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The donkeys' tale

At Magazzino Italian Art in Cold Spring, the Sardinian donkeys are as famous as the artwork

MICHELLE FALKENSTEIN

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Artist Namsal Siedlecki created a site-specific sculpture with a feeder and an abstract sculpture made from coins collected in the Trevi Fountain in Rome. The donkeys love to eat from it.

Marco Anelli / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art

It was Friday night during Upstate Art Weekend and Magazzino Italian Art in Cold Spring was hosting a kick-off party. An array of guests, including museum co-founders Giorgio Spanu and Nancy Olnick, enjoyed platters of prosciutto, Parmesan and pickled vegetables under a large white tent as DJs played Italian dance music.



But many guests strayed from the festivities, some carrying Prosecco, to visit a barn atop a nearby hill, where a herd of 14 Sardinian donkeys munched on hay or stood silently on the dusty ground.

“They’re so cute,” exclaimed one partygoer, waving her hand inside their enclosure to encourage them to walk over for scratches.

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The donkeys were not impressed.

Donkeys are an integral part of life in Sardinia, and Spanu, who was born and raised there, remembers them fondly. When Spanu and Olnick established Magazzino to share their enthusiasm for postwar Italian art, they did not plan to share their enthusiasm for Sardinian donkeys as well. But therein lies the tale.

“The donkeys have become as famous here as the artwork,” Spanu said.





The Sardinian donkeys at Magazzino Italian Art. (Alexa Hoyer / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art)

Sardinian donkeys are small in stature, with a rough gray coat marked by a black cross on their backs. Spanu said the donkeys have a sweet temperament. As for their notorious stubbornness, “they know what they want,” Spanu said.

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The donkeys have a gestation period of 11 months and can live up to 50 years. At Magazzino they eat hay year-round and, in the winter, receive a serving of grain and sweet feed, a mixture of grains, minerals and molasses. “They hate water,” Spanu said. “As soon as it rains, they go inside.”





— Magazzino Italian Art co-founder Giorgio Spanu pets Max, a Sardinian donkey.
Michelle Falkenstein / Special to the Times Union

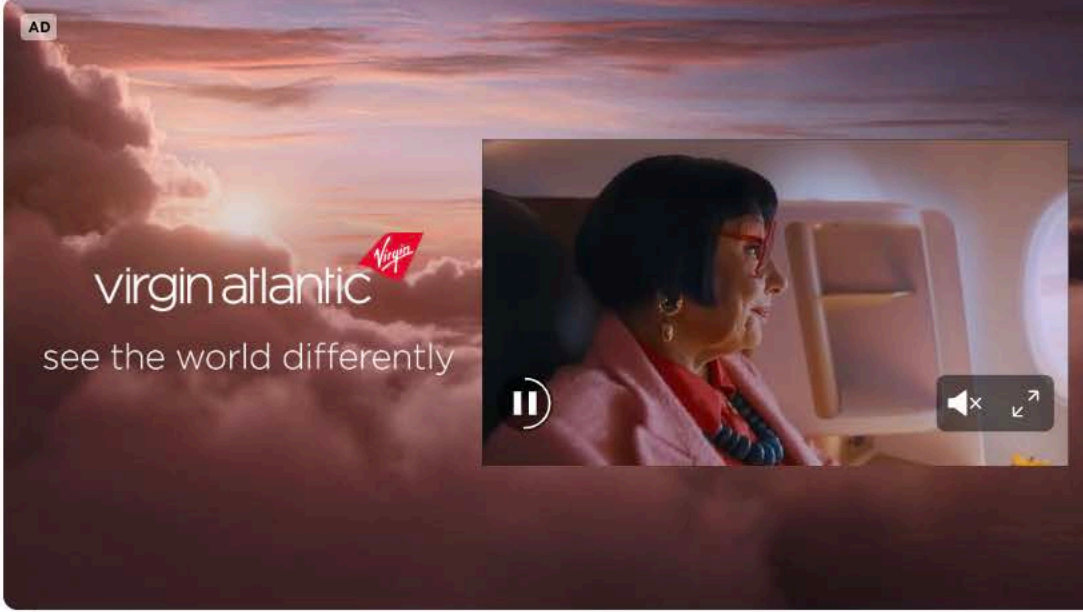
Spanu grew up in the town of Masua, where his father worked in the mines. “The donkeys were very popular animals,” he said. “They were part of everyday life.”

Fruit and vegetable sellers came to town in carts pulled by the donkeys. “Downhill to the village was easy, but the way back was uphill,” Spanu recalled. “Children would go and give the donkeys a push because we felt so bad for them.”

