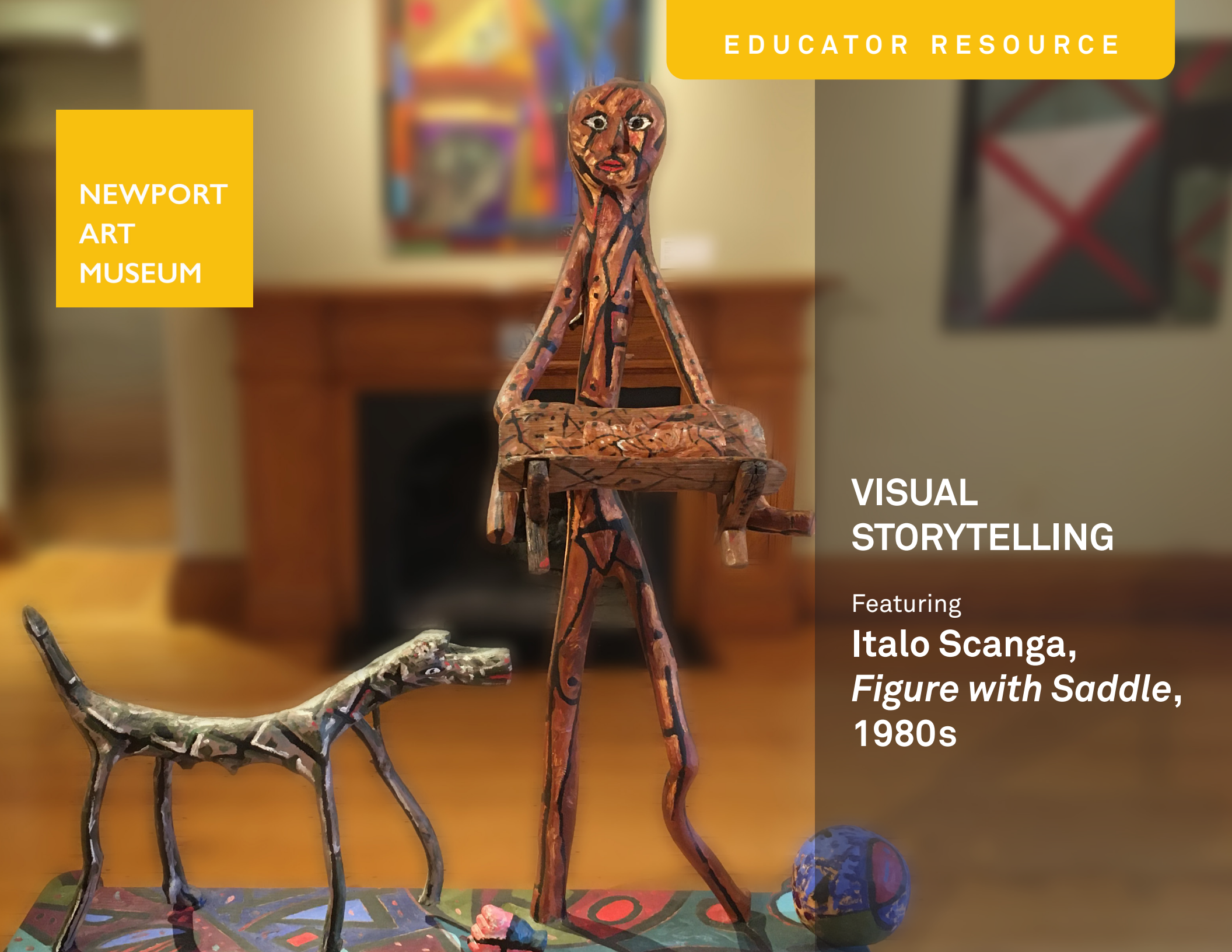


NEWPORT
ART
MUSEUM

VISUAL
STORYTELLING

Featuring
Italo Scanga,
Figure with Saddle,
1980s





Italo Scanga, *Figure with Saddle*, 1980s

Wood and paint
Gift of the Italo Scanga Foundation
2013.004.001

About the Artist

Italo Scanga (1932 - 2001), was an Italian-born American artist, known for his sculptures, prints, and paintings. Born in the Italian region of Calabria, Scanga's artistic practice was greatly influenced by the religious rituals, spirituality, and mysticism deeply ingrained in the culture of Southern Italy. As a young teenager, Scanga worked in the studio of a cabinet maker and with an Italian sculptor who carved statues of saints, both experiences would influence his later artwork.

