

SALVATORE SCARPITTA
TRAVELER



ASINGULAR FIGURE IN POSTWAR AMERICAN art, Salvatore Scarpitta (1919–2007) traversed a wide terrain, crossing the presumed borders between painting and sculpture, abstraction and realism, art and everyday experience. Born in New York and raised in Los Angeles, Scarpitta began his career in Rome after the Second World War and completed it on the dirt-track speedways of rural Pennsylvania and Maryland. Focusing on his shaped and wrapped canvases, race cars, and sleds, *Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler* illuminates themes that preoccupied the artist throughout his life: risk, movement, death, and rebirth. As this adventurous body of work attests, Scarpitta was unafraid to go wherever his ideas led. In his words, “Art has no particular resting place . . . it travels where it is needed.”¹

Driving Scarpitta’s art forward through its many iterations was a persistent desire to “introduce into the art experience the life experience.”² His first radical breakthrough came in 1957 with his so-called Extramurals: three-dimensional “paintings” made by wrapping fabric around stretcher bars or panels, and sometimes incorporating wire armature (fig. 1 and back cover). Scarpitta’s aim was to “make my painting real . . . to make it terribly physical.”³ Challenging the picture plane and forcing the canvas out of its traditional role as neutral support, he tore up old works and used the material to produce a new form of expression. Scarpitta also employed unconventional items such as swaddling, medical bandages, and straps. With their wound-like slits and bandaged surfaces, these works reflect the trauma of World War II. Scarpitta resided in Italy from 1936 to 1958 and experienced the disasters of Fascism and war firsthand. After the fall of Mussolini in 1943, he fled with his first wife, Clotilde Puntieri, an Italian Jew, into the Apennine Mountains. They remained in hiding for almost a year, living among escaped prisoners of war and aiding the Italian Resistance. There is rupture and tension in the Extramurals but also a

sense of buried vitality. Their bulges and ripples evoke the contours of a living body but, viewed closely, the undulating surfaces appear frozen—or, as an early reviewer observed, “mummified”⁴—in applications of resin and paint.



Fig. 1: **Ponte S. Felice**, 1958. Collection of Ruth and Theodore Baum. Photo by Cathy Carver

Scarpitta’s art in the 1960s continues to allude to the body and mortality, but references the risks of car racing rather than war. By this time, Scarpitta was living in New York, having returned to the United States in 1958. As a boy in Los Angeles, he had been a regular spectator at the notoriously treacherous Legion Ascot Speedway, where he marveled at the feats of the drivers and mourned those who perished. Now, as an adult attending races again, he began using car parts, such as exhaust pipes and safety belts, in his paintings (fig. 2). Incorporating these objects, some of which he scavenged from fatal wrecks, was his way of “trying to extend the lives of those young guys that had burned up.”⁵ As with his earlier work, the car-part paintings are cut and bruised, bandaged and bound. In contrast to the Extramurals’ muted monochrome, however, many employ combinations of red and yellow, the hot hues signaling both the danger of the track and the contradictory joyfulness of the drivers’ pursuit.

The artist’s reignited passion for racing soon led him to abandon abstraction for a radical realism. Between 1964 and 1969, Scarpitta created six full-scale vehicles. The first, *Rajo Jack Spl*, 1964 (Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, not on view), is a replica of a car once driven by Dewey “Rajo Jack” Gatson (1905–1956), a pioneering African-American driver. Copied from a photograph, *Rajo Jack Spl* was made almost entirely by hand, some parts carved from wood. For the subsequent vehicles, Scarpitta began with existing antique components, which he rehabilitated and augmented with newly fabricated parts. Several cars were even rendered fully functional, though intended for gallery display. The last to be completed and the only example the artist deliberately left unfinished, *Sal Cragar*, 1969 (figs. 3 and 4), is an elegiac, austere shell of a car.⁶ Scarpitta likened his automobiles to “suit[s] of armor,” strongly associating them with the men who drove and sometimes died in them.⁷ He did not aspire to showroom perfection, preferring them to appear “alive” and “human,” displaying signs of wear and tear. “I felt the cars were an extension of those people. . . . I don’t consider my cars restored vehicles at all.”⁸

