

With a wild look and an outgoing manner, Old Town native Bernard "Blackie" Langlais cut quite a figure on the Maine art scene back in the sixties and seventies. So productive was this irrepressible sculptor that some of his best works, fashioned with wit and whimsy from remnant wood, have still never been offered on the market.



Remembering Blackie

Almost twenty-five years after the death of one of Maine's most colorful and most human artists, his work is still as popular as ever. By Edgar Allen Beem.

WHEN sculptor Bernard "Blackie" Langlais died in 1977 at the age of fifty-six, he was at the height of his creative powers and his local popularity. As many as 200 people a day would stop by the Langlais place on the River Road in Cushing to see what Blackie had been up to. Tourists, sight-seers, and serious art lovers would wander up the lawn past the big wooden horse, around a colossal timber football game in progress in front of the ramshackle house and barn, down to the pond where wooden nudes with newel-post breasts skinny-dipped happily, and out back where carved and carpentered horses, elephants, bears, birds, lions, and dogs shared the overgrown fields with real ducks and geese, a Billy goat and an obstreperous ram, a donkey and a pinto pony.

Amid this peaceable kingdom, the benign trespassers would also see a larger-than-life Richard Nixon in full V-for-Victory wave, Andrew Wyeth's Christina crawling woodenly through the grass, and a towering basketball player rebounding the clouds. Occasionally, the uninvited visitors would also come across Blackie himself, an outlaw figure of a man dressed in jeans, leather vest, and bandanna, covered in sawdust and wood chips, wild mane of gray hair flying.

"I don't mind it that much," Langlais told an interviewer from the Archives of American Art in 1973 when asked about all the uninvited guests, "but it does get to be a nuisance sometimes."

Blackie Langlais was a gregarious fellow who'd talk art, sports, or politics with anyone. It was primarily his wife, Helen,

who was inconvenienced by the constant stream of visitors. If she went out for groceries, there was a good chance she wouldn't be able to get back into her own driveway. When Blackie and Helen went out, people would recognize him and follow them into restaurants. Blackie would then invite them to sit down and have a drink. For while Bernard Langlais was never as famous as his Cushing neighbor Andrew Wyeth, he was far more approachable.

After Blackie's premature death from heart failure, Helen Langlais was left alone to cope with his legacy. For several years, until word got around that Blackie's art could only be seen now by appointment, she was forced to stay close to home in order to keep people from wandering all over her property. The IRS socked her with a huge inheritance tax bill and threatened to take her home. Art dealers proved difficult to deal with. Then there was the art itself.

Blackie Langlais' greatest legacy was the wonderful wooden world he created, but even that began to disintegrate after his death. In the last twenty-four years, Helen has spent untold hours and thousands upon thousands of dollars in a constant battle with the forces of ice, snow, wind, rain, frost, insects, dry rot, and gravity. Of the more than 100 outdoor pieces Blackie left behind, perhaps half are still standing. The rest have collapsed, rotted, or been taken in. But Helen Langlais isn't complaining. Caring for her husband's artwork keeps him close.

"Blackie was a good man and a good husband," she says. "He has kept my life interesting."



ESTATE OF BERNARD LANGLAIS



THE NEW OFARRELL GALLERY, BRUNSWICK

Bernard Langlais was not your average Maine chainsaw artist. Though wood was a natural medium of expression for a Maine native, Langlais began his career as a painter. He had an extensive art education in the U.S. and abroad and an impressive exhibition record in New York City. Indeed, the first time Helen met Blackie was in the city over the Christmas holidays in 1952.

Helen, a Skowhegan native, was in New York visiting her friend (and now Cushing neighbor) painter Nancy Wiseman. The two young women stopped by an old warehouse building at 212 West 28th Street where three promising young painters had their studios. Charles DuBack, who now lives and works in Tenants Harbor, was on the first floor. Alex Katz, now a Lincolnville summer resident, was on the second. And Blackie Langlais was on the third. After visiting Charles DuBack's studio, the two women, both in high heels, followed DuBack out his window and up a fire escape to visit Langlais' studio. When they stepped through Langlais' window they found Blackie swaddled head to foot against the cold, only his eyes and fingers uncovered so he could paint. As it happened, this was not the first time Blackie Langlais had laid eyes appreciatively on Helen Friend.

