

# Bernard Langlais: *Live and Let Live ON*

October 15, 2021–May 1, 2022

During Bernard Langlais's lifetime, his ninety-acre farm in coastal Maine comprised dozens of monumental wood sculptures, a spirited cadre of livestock, an orchard, ponds, barns, and a small farmhouse. After the artist's untimely death in 1977, the harsh climate of the locale took its toll, often bringing Langlais's interest in weather as a tool to a destructive conclusion. The resources and practical realities of those who became responsible for his environment also contributed to its transformation over the last four decades.

*Bernard Langlais: Live and Let Live ON* considers key figures and moments in the evolution of this art environment—the challenges faced, the actions taken, and the questions that linger about its preservation. The most notable of these figures was the artist's widow, Helen Friend Langlais, whose stewardship of her husband's art was a remarkable coda to Langlais's own prolific career.

Providing a rare glimpse into the life of an environment-builder's spouse, the following article appeared in the *Maine Sunday Telegram* in 1974, three years before Bernard's death. The article evokes the couple's unique domestic environment and their mutual admiration. In the same art-filled living room described by the author, Helen went on to conduct estate business and cultivate relationships with journalists and curators for more than thirty years after Bernard's death. In 1978 she told a friend, "I am going to make it my business to keep his legacy alive." Upon her own death in 2010, Helen bequeathed her house, land, and all the remaining art in her estate to the Colby College Museum of Art, thus setting in motion the next chapter in this stewardship story.



**John Michael  
Kohler Arts Center**

*Bernard Langlais: Live and Let Live ON* was curated by Hannah W. Blunt, with support from the generous JMKAC curatorial team.

The exhibition is a companion to the first posthumous survey exhibition of Bernard Langlais's art outside of Maine, *Bernard Langlais: Live and Let Live*, on view at the Arts Center from April 4 through October 3, 2021.

This exhibition is supported by the **Kohler Trust for Arts and Education**, the **Frederic Cornell Kohler Charitable Trust**, **Kohler Foundation, Inc.**, the **Herzfeld Foundation**, and the **Wisconsin Arts Board** with funds from the **State of Wisconsin** and the **National Endowment for the Arts**.

**Cover:** Helen Langlais with *Five Bears*, 1983; color photograph; 12.5 x 9 cm. Bernard Langlais papers, 1950–2010. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

**Interior:** Priscilla Adams, "Life of Artist's Wife Filled with Surprises," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, April 4, 1974, Bernard Langlais papers, 1950–2010. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



'I knew when she walked through the window she was the one.'

## Life Of Artist's Wife Filled With Surprises

By PRISCILLA ADAMS

CUSHING — Living with a wooden Trojan horse in the front yard, and a live horse in the back yard doesn't faze Cushing schoolteacher, Helen Langlais, a bit. As the wife of prominent sculptor Bernard Langlais, it's what she expected when she married the struggling young painter in 1955 — a life of never-ending excitement and surprise.

And the Langlais (sounds like Langley) residence is also one of surprise to the visitor. From the moment one passes the silent, great wooden horse which appears to stand roadside guard over the premises, until one crosses the sturdy outside porch, there are multitudinous objects and critters — both wooden and alive — all over the place. Literally.

There are man-made ponds with meandering bridges, cleared land, grazing animals; the pony, "Cheyenne"; donkey, "John Quincy Adams"; "Billy Goat"; Labrador retriever, "Cinderella"; seven cats (only one lives "in"); si and three ducks with anticipated spring additions. A jungle of plants stand in living room windows overlooking the porch.

When Helen was asked if she loved animals and plants, she replied, "I love some of them. Some of the animals, some of the plants. Geese nip."

INSIDE the white-walled, beamed, living room, coziness is the theme. The handwrought wooden door glows with multi-colored glass peepholes suggesting a medieval church door. Throughout the room, artistic touches by "Blackie" Langlais, as he is known locally, give the room a distinctive personality. Wooden animals glare from walls and floors, and intricate pieces of Langlais furniture — chest, couch and table — eloquently proclaim that this is no ordinary living room.