In 1986, Scarpitta further merged his art with life by taking the extraordinary step of establishing his own sprint car team. The car that became *Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special)*, 1985 (cover), played a crucial role in this transition. Scarpitta purchased it from driver Gregory O’Neill in 1985. Their ensuing friendship led the artist deeper into the world of sprint car racing, emboldening him to field a competitive team the following season, with O’Neill as driver and Leo Castelli, the artist’s longtime gallerist, as primary sponsor. Scarpitta saw car racing and art making as closely aligned—both are about risk, instincts, and “constant renewal.”⁹ He embraced sprint car racing in particular for its rough-and-tumble, homegrown nature. Unlike Formula and Indy cars, sprint cars

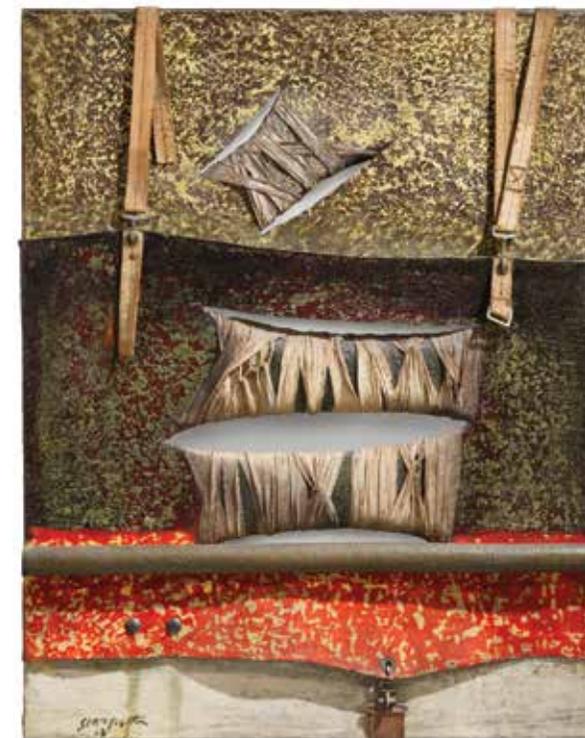


Fig. 2: **Racer’s Pillow**, 1963. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; bequest of B.H. Friedman (2011.53) Photo © Whitney Museum of American Art

are not factory-produced; they are created and driven by passionate individuals, more for raw experience than for profit. Scarpitta’s engagement with racing was ardent. For more than fifteen years, his cars competed in as many as sixty races a season at speedways in Pennsylvania and Maryland. *Trevis Race Car* was retired to the gallery, altered only by a colorful Pop-art style paint job. The names of Scarpitta’s family members, friends, and collaborators from both the racing and art worlds appear alongside decorations dating to the car’s competitive life. Other motifs point to social issues about which Scarpitta cared deeply. The phrases “AGE OF RAGE” and “cool it” scrawled across the dashboard reference both the violent nature of car racing and the tumult of societal conflict.



The exhibition closes with a selection of Scarpitta's sleds, works he initiated in the 1970s and returned to in later decades. A primitive means of transportation, the sled represented to the artist solitary, nomadic travel, in contrast to the roaring speed and circular motion of race car driving. The freight on such a journey, Scarpitta suggested, was human feeling: "Why wheels? Why wheels? You've been dragging your emotions around the world for 56 years. Why *drive* it? *Drag* it. That's what you're doing. So I dragged it and it was right."¹⁰ Made from objects mostly scavenged from the streets, the sleds project both a sense of human resourcefulness and vulnerability. The stretched canvases that accompany many of them (see *Snowshoe Sled*, 1974) are made from obstetrical drapes—their distinctive openings being the space through which a baby is meant to enter the world. Scarpitta's last sled, *Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo*, 1989/2000 (fig. 5), also hints at a life passage. The artist completed the piece in 2000 when he discovered the remains of a roadside billboard hit by lightning, and decided to use parts of it as the sled's "cargo." The charred wood, accompanied by an empty pair of metal shoe guards, lends a funerary air to the assemblage, as if the cot were bearing a soul toward the afterlife.