In 1947, after World War II, 14 year old Scanga and his family immigrated to the United States. Living in Detroit, he worked on the General Motors assembly line and served in the United States Army before attending Michigan State University to study sculpture. Scanga experimented with a variety of media throughout his career, including printmaking, painting, ceramics and glass, and often combined multiple artistic styles in his pieces.



Scanga's work often centered around familiar, domestic spaces, with imagery of food and wine, tools, vessels, plants, and objects of worship. He was heavily influenced by the **Cubist** movement of the early 1900's and **folk art**. He also used a wide range of unusual materials including **found objects** such as branches and seashells, and items scavenged from flea markets and thrift shops. Through repurposing and transforming used recognizable objects into free-standing sculptural **assemblages**, his artwork tells stories rich with real and imagined histories.

He taught at the University of Wisconsin, Rhode Island School of Design, Penn State, the Tyler School of Art, and ultimately the University of California in San Diego. He had one-person shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, and the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City. His work is in the collection of many museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2001, Scanga died in his Pacific Beach studio in California of heart failure. He was 69 years old.

Description of Artwork

Figure with Saddle is a sculpture constructed entirely of wood that depicts several objects: a figure, a 4-legged animal, a fist, and a ball, all placed on a bench-like construction. The sculpture is roughly 5' tall. All of the objects in the sculpture are painted with a variety of **expressive** and **abstract** patterns, circles, thick lines and splatter marks in bright colors and black.

The figure is a lanky, whimsical, creature that appears to have both human and nonhuman features. It has a circular head with recognizable facial features - bright white eyes with stark black pupils, a nose, and bright red lips. The body has a long torso with spindly peg-like arms and legs. But it has **unrealistic** elements too, for example the figure is lacking hands and feet. In the figure's arms is a V-shaped wooden tray that holds a carved wooden head. The head has eyes, a nose, mouth, jutting chin, and neck.

Around the figure are placed other objects including a round ball shape, a hand curled into a fist, and an animal that appears to be gazing at the figure. The animal has four legs, a tail, elongated head with ears, bright black and white eyes, and red lips. It most resembles an animal in the dog family.

About the Artwork

Figure with Saddle is one of a series of sculptures that blends Scanga's unusual imagery with a distinctly folk art style, and Cubist-inspired patterning. Folk Art influences can be seen in his choice of humble, easy to source materials of found sticks, carved wood and paint. The figures and bench are covered with energetic, bold, expressively painted patterns. These patterns recall the faceted, fragmented and abstracted patterning that Cubist artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque used to represent three-dimensional forms from multiple angles together on a flat canvas.

Scanga's curious collection of objects seems to be evidence of an event or story taking place, though the details remain a mystery. The figure is holding a V-shaped "saddle" with a head resting in it. Perhaps the figure is transporting the head somewhere, or perhaps it is symbolic of a spiritual offering of some kind. The animal appears to resemble a dog. His tail in the air, his front paw raised as if trotting, and his gaze focused on the figure are all clues that could indicate that they share a friendly relationship. The fist and ball are particularly mysterious pieces of Scanga's puzzle. Given that the figure does not have hands or feet, the fist with its thumb driving into the bench raises more questions than answers. And the orb? Is it a ball? A globe?

Scanga was fascinated by stories of all kinds and from all over the world - from Greek mythology, to stories of Catholic saints, symbolic African sculptures, spiritual stories and tales of mysticism. This assemblage seems to tell a story that for us is cryptic. Whether it's a fable, morality tale, or myth, Scanga has left it up to each viewer to write the story.