Giant macrame lampshades made by friend, David Andes of New Hampshire, reflect hours of tedious work; actually one of them was 100 hours in the making. A sheepskin, casually thrown over a chair, evokes a feeling of warmth — a companion to the hissing fireplace logs.

Across the room, Helen Langlais leans back in her comfortable chair and rests her eyes momentarily on the blazing fire as she reflects upon her role as the wife of a successful artist.

"WHEN WE MARRIED, I thought very seriously about the future — marrying an unknown, unsuccessful artist. I thought it would be an interesting life. Even when I was a teen-ager, I felt money wasn't very important.

"We had our health and education — I knew we could get along somehow. We got married and I thought we'd have a long vacation. We were married on a Saturday. Monday he told me I'd have to get a job."

The couple married in Norway where Bernard was studying as the country's first Fulbright painter-scholar at the Kunstakademi in Oslo. Previously, he'd studied at the Grand Chaumier in Paris.

Helen studied the Norwegian language at the University of Oslo and through contact with government aides there, became a civilian employe with the Norwegian Armed Forces Department of Psychology as a specialist in human relations. Her master's degree in human relations from Ohio University prepared her for the task of presenting a paper on "How to Develop Morale in the Norwegian Armed Forces." This position also included bibliographical research, and interviews with soldiers and sailors. "I loved it," she says. "The people were so great to us."

As much as they enjoyed their time abroad, Helen says, "Bernard really loved America and wanted to come home."

BERNARD AND HELEN are both Maine natives. He was born and reared at Old Town; she in Skowhegan. She graduated from the University of Maine with a degree in psychology.

They met when Helen stopped over in New York on her way back to Ohio University. Bernard had a loft studio there and, on the invitation of an artist, Helen visited his studio. She entered through a window off the fire escape.



WOODEN HORSE—Helen Langlais, wife of painter-sculptor Bernard Langlais, pauses in front of giant horse made by her husband. The work stands in the yard of their Cushing home. (Moore Photo)

"I knew when she walked in the window that she was the one," interjected Bernard.

Helen described his studio.

"It had a pot bellied stove. The place was partitioned with canvas strips, and Bernard was working with his outdoor clothes on — including his hat and scarf. I never met anyone like that!

"I knew lots of artists from working at Lakewood near the Skowhegan School; in fact, we used to think artists were weird with their paint-spattered dungarees. We used to make special trips to the hamburger shanty just to look at them. I didn't know it then, but Bernard was at the school when I was working at Lakewood."

Helen studied voice for 10 years, but says now she sings only for the kids at school.

"My grandmother was a concert pianist and Father had to listen to it. He didn't want music for me although I loved it. It was in me. I couldn't help it. I used to listen to operas and classical music on the record player when I was in college instead of going to the football games.

But much has happened since then.

THOUGH BERNARD LANGLAIS began as a painter, he is recognized as one of Maine's most outstanding sculptors. He received the Maine Artists Award in 1973 from the Arts and Humanities Commission and was recently named to the commission; he was awarded a doctor of arts degree by the University of Maine at Farmington in 1973 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1972-73.

This prestigious recognition is one of the highest awards an artist or scholar can receive.

THOUGH LANGLAIS is perhaps best known for his wooden Indian sculpture in Skowhegan, he is represented in public and private collections throughout the United States. Working in wood-plywood construction and a variety of creations from toothpicks to timbers — his handiwork is also evident in the ecological terrain surrounding his home.

Bernard also studied at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Brooklyn Museum School in New York. But his work reflects the mark of individuality that is Bernard Langlais; the school — himself.

On May 12, Bates College will present an exhibition of his works at Treat Gallery.

As for Helen, together she and Bernard share a meshing of growth, independent some of the time, yet joined in a common meld of joy, warmth and down-to-earth LIVING — with capital letters all the way.