



Smithsonian American Art Museum

April 2012



Top of the Line (Steel)

1992

Thornton Dial, Sr.

Born: Emelle, Alabama 1928

mixed media: enamel, unbraided canvas roping, and metal on plywood
65 x 81 x 7 7/8 in. (165.2 x 205.7 x 20.1 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum
Gift from the collection of Ron and June Shelp

1993.47

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

Researcher Liz investigated Top of the Line (Steel), a mixed media painting by Thornton Dial, Sr. Dial, an African-American self-taught artist from Bessemer, Alabama, composes his works out of a variety of “found” objects such as metal and steel parts, clothing, dolls, and animal bones. The subject matter of this painting is the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Liz wanted to learn more about Thornton Dial’s art and about the event that inspired Top of the Line (Steel).

- **Thornton Dial is now 83 years old. Is he still actively creating art?**

I was able to find the answer easily by searching online. Yes, Mr. Dial is alive and well and attended an opening in March 2011 of the retrospective exhibition, *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial*, at the [Indianapolis Museum of Art](#). The IMA includes several [video-clips](#) on its website, including the artist talking about his work.

- **How does Dial’s work compare to that of other African-American “outsider” artists in the South?**

I learned about the “outsider” art of African-Americans primarily through essays in *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South* (2000), which was edited by William Arnett, the art dealer who represents Dial, as well as essays in Arnett’s co-edited book on Dial, *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century* (2005). “Outsider” artists, also known as “visionary” or “self-

taught,” are individuals who create art without formal training. Babatunde Laval explains that African slaves made objects that reminded them of home.

Arnett explains how generations of African-Americans constructed works of art in backyards from found or discarded objects. Dial’s stepfather, Buddy Jake Dial, honored his own father’s passing by placing a wagon wheel above a car wheel, evoking lines from an African-American hymn, “Little wheel turns by faith/Big wheel turns by the Grace of God” and the African Kongo people’s circular conception of time. Buddy Jake Dial and other southern African-American men constructed barns and sheds from scrap metal, creating an intricate, quilt-like patchwork. Some barn-builders signed their names on the barns just as a painter would sign a canvas.

- **Dial worked in the steel industry in Bessemer, Alabama. How did the steel industry impact the southern economy?**

Thornton Dial worked for thirty-one years for the Pullman-Standard Company in Bessemer, a suburb of Birmingham. John Beardsley (*Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, 274-293) explains how Dial’s own life story intersects with the social and economic history of Alabama. [Emelle](#), the small town in Sumter County, Alabama where Dial was born, was in the middle of the “Black Belt”- a name indicative of the region’s rich soil and 75% African-American population. Buddy Jake Dial raised cotton and other crops like many African-American sharecropper families. By the 1930’s, the economy in the Black Belt was extremely depressed due to slumping cotton prices and crop damage from a boll weevil infestation. In 1941, young Thornton Dial was forced to move to [Bessemer](#) in Jefferson County to find work.

The city of [Bessemer](#), named for the inventor of the open-hearth steelmaking process, was founded during Reconstruction, when agricultural southern states promoted industrial development. Iron and steel works were established exploiting the area’s geological (iron and limestone) and human (inexpensive African-American labor) resources. The Second World War further increased demand for iron/steel in munitions, railroads, and ships.

Pullman-Standard –Thornton Dial’s employer - manufactured railroad boxcars. (I found online images of the [Pullman Standard plant](#) in the collection of the Historic American Engineering Record on the Library of Congress’ website). Segregation limited the jobs that African-Americans were allowed to perform ([welding jobs](#) were reserved for white workers). Eventually, Dial was permitted to run the machines that punched out the metal boxcar patterns and also learned riveting and painting. Dial invented a labor-saving device for punching steel but never received credit for his work.

Bessemer suffered in the early 1980’s from the rise in imported steel, which decreased production. After Pullman Standard laid him off in 1983, Dial and his sons started their own business in Bessemer making steel garden furniture, [Dial Metal Patterns](#). The business is still in operation almost three decades later.

- **What happened during the riots, and what caused them?**

I learned about the L.A. Riots from a number of sources: video footage on YouTube from various [CNN](#), ABC, and [NBC](#) newscasts and filmed by an [independent videographer](#); a CNN documentary, [Race & Rage: The Beating of Rodney King](#); and scholar Janet L. Abu-Lughod's *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (2007), which I found on the America: History and Memory database. The riots broke out in the Los Angeles neighborhoods of [Watts and South Central](#) after the broadcast of a jury's verdict on April 29, 1992 on the Rodney King trial. King, an African-American, was stopped by Los Angeles police on March 3, 1991 for a traffic violation and was beaten so severely that doctors treating him reported his facial bones were pulverized like "grains of sand." George Holliday, a nearby resident, [filmed the beating on video](#) and released it to local news channels and nationwide.

The four policemen stood trial not in Los Angeles, but in the white enclave of Simi Valley. In a verdict that shocked the nation, the all-white jury acquitted three of the four policemen. Within hours, rioters began looting and setting fire to businesses in Watts and South Central and looted high-end stores in West Hollywood and Beverly Hills.

[National television networks](#) repeated clips of rioters looting and burning stores yet downplayed those residents who decried the verdict but condemned the violence. In footage filmed near the Parker Center (police headquarters) by an independent filmmaker, one of the peaceful demonstrators declared to the camera, "[What would you do if he \[King\] was your brother and not just a man who got beaten?](#)" On May 1, Rodney King pleaded in a televised press conference for calm, asking, "[Can't we just all get along?](#)" The rioting, which lasted about five days, killed 52 and injured 2,383 people and resulted in 16,291 arrests and \$1 billion in property damage.

The racial composition of Watts and South Central has changed dramatically over a century. Railroad construction jobs attracted Black workers to the area in the early twentieth century, but the city's "housing covenants" restricted where African-Americans could live. Lonnie Bunch, director of the Smithsonian's [National Museum of African-American History and Culture](#), writes that in the 1920's that the South Central neighborhood was a fashionable middle-class African-American community featuring theaters, clubs, and Black-owned businesses. Watts, located east of South Central, originated in the late 19th century as a predominantly Jewish and Mexican community. During World War II, a wartime job boom in shipbuilding and industries drew 340,000 African-Americans to Watts. By the early 1990's, the African-American population of South Central decreased from 81% in 1965 to 45% in 1995, and immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and Korea moved into Watts and South Central.

The 1992 Los Angeles riot was not an isolated incident. Abu-Lughod recounts the Watts riot in August 1965 that erupted following a police arrest of an African-American man, Marquette Frye, at a traffic stop. Although the McCone Commission (organized in response to the riots) sought to

improve relations between police and the African-American community and improve the lives of Watts and South Central residents, the situation improved very little. By 1990, 30% of the area's residents lived below the poverty level and unemployment had risen to 8.6 % from 5.6 % in 1965.

Like many Americans (including myself), Dial watched the 1992 riots unfold on national television. Dial did not approve of the looting in Los Angeles, but could understand the rage that people felt following the verdict. "Strange things happen in Los Angeles and the people couldn't understand it," he commented. "People fight with the only thing they got. Sometime they got to fight fire with fire."

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