

What is Chatoyance?

By George Vondriska at Woodworkers Guild of America

Description

Like snowflakes, no two pieces of wood are exactly the same. That's one of the things that makes woodworking so much fun. Like Forrest Gump said (using a little artistic license), wood is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get. It's so cool to clean up a piece of wood, the right piece of wood, and see amazing grain start to pop out at you.



Chatoyancy

The characteristic we're specifically looking at here is chatoyancy. Now, there's no such thing as chatoyance wood. Chatoyance is a characteristic that shows up in some pieces, not in others. There's no specific species we can call chatoyance wood. That being said, it seems to show up with the most frequency in maple.

Cause

One cause of chatoyance is the tree being under stress as it grows, causing the grain to curl back on itself. This results in an effect that basically looks like waves within the wood. This is an amazing and beautiful 3D look that changes as you look at the wood from different angles.

A comment by Bob Wallace further explains it like this: A better explanation of chatoyance is that it is an OPTICAL property of the cell structure of the wood. Woods do not have to be quilted to show chatoyance, which is implied in the explanation provided in the video. There are different variations of cell structure that give 'highly figured' characteristics, but not all have the refractive and reflective properties that produce chatoyance. It is necessary to distinguish the concepts of structural differences in "figure" and the unique optical properties that give rise to chatoyance in wood.

How do I know how it'll look?

You can see chatoyancy in wood, to some extent, as soon as you start to clean up the surface. The smoother the wood gets, the more the chatoyancy will show up. But the real trick is to [use mineral spirits](#) to show the wood grain. This gives you a great idea of what the piece will look like under finish.

But wait, there's more

There are so many amazing aspects of wood. That's why we have an entire section that deals with nothing but [understanding wood](#). Spalting, expansion and contraction, bark inclusions—there are so many things that make each piece of wood unique.

See the video that accompanies this article here...

<https://www.wwgoa.com/video/chatoyance-wood-016077>