

A large, weathered wooden sculpture of a horse, standing on a stone base, surrounded by lush greenery and trees. The sculpture is made of light-colored, aged wood with a rough, textured surface. It depicts a horse in profile, facing left. The horse's mane is represented by a row of small, dark, pointed objects along its neck. The sculpture is set against a backdrop of dense green foliage and a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The overall scene is a natural, outdoor setting.

The Monumental Talent of
Bernard Langlais
A Maine modernist's endangered legacy

by Candace Karu
Photography Darren Setlow

The towering wooden horse looks down on a winding rural road guarding a small weathered farmhouse. Behind the house, in no discernable order or pattern, are dozens of monumental figures, representing both animals and humans, carved and assembled from massive timbers and planks. An assembly of bears shares a field with the twelve-foot-tall figure of a woman seated in the grass, a *plein air* homage to Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. Nearby, a huge hand emerges from a stand of bushes. In a swale surrounded by cattails, a dark-eyed Richard Nixon flashes his signature "V for victory" hand gesture.

Down every path and around every corner the wooden sculptures of Bernard Langlais dot the landscape. The newest of these is over thirty years old, and each one is beginning to show its age. Time and nature have taken their toll on these singular works. Paint is fading, wood planks are splitting, the beauty and clarity of the pieces are diminished with each passing day.

In the pantheon of Maine artists, Bernard Langlais (1921–1977) represents a unique link between classicism and modernism, painting and sculpture, abstraction and representation. His prodigious *oeuvre* includes hundreds of sculptures and thousands of works on paper and canvas. His career is all the more extraordinary given his unexpected death of congestive heart failure at the age of 55.

Bernard "Blackie" Langlais, the son of a carpenter, was raised in rural Old Town, surrounded by verdant forests and steeped in the culture of logging and woodworking. It was a childhood imbued with the spirit of the Maine woods. With no formal art training, he left Maine after high school to pursue a career in commercial art. Later, Langlais enlisted in the navy during World War II and served for six years, mostly in Hawaii, where he painted images of ships and planes before graduating to officers' portraits.

After the war, Langlais spent several years honing his artistic skills at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the Brooklyn Museum School, and at the Académie de la Grand Chaumière in Paris. His education culminated with a Fulbright scholarship to study the work of Edvard Munch in Oslo. It was in Norway that Langlais married Skowhegan-born Helen Friend, who became his partner, his confidant, and his muse.

Returning from Norway in 1956, the couple moved to a small loft on West 28th Street in Manhattan. They also bought a small cottage in Cushing, where they spent each summer. His practical Maine upbringing led Langlais to repair the walls in the two homes with



Langlais's *Wooden Horse*, a majestic thirteen feet tall (opposite), which was created in 1966, guards the entrance to the Langlais farm. Each passing season brings this irreplaceable work of art closer to ruin. Along with Helen Langlais, gallery owner and Langlais representative Andres Verzosa is actively seeking funding to repair and restore the monumental sculptures that dot the property.

Wooden reliefs from the late sixties and early seventies (above) cover the walls of the three barns and several outbuildings. Langlais's fascination with the animal kingdom is manifest at every turn.



Five Bears, 1976–1977, 9' 7"; *Hand*, 1975–1976, 15' 8"; and an homage to Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World*, called *Local Girl*, 1968, 9' (above), are all represented in an open field near the Langlais's farmhouse, along with many others.

The extent of the deterioration varies from sculpture to sculpture. This detail of a much larger sculpture called *Birds*, 1970, 14' 6" (opposite), has sustained major damage, and without intervention, it will be lost forever in a few short years.

"The imprint of Maine upon the work of Bernard Langlais is as clear as tracks in fresh snow. Few artists nurtured by this state express more clearly its earthy heritage. Working in the prime material of this timbered land, Langlais creates with wit and power his personal images of the creatures of the earth. Under his hand, the rough scraps of forest and sawmill, of abandoned structures and implements, are brought to new and unexpected life, creating a robust art of regional flavor."

(The inscription on the Maine State Award presented to Bernard Langlais in 1971 from the Maine Arts Commission.)

scraps of available wood, which he found in abundance in the rural Maine woods and a neighborhood lumberyard in New York. It was through working on these projects that Langlais realized how immediate and satisfying working with wood could be. He began creating abstract reliefs and intarsia, combining colors and textures using carved, painted, burned, and layered wood.

The process ignited the artist's imagination, transforming the way he expressed his vision. In an interview in the *Boston Globe*, Langlais described the allure of the medium. "I love to work with wood. I'd never work with any other medium again. Paint is too sophisticated, too removed. When I work with it the distance between my hand and the canvas is too great. The balance is wrong. Painting is ninety percent intellectual and ten percent physical. Using

wood is closer to even. This satisfies me, this contact." It was a process that also satisfied critics and collectors, and Langlais was soon making a name for himself in the New York art scene.

The artist's success allowed the couple to purchase a modest farmhouse on eighty untamed acres near the ocean in Cushing. In 1966, they left New York to live in Maine year-round. The move marked a period of staggering productivity for Langlais and a shift away from the abstract toward the figurative. The influence of Maine—both in his personal history and in his surroundings—permeates Langlais's work of this period. The two-dimensional abstract work of his years in New York evolved into larger and more monumental three-dimensional figures that began to appear in the fields and forests surrounding the farmhouse.

His personal menagerie—which at various times included goats,



geese, sheep, cats, dogs, and ponies—inspired some of Langlais’s work, but he also made subjects of wilder, more exotic creatures. Elephants and alligators, bears and bison, gesticulating politicians and unabashed nudes were also translated into sculpture. His work could be playful or fantastical, satirical or whimsical, but it was always informed by his broad education, superb craftsmanship, and formidable talent.

In the years since Langlais’s death, Helen Langlais has worked to preserve their home and her husband’s legacy. Over the intervening three decades, however, time and the elements have taken their toll on the work, especially the monumental sculptures, which have been assaulted by Maine’s harsh winters. Andres Verzosa, owner of Portland’s Aucocisco Gallery, has made it his personal mission to

preserve this extraordinary body of work. Many of the large outdoor pieces are deteriorating and in desperate need of repair. Some have already been irrevocably damaged, falling prey to the incursion of moisture, air, and insects. A few have collapsed and are decomposing where they have fallen. “It is an ongoing and expensive battle,” says Verzosa. “But it is a battle to save an irreplaceable Maine treasure, and so it must be done.”

The future of Blackie Langlais’s singular body of work remains uncertain. But Verzosa, building on the efforts of Helen Langlais, has committed to taking on the challenge.

“Langlais’s work is an important part of Maine’s artistic heritage,” he says, “and deserves to be an equally important part of its future.”

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In his light-filled studio a photograph of Bernard Langlais, taken shortly before his death in 1977, rests against the sculpture of a wolf, an example of the work the artist was doing at the end of his life.

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