Mason Fiber Company, later the Masonite Corporation, in 1926 around his patented process for making what he called Presdwood. Although there are precursor products appearing in the late 1800's, Mason's process was the first to yield what we all know as, well, masonite. The beauty of the product was in its simplicity. Waste sawdust was slurried with water and placed under high heat and pressure. The lignins already present in the wood acted as glue while the fibers were randomly reordered and the result was re-engineered wood. It was dense, dry, uniform, predictable and dimensionally stable.

Artists were among the first to recognize its usefulness and in fact Ralph Mayer used it and analyzed its properties since its introduction. Perhaps no type of artist found it more useful than egg-tempera artists. The tempera artist must work on gesso and gesso must be prepared on wood. But wood panels suffer many defects due to grain and other discontinuities, plus they are heavy and bulky and difficult to prepare. Masonite is wood without all the problems and is therefore a brilliant solution for the tempera artist.

Where does this news leave the egg-tempera artist? I was particularly concerned since I had recently developed a gessoed panel product for egg tempera painters, now being manufactured by the company True Gesso. Readers of this Newsletter may have seen the survey I made of the hardboards currently available to artists, published last Fall [1], 2003. In my analysis I identified only two products that fully made the grade, one of them being Masonite's *Untempered Duron*. I was worried that both US-made products might succumb to the same pressures.

I called the Louisiana-Pacific factory, the maker of the only other board which in my analysis is artist-grade. They assured me that they had no plans to discontinue their hardboard products. Indeed, they are now the "last man standing," to quote L-P's Tom Gruder, one of the plant managers. Now the oldest remaining US manufacturer of hardboard, they are already operating close to capacity to fill the void left by Masonite for the highest-grade types of hardboard. He warns that the price may fluctuate if supply gets tight, but otherwise sees business as usual.

The particular board of interest to artists is Louisiana-Pacific's *Standard Hardboard*, not to be confused with their *Tempered* boards. Depending on the manufacturer, a tempered board may be more reliable to work on than it was in the past but it is still a hardboard which has been coated liberally with linseed and/or tung oil. The cellulose fibers of hardboard can then be expected to suffer the same degradation as cellulosic linen, cotton or paper fibers coming in contact with an acidic drying oil. The tempering process may well yield a better construction product and a slicker surface for industrial painting purposes, but can only degrade the board from an artist's point of view.

So it was the *Standard Hardboard* product which concerned me since this is the board I specified for the egg tempera panels I developed. For reasons I go into in detail in the aforementioned article, it is important that artists avoid using the unbranded or foreign boards available in most hardware stores and lumberyards. Around the country it is typically a special-order item; it is not available in standard lumberyards and seems to have limited industrial uses. But Mr. Gruder assured me that this high-quality product would remain available.

Eric Thomson

[1] *Which Hardboard is Best?* , Society of Tempera Painters, 19th Edition Newsletter.

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