Questions for Viewing

Look closely at the sculpture from all sides. Describe what you see in detail - shapes, colors, textures.

What kind of animal do you think it is, and why?

What is the relationship between the figure and the animal? Are they friends or strangers?

What is the figure carrying? Look at how the figure is holding it - how does the figure feel about what it's carrying? Is the figure cradling it, protecting it, or burdened by it?

Describe the figure's facial expression. What type of mood or emotion does the face communicate?

Where do you picture the figure - in a desert? Beach? Forest? Farm? City? Sidewalk? Mountain? Inside a building? Some other place? What makes you think that?

Is the figure standing or walking? If it's walking, where is it going? Is it bringing the object it's holding to someone, or taking it away?

Activities

Choose your own adventure!

Make a picture book of the figure, animal and objects in Scanga's sculpture. You decide what they do next, where they go, and who or what they see.

Collaborative Ekphrastic Poetry Writing

Ask students to respond to sensory (taste, touch, smell, sound, sight) questions about Figure with Saddle with descriptive adjectives and phrases. Write their words and phrases down and piece them into an evocative free form poem together.


Sample questions:

What does it smell like here? Describe the weather, what is the temperature? Is the figure hungry, thirsty, tired, energized, excited...? Where is the figure going and who is going with it? What does the figure see up ahead? What sounds does it hear?

Found Objects Assemblage Artmaking

Using a collection of found objects, construct and decorate your own figure or animal. Present your figure to the class, and share its story.

Suggested materials: pipe cleaners, sticks and masking tape, or model magic clay can be used to create the body. To that, add rubber bands, paper clips, beads, paint, markers, etc. Poke the "feet" of the figure into a clay or styrofoam base.



Paul Cézanne, *Gardanne*, 1885-86, Oil on Canvas, 31.5x25.24 in.,
The Met Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Franz H. Hirschland, 1957

Folk arts and folklore are rooted in and reflective of the cultural life and cultural heritage of a community. Often folk objects are handmade and tell a story of the people and place where they were made, such as quilts or decorative objects.

Art in Context

Cubism was an avant-garde art movement pioneered by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque between 1907 and 1914 that revolutionized European painting and sculpture. It was inspired by a series of paintings by painter Paul Cezanne on exhibit in Paris in 1904-1906. Cubist painters rejected the notion that art should copy nature precisely. They challenged conventional forms of representation, such as perspective, modeling and foreshortening. Liberating themselves from these formal rules allowed them to experiment with how to depict a three dimensional subject on a flat surface. Cubist artists began to paint their subjects in new ways, trying to depict three-dimensions on a flat canvas by analyzing the objects, breaking them up into many different shapes and facets, and reassembling them in an abstract form by painting all of the different angles on the canvas together.



Fine Art Vocabulary

FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURE:

a found object is a natural or man-made object, or fragment of an object, that is found (or sometimes bought) by an artist and kept because of some intrinsic interest the artist sees in it.

ASSEMBLAGE:

art produced by the assembling of disparate elements, often scavenged or bought by the artist. The practice dates back to Picasso's Cubist constructions made from 1912 onwards.

EXPRESSIONISM:

a style of painting, music, or drama in which the artist or writer seeks to express emotional experience rather than impressions of the external world. Expressionists characteristically reject traditional ideas of beauty or harmony and use distortion, exaggeration, and other non-naturalistic devices in order to emphasize and express the inner world of emotion.