BERNARD Langlais was born in 1921 in Old Town. His father, Maurice Langlais, was an industrious carpenter who became a very successful local landlord. His mother, Mary Jane Pelletier Langlais, gave birth to ten children. Blackie, the oldest, was an indifferent student, but he loved to draw. Fortunately, his Aunt Isabelle, who had moved to Washington, D.C., to work as a nurse, doted on young Blackie and encouraged his artistic interests by sending him books and art supplies. When he graduated from high school, Langlais promptly moved to Washington, D.C., where he studied first at a small commercial art school and then at the Corcoran School of Art.

When World War II broke out, Langlais joined the navy where he found himself painting the insides of airplane fuel tanks. On his own initiative, however, Langlais painted a portrait of his base commander who promptly set the budding artist up with his own studio.

After being discharged from the navy in 1948, Langlais returned to study at the Corcoran School where he won a schol-

arship to spend the summer of 1949 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

"That exposure," he said of his exposure to serious working artists at Skowhegan, "just convinced me that fine art was really my field." Langlais studied at Skowhegan the following two summers as well, and that was where he first saw Helen.

Helen Friend was a Showhegan girl whose father, Francis H. Friend, was a prominent forest-products broker, president of the Showhegan Fair, and president of the Maine Senate. Art student Langlais spotted Helen one day when she was working in the Lakewood Theatre box office and made discreet inquiries. That might have been the beginning of a beautiful romance except for a case of mistaken identity.

It seems Helen Friend was a dead-ringer for the married daughter of the owner of Lakewood Theatre. So when Blackie asked who the dark-haired girl

A prolific artist, Langlais believed in generating quantity in pursuit of quality. "The more you do," he said, "the freer you can be."

with the ponytail was, he was informed that she was spoken for. It was not until they met in New York a few years later that the boy from Old Town and the girl from Skowhegan fell in love.

In New York, Langlais attended the Brooklyn Museum Art School where he studied with the German expressionist painter Max Beckmann. Never an intellectual or even much of a reader, Langlais preferred what he called "a kick-in-the-pants kind of teacher" and he found it in Beckmann. Beckmann, who spoke no English, communicated by nods, grunts, and, if he really didn't care for what a student had done, by painting right over the offending work.

In 1953 Langlais went abroad to study at the *Academie de la Grande Chaumiere* in Paris. There he came under the influence of the purist abstraction popular at the time. Then, in 1954-1955, he won a Fulbright Fellowship and chose to spend his Fulbright year in Oslo,

Norway, because he had fallen under the spell of the Norwegian master Edvard Munch. Helen joined Blackie in Oslo and the two were married in the U.S. Embassy there on January 15, 1955.

In 1956, having returned to the U.S., the Langlaises decided to spend the summer back in their native Maine. Blackie wanted to be near Skowhegan, but Helen emphatically did not. Her new husband, after all, had three strikes against him. He was an impoverished artist, a Catholic, and, worst of all, a Democrat. Better to keep her family at a distance initially.



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Helen had spent part of every childhood summer visiting her grandparents in Thomaston, so it was decided to look for a cottage along the coast. What they found was a charming little place on the bank of the St. George River. It was while renovating the cottage on the St. George that Blackie Langlais had what he called "an awakening."

BERNARD Langlais was a painter until he returned to Maine. His figurative and landscape paintings of the 1940s and 1950s (a selection of which

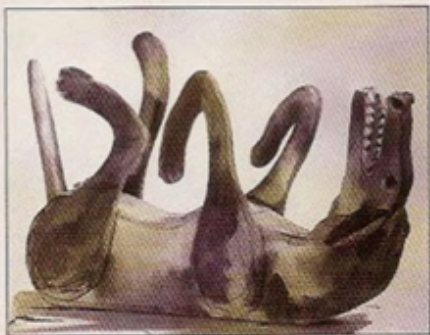
were exhibited at the New O'Farrell Gallery in Brunswick last summer) show the unmistakable influence of Beckmann and Munch in the expressionistic use of dramatic black outlines and bold, bright colors. In Cushing, however, Langlais discovered the medium that would become his great passion — wood.

After fixing up the little riverbank cottage, Blackie found he had scrap wood left over and, rather than waste it, he started arranging it, almost artlessly, like puzzle pieces to add interest to a section of wall.

