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Take a ride through artist Salvatore Scarpitta's works in Hirshhorn exhibition

By [Philip Kennicott](#)



Installation view of “Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 2014. Left to right: Salvatore Scarpitta and Joan Bankemper, “Sal Is Racer,” 1985 and Salvatore Scarpitta, “Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special),” 1985. (Cathy Carver/Smithsonian Institution)

In a 1975 oral history interview, artist Salvatore Scarpitta remembered his time in Italy during the Second World War in contradictory ways. It wasn't so bad, kind of a lark, except for the hunger and the time the Nazis “chewed up the ground with a machine gun around my body.” Born in the United States in 1919 (to an Italian father), Scarpitta moved to Italy in 1936 to study art. After the United States entered the war, he spent time in an internment camp: “Well, it was like being on a vacation, except we didn't have anything to eat.”

Later, he escaped to the Apennine Mountains, hid out with partisans and other escaped prisoners and, much later, he began to make art that seemed to reflect

some kind of wound or trauma. A new Hirshhorn Museum exhibition, “[Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler](#),” begins with those works, which look as if a traditional painting has been damaged, bandaged and wrapped. They are powerful pieces, abstract in their basic form, tightly woven skeins of thick material, sometimes canvas, sometimes fabric, coated in resin and sometimes given texture and color by the admixture of sand, tea or iodine.

But the use of these particular materials grounds the work in unavoidable allusions: The tightness of the fabric, the layers, the widening slits that open like torn flesh, all of this suggests something bound up with trauma, death, perhaps even mummification (as one early critic noted). Even more poignant is the way some of these strips of cloth pass through holes in other pieces, creating a tension that widens the slit-shaped wounds, as if the painting is wounding itself.

That sense of self-destruction is particularly apparent in a 1964 work, “Tishamingo (for Franz Kline),” in which a metal clasp seems to scrape at the picture behind it, like a spectral finger nervously reaching out of a crumbling plaster wall only to scratch and damage it further. Often in these works made in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the wounds implied are also self-inflicted. You also sense a distinct feeling of patina and age, that everything here is a bit distressed, worn, and seen through sepia-tinted glasses. In short, they feel Italian and Old World.

Scarpitta made a huge change in his art in the mid-1960s, when he was back living in the United States and reconnecting with his childhood in Los Angeles. As a boy, before he left for Italy, he had loved car racing; now, back on American soil, he returned to this early fixation. Spare car parts crept into his abstractions, often giving them a strong horizontal orientation. Pipe elements in the 1962 “Sundial for Racing” and the 1963 “Racer’s Pillow,” cut straight across the picture, weakening the more organic abstraction of his earlier work, though connecting his art to something more decidedly and obviously American.



Salvatore Scarpitta, circa 1960–1969 / unidentified photographer. (Leo Castelli Gallery records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution)

The next step was a radical one, though not unprecedented given some of the experiments of Pop Art at the time: He started to make the whole car. From 1964 to 1969 he created six full-sized racecars, one of which, the unfinished 1969 “Sal Cragar” is on view here. Also included is the 1985 “Trevis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special),” which was in fact an actual racecar that Scarpitta purchased, retired and repainted to include a reference to the Three Mile Island disaster (painted perhaps with Roy Lichtenstein’s cartoon style in mind), along with the usual array of branding and logos familiar from the speedway.

In 1986, he persuaded his gallery owner, Leo Castelli, to sponsor a sprint car team (a particularly scrappy, often homemade form of racecar), and for more than 15 years his art and his passion for motor sport were combined in a way that must have made some of his fellow artists green with envy.

Scarpitta’s cars are definitely his most famous work, and perhaps his most accessible — if you buy the glib analogy he made between racing and art. Art and sprint car racing are both high risk and require faith in instinct. One is about pure form, the other about pure functionality, but for Scarpitta, the extremity of both endeavors made them somehow blend into one another. Perhaps he believed that, but it sounds a bit like convenient sophistry.

In any case, his car art isn't his most interesting, as the final room of the exhibition makes clear. In the 1970s, he began making sleds — another kind of vehicle, but more primitive, and in Scarpitta's hands, clearly never intended to be functional. They often used some of the same materials as his wrapped paintings, and they have a similar, monochrome, earthy, worn-out quality to them. Likely there was a reference, at the emotional level, to Scarpitta's time in the mountains.

He said of them: "Why wheels? You've been dragging your emotions around the world for 56 years." Why, he asked himself, "drive" these emotions when he could "drag" them. And he concluded: "So I dragged it, and it was right."

There's a strangely biblical cadence to that statement. But clearly Scarpitta had figured out something essential, and his sleds are indeed ridiculously haunting. The 1973 "Sled Log" is stood on end, with a pattern on the canvas cargo bed that looks like some kind of braille or hieroglyphics. Canvas is wrapped around its wooden frame in ways that seem likely detrimental to its function as a sled, but highly evocative in light of Scarpitta's earlier work. The whole thing feels totemic, almost anthropomorphic, standing on frail legs, with a huge head and a slightly hunched back.

Another sled is even more powerful. "Cot and Lock Step n. 2 Cargo" is a sled bearing pieces of a charred billboard that Scarpitta found alongside a road — connecting it in a macabre way to the advertising logos that decorated his favorite racecars. Yet another sled work used birthing sheets (with a rounded, rectangular opening cut in them for the baby's passage) to create a sense of landscape, the lower one green, the upper one a sandy, gray color, like an arctic sky.



Salvatore Scarpitta, "Racer's Pillow," 1963. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; bequest of B.H. Friedman. (Whitney Museum of American Art)

These later pieces, with their connection to birth, memory and travel, and the early works, with their quiet but powerful sense of trauma, put the car art in a different perspective. They bookend the automotive phase, and make it seem less interesting, more of a distraction during a lifelong process of thinking more deeply and poetically about life. Scarpitta's cars feel like a midlife crisis, a second childhood. But it's reassuring to see that Scarpitta, who died in 2007, could also put away childish things and be a richer artist for it.

Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler At the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden through Jan. 11.