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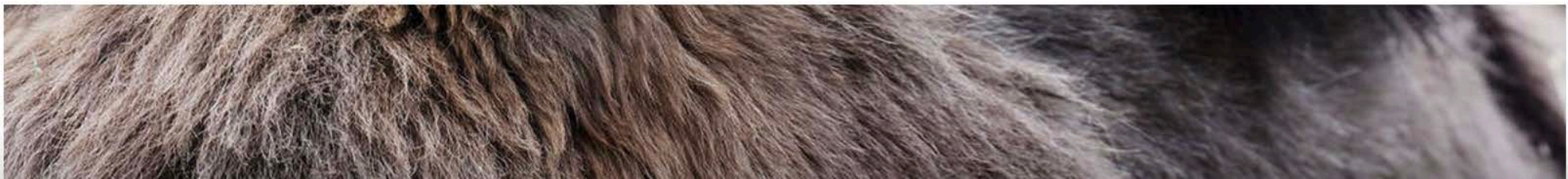


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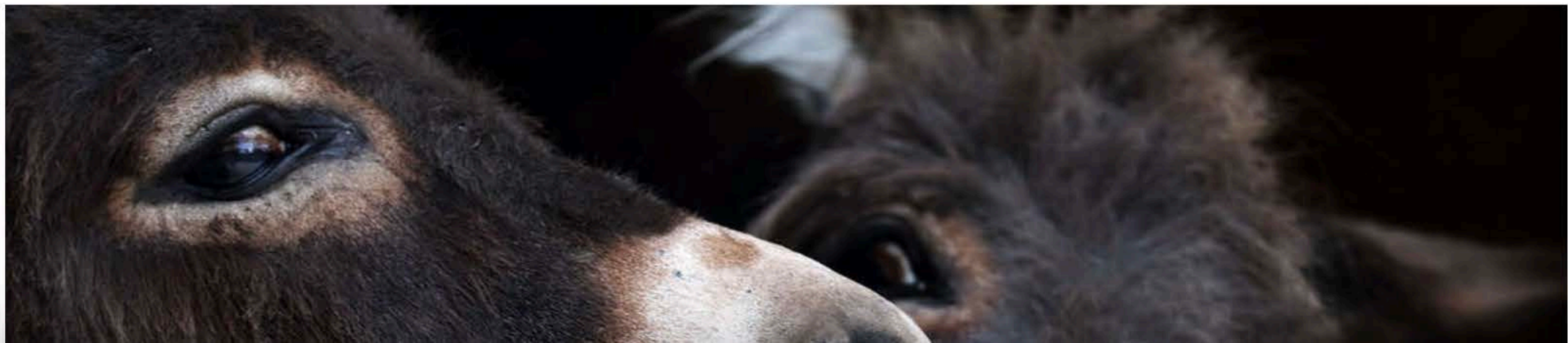
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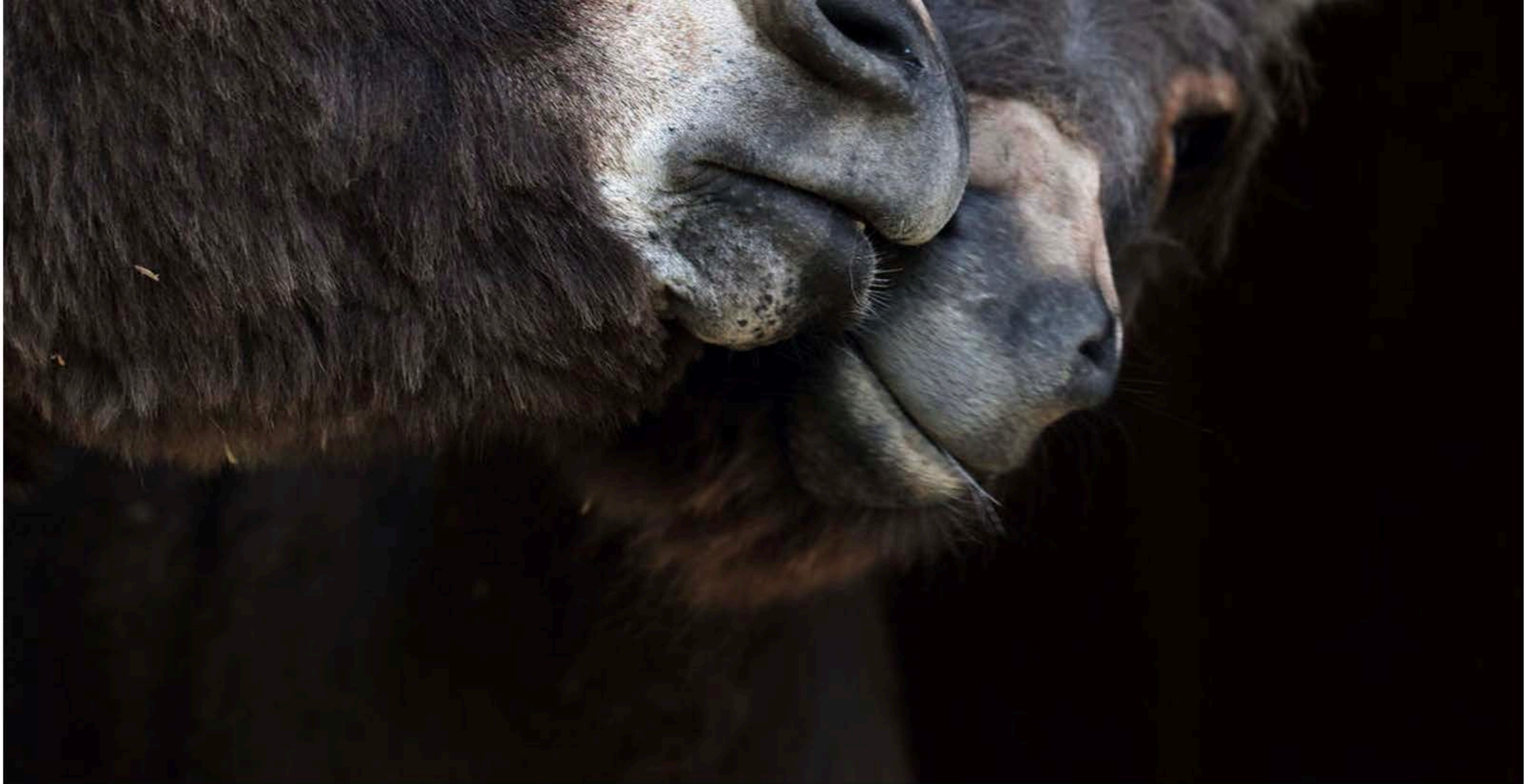
In addition to moving goods and people, the donkeys were used to grind grain and extract olive oil. “They were our F-150s,” Spanu said, a reference to Ford pickup trucks. “We had no other means of transportation, just a donkey with a cart.”