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ESTATE OF BERNARD LANGLAIS



LEIGHTON GALLERY, BLUE HILL

A gifted woodworker who could spot a latent hippopotamus or laughing dog in a piece of scrap wood, Langlais actually began his career as a painter and became a noteworthy abstract expressionist. His sculptures typically range in size from six inches or so up to life size, though the artist's best-known work is probably his sixty-five-foot Skowhegan Indian (above).

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Intrigued, he did the same with a door. Back in New York City, his studio was upstairs over a lumberyard, so he found a ready supply of odds and ends to experiment with. All of a sudden Blackie Langlais was "painting" with wood.

In his review of Langlais' 1959 show at the Area Gallery artists' co-op in New York City, critic Hilton Kramer, a summer resident of Waldoboro, described Langlais' new work as "paintings made by staining various sized pieces of wood." These abstract wall reliefs with natural wood finishes put Bernard Langlais on the art world map.

In 1961 Langlais had a highly successful show at the prestigious Leo Castelli Gallery. In 1962 *Art in America* featured him in its "New Talent USA" issue along with artists such as Al Held, Claes Oldenburg, Mark DiSuvero, and Andy Warhol. Suddenly, Blackie Langlais was

"Blackie really blossomed in the short eleven years he lived here. He was much happier in Maine than in New York."

hot. He was an A List artist in the art capital of the world, invited to swank dinner parties and openings at the Guggenheim, the Modern, and the Whitney.

Blackie figured he had arrived. Helen, however, counseled her husband to enjoy it while it lasted. The art world is nothing if not fickle, and fame is fleeting. Blackie's big-time celebrity lasted perhaps five years.

For one thing, Langlais' enthusiasm for showing his work yearly rather than every two years — as art world orthodoxy still dictates — quickly earned Blackie a reputation as "a gallery-hopper." In 1962 he jumped to the Allan Stone Gallery. In 1964 he made the mistake of joining the ill-fated Grippi and Waddell Gallery, which ended up dumping all of its artists and then fading into obscurity.

Then, too, Langlais created career problems for himself by following his own passion from pure abstraction back into figuration.

"It isn't every day of the week that someone switches from abstractions suitable for the Castelli Gallery — to flat-out representation," wrote *Arts* reviewer Vivien Raynor in 1964. Raynor wrote of

Art galleries typically take 40 to 50 percent commissions. To make matters worse, one art dealer sold several Langlais pieces and did not report the sales or pay the Langlais estate until Helen retained an attorney.

Since settling her tax debts, Helen Langlais' biggest challenge has been maintaining her husband's oeuvre. Several pieces were badly damaged when a shed roof fell in on them. The wooden quarterback who once stood beside the house collapsed. His arm, still clutching the wooden football, is stored in a barn. A group of huge wooden bears that developed dry rot was cut apart, hollowed out, and rejoined, but Helen sometimes feels the preservation effort is a losing battle.

"I don't know how many thousands of dollars I've spent on the outdoor sculpture, but it hasn't worked," she says.

In recent years, health problems have kept Helen from actively working on her late husband's behalf. For a decade or more, Langlais has not had proper gallery representation in Maine or Manhattan, nor has he been accorded the major retrospective due one of Maine's most important and popular native artists. The Portland Museum of Art plans to rectify that oversight with a big Blackie Langlais show during the spring of 2002.

"This is something we've always wanted to do," says Portland Museum of Art curator Aprile Gallant. "There hasn't been a major retrospective since he died and it's past time. Langlais is one of the artists of note who haven't been properly appreciated."

As tempting as it is to see Blackie Langlais in retrospect as a wild bohemian, he was, in fact, a serious working artist who spoke with modesty and Maine in his voice. The genius of his art is its humanity. He left behind a spirit of hard work and good humor that is unmatched by any other Maine artist.

"The way life is set up" Blackie once said, "you forget all the unpleasant things. It all becomes part of the romance." □

A selection of Blackie Langlais artworks can be seen in Maine this summer at the New O'Farrell Gallery (207-729-8228) on Maine Street in Brunswick from July 23 to August 19. The Leighton Gallery (207-374-5001) in Blue Hill also has some Langlais pieces on display. The Portland Museum of Art's upcoming Langlais retrospective is currently scheduled to open April 11 and run through June 9, 2002.