

Colby College Museum of Art

# BERNARD LANGLAIS



## Teacher Guide Grades 6-8



**Free and Open to the Public**  
Tuesday – Saturday 10 am – 5 pm  
Sunday 12-5 pm  
Closed Mondays  
Open Thursdays until 9 pm during the academic year

Bernard Langlais, *Auk* (1976-1977). Painted wood. Gift of Ms. Bernard Langlais.

# Bernard Langlais

Bernard Langlais (1921-1977) was an artist from Maine. He experimented with different media such as printmaking, painting, and sculpture while studying in Washington D.C., France, and Norway. He also lived in New York City for a large part of his life, where the thriving art scene influenced his artistic ideas and styles. In the Museum you can view his paintings, which are his earliest works, made before he began making sculptures. He painted in many different styles and once said, "I might work the Cubist way or abstract expressionist way, or a figurative way...then switch to something else." Eventually, he changed media from painting and began to work with wood, which became the medium he used for the remainder of his career. He initially made abstract wood sculptures by assembling different wood blocks onto a background to form a kind of wooden relief or mosaic. However, his abstract sculptures evolved into the wood sculptures of animals that he became so well known for.

## Vocabulary

- **Abstract:** Abstract art is a type of art that does not show a person, place, or thing in the real world, but is simply made up of colors, lines, and shapes.
- **Expressionist painting:** Expressionist paintings express emotion instead of depicting the real world.
- **Still life paintings:** A still life depicts an arrangement of everyday objects, such as dishes, fruit, and flowers.
- **Relief:** A relief is a type of artwork consisting of shapes carved on a surface that stand out from the background.
- **Assemblage:** Assemblage is a type of artwork that is made by assembling things. This medium brings together objects and materials such as wood, sawdust, rocks, paper, fabric, and even trash!
- **Medium:** The substance that is used to make a piece of art such as charcoal drawing, oil painting, marble sculpture, or photography.

## Some Relevant Pieces from the Colby College Museum of Art

- *Winter in Oslo* (1954-55), oil on canvas.
- *The Town (The White City)* (1956-57), oil on canvas.
- *Untitled (Still Life, Landscape)* (early 1950s), oil on Masonite.
- *Made in USA* (1958), stained wood.
- *Behind the Barn Door* (1960), raw wood.
- *Monitor or the Merrimack (Gull on Pile)* (1961), raw and painted wood, screws.
- *Eagle* (ca. 1964), wood and painted wood.

## Langlais's Paintings

Although he was later known for his sculptures, Bernard Langlais began as a painter. Artistically inclined from a young age, he first worked officially as an artist in the United States Naval Air Transport Service, where he painted everything from official portrait commissions to “painting signs, or painting scenes of battles.” He later spent an entire year in 1954 studying the expressionist paintings of Edvard Munch on a Fulbright scholarship. As a result of his eclectic sources of learning, Langlais had quite the variety in style throughout his painting career. He said himself, “I might work the Cubist way or abstract expressionist way, or a figurative way...then switch to something else.” His subject matter was often a result of his environment: landscapes, geometric cityscapes, and still life arrangements, but also some abstract compositions as well. Eventually his stylistic restlessness affected the medium itself, and he switched from painting to wood sculpture. After discovering his passion for wood, he stated, “Paint is too sophisticated, too removed.”

- What is a medium? Is paint a traditional medium?
- What does *abstract* mean? Are any of these paintings abstract?
- Why would an artist choose painting over another medium?

## Langlais's Wood Paintings

After finishing work on his summer cottage in Cushing, Maine around 1958, Langlais had a pile of scrap wood left over. "I kept wondering what I could use all of those scraps for," he said. "We had this problem wall in the cottage that was kind of barren looking and I tried experimenting on it with a collage, using the scraps." This was the beginning of Langlais's long career in sculpture. In New York City, he lived above a lumber store where he acquired odd scraps and slivers of wood to work on similar projects thereafter. Langlais termed this distinctive medium "painting with wood," and can also be referred to as wood "mosaics" or "reliefs." He particularly liked the closeness to his materials that came with physically handling the wood in order to sculpt and compose his wooden works. In this era, Langlais was linked with other well-known artists, showing his abstract pieces in 1960 alongside artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauchenberg, Claes Oldenburg, John Chamberlain, Robert Indiana, and Louise Nevelson (artists whose work we also have in the Colby College Museum of Art collection). However, Langlais would later reflect, "Once you are in a big time gallery, then the pressure to succeed and to make this so-called splash are unbelievable." Although his "wood paintings" may have garnered him the most critical acclaim in the New York art scene, Langlais soon moved on to his larger-scale sculptures for which he is best known in Maine.

- Do you know what a mosaic is? Do you know what a collage is? How might these media relate?
- How are Langlais's paintings similar to his wood paintings?
- How are they different?
- Pick an abstract work of art. What colors, shapes, and lines do you see? Can you see any figures or objects that Langlais might have meant to suggest?
- What is the title? Does the title change how you see the sculpture?
- How are Langlais's wood paintings similar to his actual paintings? How are they different?



## Langlais's Wood Animals

By 1963, Langlais used wood in more prescribed and less spontaneous ways. He transformed found pieces through more **explicit** carving and painting, and crossed a highly contested line during that time: away from abstraction and spontaneity, and toward figuration. At first, his wood reliefs showed an interest in the wild and domestic animals of rural, coastal Maine. While initially his subjects were shore birds, raptors, horses, cows, and bulls, he eventually included creatures from the African jungle, the western plains, and even fantasy animals. Langlais said of his subjects, "Animals survive on freedom. [They] live and let live within the whole balance of nature." In addition to the inspiration provided by his animal neighbors, Langlais also enjoyed unhindered access to wood in Maine: lumberyards, logging mills, boatyards, an old foundry in Waterville full of wood scraps and pattern molds.