In this late work, as in all his art, Scarpitta merges the real with the metaphorical. If material bits of "life's wreckage"¹¹ were his means, the human condition was his subject matter. Art was Scarpitta's way of investigating life itself—an open kind of travel, with no fixed destination.

Melissa Ho
Assistant Curator

I would like to thank Stella Alba Cartaino for her tremendous generosity and dedication, which made this exhibition possible. I am also very grateful to Gregory O'Neill for his enthusiasm and support.



Fig. 3 (opposite) and Fig. 4 (above): **Sal Cragar**, 1969. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2014 (14.5). Fig. 3 photo by Lee Stalworth. Fig. 4 photo by Cathy Carver

¹ Salvatore Scarpitta quoted in Granville Greene, "Auto Motives," *Baltimore City Paper*, vol. 10, no. 29 (July 18–24, 1986).

² See "Evening Magazine," televised interview with Scarpitta, 1986, transcribed from video provided by Marianne Boesky Gallery.

³ "Oral history interview with Salvatore Scarpitta, 1975 January 31–February 3," *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴ See George Stiles's short review of Salvatore Scarpitta: *Extramurals* (Leo Castelli Gallery, January 27–February 14, 1959) in "Gallery Previews in New York," *Pictures on Exhibit* 22, no. 5 (February 1959): 21.

⁵ Interview with Salvatore Scarpitta by Barbara Snyder, "Racing with Sal," *Issue: A Journal for Artists*, no. 6 (Spring 1986): 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ "Oral history interview with Salvatore Scarpitta, 1975 January 31–February 3," *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution.

⁸ Snyder, 24.

⁹ Scarpitta quoted in "Quick Change," *Open Wheel*, April 1987. A copy of this article is in the MICA Archives, Decker Library, Maryland Institute College of Art.

¹⁰ Scarpitta quoted in James Harithas, *Salvatore Scarpitta*, exh. cat. (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1977), n.p.

¹¹ Interview with Salvatore Scarpitta by S. Perri, "Arte come vita," *Carte d'Arte*, no. 4 (December 1993): 9, cited in Luigi Sansone, *Salvatore Scarpitta: Catalogue Raisonné* (Milan: Mazzotta, 2005), 81.

Exhibition Checklist

All works by Salvatore Scarpitta unless otherwise noted.

Moby Dick (Extramural-Composition n. 3), 1958

Paint, resin, sand, and charcoal on canvas
78 7/8 x 53 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. (200.3 x 135.9 x 8.9 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
bequest of B. H. Friedman (2011.54)

Nikos, 1958

Resin on fabric over wood
13 1/2 x 16 3/4 in. (34.3 x 42.5 cm)
Collection of Nicholas Howey and Gerard Widdershoven

Ponte S. Felice, 1958

Paint and resin on fabric over wood
12 1/2 x 17 in. (31.8 x 43.2 cm)
Collection of Ruth and Theodore Baum

Untitled, 1958

Paint and resin on canvas over metal
67 1/2 x 57 in. (171.5 x 144.8 cm)
Private Collection

Facetowel Print (The Traveler), 1959, revised after 1964

Canvas, paint, resin, wood, and mixed media
49 x 39 1/4 x 5 in. (124.4 x 99.7 x 12.7 cm)
Private Collection

Mas Tres, c. 1959

Paint, canvas straps, and mixed media over wood
29 1/2 x 33 1/2 in. (74.9 x 85.1 cm)
Collection of Barbara Bertozzi Castelli

Sundial for Racing, 1962

Canvas, paint, resin, and mixed media
89 3/4 x 72 1/2 x 5 1/2 (228 x 184.2 x 14 cm)
Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Festival of Art Purchase Fund, 1965-12-1

Drummer Sergeant, 1963

Canvas straps, paint, resin, and mixed media
27 1/2 x 25 1/4 x 6 in. (69.9 x 64.1 x 15.2 cm)
The George Economou Collection

