Thornton Dial (American, 1928-2016)

Read an artist spotlight written by docent Ellen Oxfeld at the Montclair Art Museum and browse the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s education guide to teaching African American civil rights through American Art using Dial’s work.


Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger was the first major solo exhibition by the artist when he was 65 years old. The exhibition was on display at the New Museum and the American Folk Art Museum.

In 2000, Dial was included in the famous Whitney Biennial. See installation images of the exhibition on the Whitney’s website. Gaining traction in response to the Biennial, the Houston Museum of Fine Art installed an exhibition entitled Thornton Dial in the 21st Century in 2005. Read an announcement about the exhibition in Artdaily.

Watch the Emmy-winning 2007 film from PBS, Mr. Dial Has Something to Say and read a rare interview with the artist in Whitehot Magazine.

In 2011, the Indianapolis Museum of Art organized the exhibition Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial, an exhibition of seventy large-scale paintings, drawings, and found-object sculptures. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the New Orleans Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, and the Mint Museum.

The New York Times published an obituary for the artist upon his death in 2016. The High Museum also organized the exhibition Green Pastures: In Memory of Thornton Dial, Sr. and PBS News Hour aired the story “How a Sharecropper’s Son with a Third-Grade Education Changed the Definition of the Word ‘Artist.’”


The 2021 MARCH Gallery exhibition Thornton Dial, The Earliest Years: 1987-1989 was the first solo exhibition of the artist’s work on the West Coast of the United States.
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**Untitled**, 1987
Enamel on metal

Private Collection; L2021:107.1

Before Thornton Dial began an art career in the late-1980s, he worked for thirty years as a metal worker at the Pullman Standard Plant in Bessemer, Alabama. Dial honed his skills as a fabricator until his fifties, making fishing lures, nets, and found-object assemblages in his spare time. In the summer of 1987, Dial’s artist friend Lonnie Holley (b. 1950) stopped by with collector William Arnett (1939-2020). Holley made an impromptu wire sculpture, to which Dial responded: “If that’s art, then I’m going to show you some art.” Created that same year, **Untitled** is one of Dial’s earliest formal artworks. This sculpture and others catapulted Dial’s career, which expanded to address black history, slavery, discrimination, and poverty in the American South. This sculpture was recently included in the exhibition *Thornton Dial, The Earliest Years: 1987-1989* at Parker Gallery Los Angeles, the first solo exhibition of Dial’s work on the West Coast.

*On view October 27, 2021 – January 30, 2022*