Meanwhile, his switch to figuration was met with criticism from his acquaintances in New York. Now disenchanted with abstraction, Langlais became more concerned with "trying to be as simple, even childlike as possible" in his work, and with being suggestive or symbolic with his human and animal forms rather than realistic. Exhausted from the stifling social and psychological atmosphere in New York, Langlais bought a house in Maine. The estate made it possible for him to create the giant outdoor sculptures that one can see on his property, people and animals that are still standing today.

- What is a symbol? What are some symbols you see in everyday life?
- What does the eagle symbolize?
- Langlais's favorite animal was the lion. What could lions symbolize?

### **Creative Writing Activity**

Ask students to take out their notebooks. Have them choose one of Langlais's paintings in order to write creatively about walking inside the art. Ask:

What sounds do you hear? Where are your feet stepping? Where do you go? Do your hands reach out to touch anything? What can you see? What colors? Any smells? Do you say anything out loud? How does your voice sound? Is anyone else there? How do you feel?





*Winter in Oslo* (1954-55), oil on canvas.

Please note that this work of art may not be on display in the museum.



***The Town (The White City) (1956-57), oil on canvas.***

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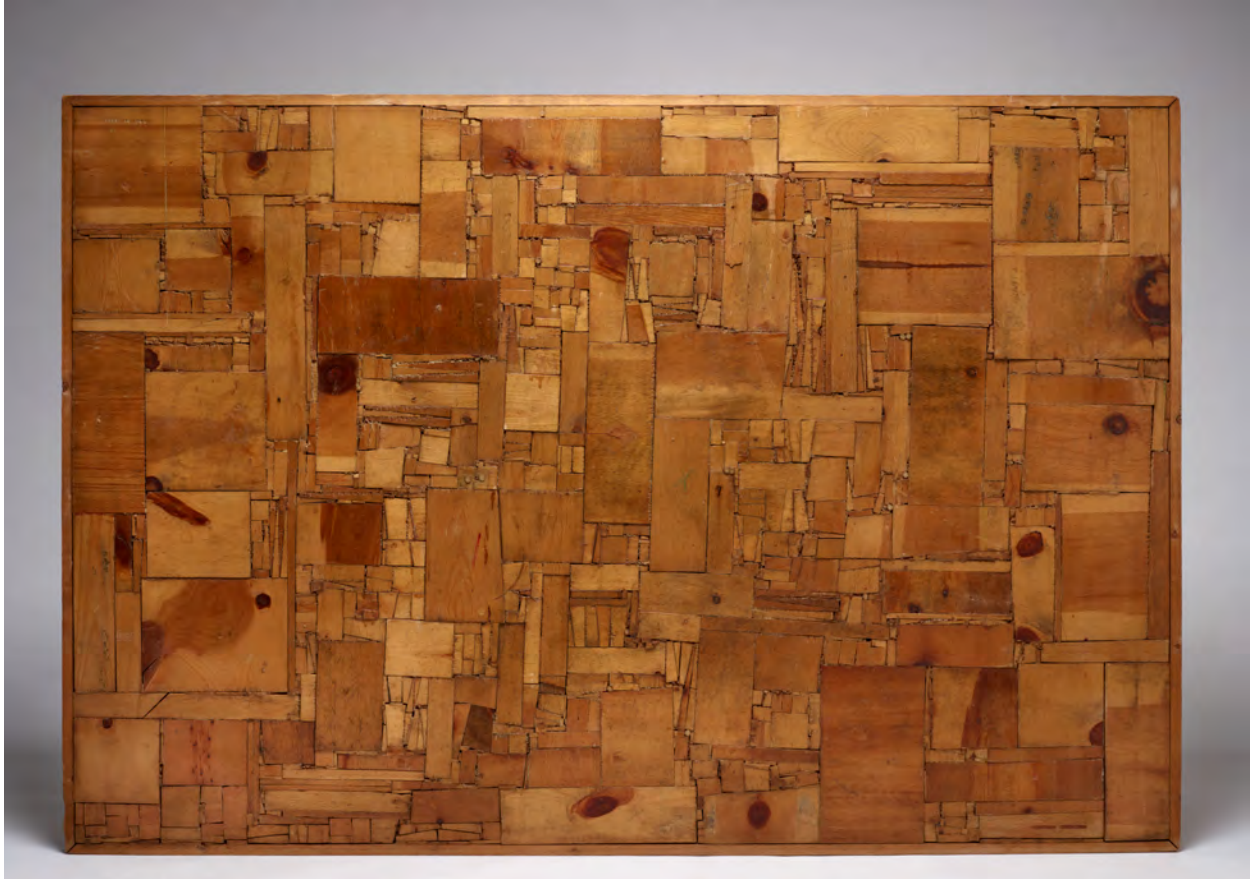




*Untitled (Still Life, Landscape)* (early 1950s), oil on Masonite.

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***Behind the Barn Door (1960), raw wood.***

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*Monitor or the Merrimack (Gull on Pile)* (1961), raw and painted wood, screws.

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***Eagle* (ca. 1964), wood and painted wood.**

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