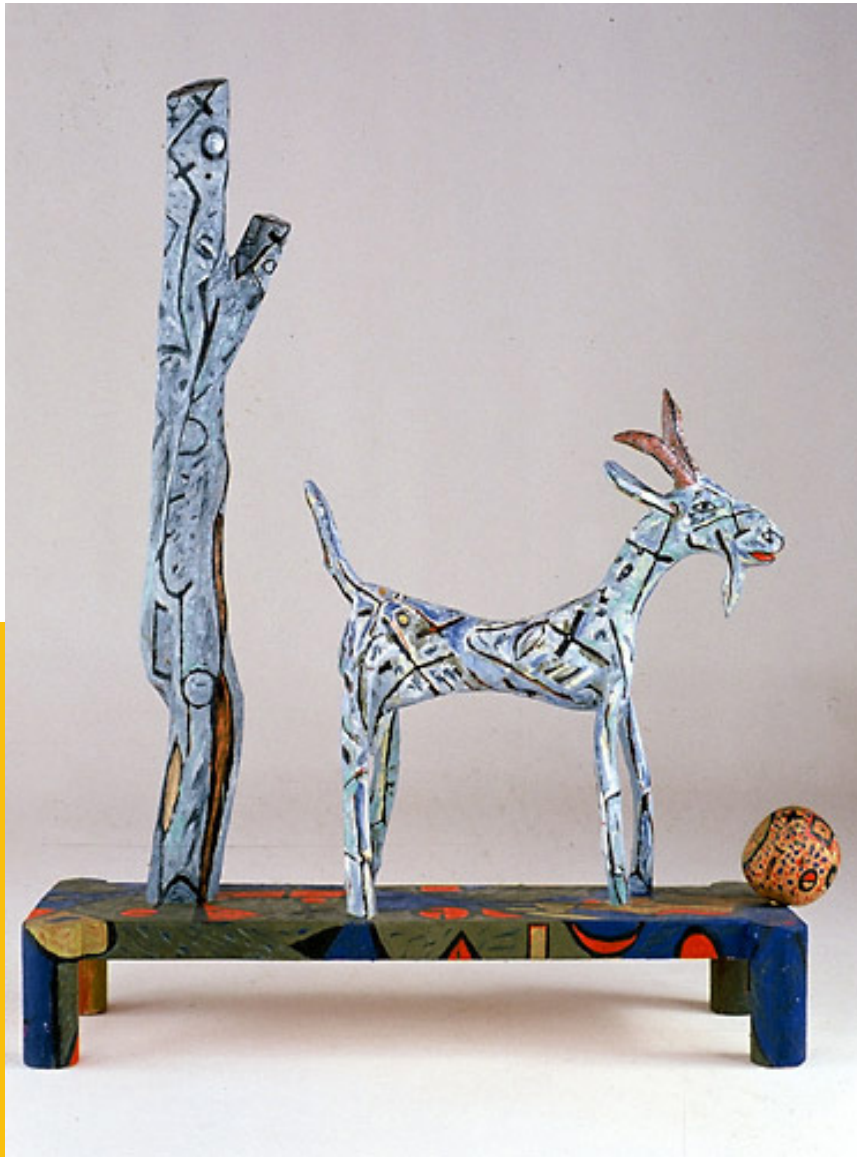
ABSTRACT ART:

a term which can generally be applied to any non-representational art (most decorative art, for example), but which is more specifically used, from the early 20th century onwards, to describe painting and sculpture which are deliberately non-representational...and not necessarily as a mirror of reality.

SYMBOLISM:

the use (or perceived use) of symbols to represent ideas or qualities. Symbolic meaning is often contrasted with literal meaning.

Other Works by Italo Scanga



The Animal Surprise,
1983 Oil on wood 87 x 75 x 26"

Montecassino: Betrayal,
1983 Oil on wood 143 x 55 x 32"



Additional Resources

IMAGE: Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766>

Credits

IMAGE: Scanga in his studio: <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2011/apr/06/remembering-artist-italo-scanga/>

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY: <https://www.italoscanga.org/biography.html>

ABOUT THE ARTIST: <https://tamarind.unm.edu/artist/italo-scanga/>

ABOUT THE ARTIST: <https://visarts.ucsd.edu/people/in-memoriam/italo-scanga.html>

OBITUARY: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-jul-31-me-28816-story.html>

VOCABULARY: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/>

IMAGE: *The Animal Surprise*: <https://www.italoscanga.org/sculpture.html#lbxFigures|1>

IMAGE: *Montecassino: Betrayal*: <https://www.italoscanga.org/sculpture.html#lbxFigures|2>