Racer's Pillow, 1963

Canvas, paint, resin, and mixed media
60 5/8 x 48 1/2 x 3 3/4 in. (154 x 123.2 x 9.5 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
bequest of B. H. Friedman (2011.53)

Tishamingo (for Franz Kline), 1964

Canvas, paint, and mixed media
65 x 60 x 5 in. (165.1 x 152.4 x 12.7 cm)
Courtesy Luxembourg & Dayan, New York/London and
Natalie Seroussi, Paris

Autoritratto con auto da corsa (Auto Collage), 1966

Paint and decals on photograph
25 1/2 x 18 in. (64.8 x 45.7 cm)
Private Collection

Sal Cragar, 1969

Car parts, metal, and fiberglass
46 x 138 x 70 in. (116.8 x 350.5 x 177.8 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington,
DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2014 (14.5)

Sled Log, 1973

Wood, canvas, resin, and mixed media
89 x 27 x 34 in. (226 x 68.6 x 86.4 cm)
Private Collection

Black Sled, 1974

Wood, leather, paint, and mixed media
125 x 36 x 10 in. (317.5 x 91.4 x 25.4 cm)
Collection of Stella Alba Cartaino

Snowshoe Sled, 1974

Canvas, resin, paint, wood, and leather
86 5/8 x 95 1/2 x 4 in. (220 x 242.6 x 10.2 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington,
DC, Gift of the Estate of Pat M. Dandignac, 2012 (12.14)

Salvatore Scarpitta and Joan Bankemper

Sal is Racer, 1985

Color photographs
35 1/2 x 39 1/4 in. (90.2 x 99.7 cm), each
Collection of Peter Beler

Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special), 1985

Race car and paint
46 x 138 x 70 in. (116.8 x 350.5 x 177.8 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington,
DC, Gift of Stella Alba Cartaino and Gregory O'Neill, 2014
(14.6)

Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo, 1989/2000

Wood skis, canvas, metal, and mixed media
25 7/8 x 143 3/4 x 37 5/8 in. (65.7 x 365.1 x 95.6 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington,
DC, Gift of Luca Patrizio DiBenedetto, 2013 (13.10)

Osoppo 44, 1990

Wood ski, canvas, metal, and mixed media
5 3/8 x 90 x 5 1/4 in. (13.5 x 228.6 x 13.3 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington,
DC, Gift of Luca Patrizio DiBenedetto, 2013 (13.14)

Fig. 5 (opposite): **Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo**, 1989/2000,
and **Osoppo 44**, 1990. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture
Garden, Washington, DC, Gift of Luca Patrizio DiBenedetto, 2013
(13.10 and 13.14). Photo by Cathy Carver



Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler

July 17, 2014–January 11, 2015

Related Programs

IN CONVERSATION

Germano Celant and Paul Schimmel

Wednesday, October 8

7 pm, Ring Auditorium

Germano Celant and Paul Schimmel discuss Scarpitta's contribution to visual art, his critical reception, and his first-hand experience of World War II. Co-curator of the 2012 retrospective *Salvatore Scarpitta* at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Turin, Celant is artistic director of the Prada Foundation and senior curator of contemporary art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Schimmel is former chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and organizer of *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962*, which included work by Scarpitta.

FRIDAY GALLERY TALKS

Friday, September 12

12:30 pm, Meet at the Information Desk

Sculptor and writer Theodore Prescott talks about helping Scarpitta create *Sal Cragar*, 1969, and other race cars in the 1960s.

Friday, October 24

12:30 pm, Meet at the Information Desk

Hirshhorn assistant curator Melissa Ho gives a tour of the exhibition.

Visit hirshhorn.si.edu for a full schedule.



Facetowel Print (The Traveler), 1959, revised after 1964. Private Collection. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's © Sotheby's Inc. 2014

Front cover: **Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special)**, 1985. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, Gift of Stella Alba Cartaino and Gregory O'Neill, 2014 (14.6) Photo by Lee Stalsworth

All art © Stella Alba Cartaino

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