

R | A | M

Collection Focus: Ron Isaacs

July 2 – October 25, 2025

I never actually made it to three dimensions; I seem to have stalled at two and a half. While I was going through the process of working my way from flat to relief, a sculptor friend kidded me that someday I was going to invent sculpture all by myself. And I sort of did, for myself, even though I came to it through the back door.
—Ron Isaacs

As a person, Ron Isaacs is thoughtful, straightforward, and engaging. As an artist, he is more of a trickster—creating artwork that initially appears straightforward even when it is not. Trained as a painter, Isaacs uses his ingenuity and skill to create poetic work full of illusions and narrative. More specifically, he crafts wood constructions that he then paints, with clothing, leaves, and found objects being popular themes. But, it does his work no justice to simply say they are painted representations.

Most of Isaacs's work—a combination of two-dimensional imagery and cut and sawn wood—operates in an in-between space that he identifies as "*trompe l'oeil* painted constructions." *Trompe l'oeil* (French for fool or deceive the eye) artwork is regarded by some as the manipulation of materials with highly technical skill. In addition, there is a kind of humor implicit in the object's creation knowing that the viewer will likely have a moment of surprise or disbelief. Isaacs maneuvers his media so that a viewer doesn't question what they are seeing until their brain catches up with their eyes. Three dimensional explorations of illusion have often included suggesting one material through another. Isaacs does this as he convincingly makes wood and paint appear to be fabric, plant matter, and numerous other things.

Isaacs does not regard himself as a proficient woodworker. For the artist, wood was a logical choice to accomplish certain goals. When painting started to feel flat in the 1970s, Isaacs began to experiment with the shape and structure of the surface he was painting on. After attaching wood to a traditional canvas as a collage element, he started painting the wood shapes. Relatively quickly, he realized he didn't need the canvas. From then on, paint and shaped wood merged into his trademark constructions.

In the simplest terms, his process involves drawing, tracing, sawing, sanding, and painting. More directly, he pins a garment—or whatever object he is translating into his work—to a board that is gridded into one-inch squares. He uses the grid to draw a line pattern of the object form. Tracing paper outlines are used to break the form down into components that he can transfer to wood with carbon paper.

R|A|M

Next, he creates outlines of shapes that can be sawed from wood and assembled with wood glue, with sometimes as many as 400 pieces of wood being used for a single object. He joins and sands components until he has a relief construction that is ready to paint.

While he universally keeps the work connected to nature and humankind, he does include a personal reference in the form of an “easter egg” that relates to beloved dog companions. This practice started when he was an art student and has continued through the inclusion of minuscule paintings “hidden” within the work. Of course, he is very clever with this, and finding the dog—being in on the secret—is another one of the rewards of extended viewing.

Isaacs received his BFA from Berea College and his MFA from Indiana University—both with a focus on painting. He taught as a painting professor at Eastern Kentucky University for over 30 years, retiring in 2001. His work is featured in numerous public and private collections and has been exhibited extensively.