Sardinian donkeys are small in stature, with a rough gray coat.
Marco Anelli / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art





— They are notoriously quite stubborn.

Marco Anelli / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art

The donkeys' odyssey to Magazzino began when Spanu and Olnick bought a weekend home in Garrison so their children — Robert and Eve from Olnick's first marriage, and later, Stella from their own — could experience nature. "We wanted them to know what country life entails and expose them to animals," Spanu said.

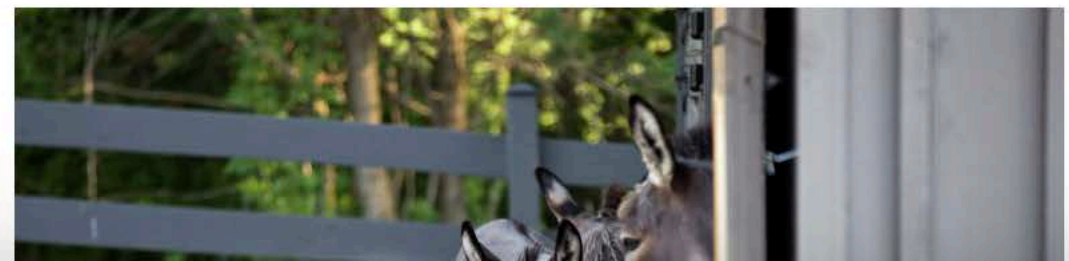
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When Stena was born in 1994, Spanu decided to buy two donkeys from Sardinia. But they were classified as endangered, so there was no way to export them. (They have since recovered to a degree.)

Spanu persisted. His research revealed that in 1936, a group of Sardinian donkeys was shipped to New England. Later, the family who imported them moved to Texas. Spanu reached out, but the family was not interested in parting with any of their herd. Nevertheless, Spanu kept in touch, and in 1998, a breeding pair of donkeys, Chip and Voyle, rode in a truck from Texas to New York along with Arabian stallions bound for Millbrook. On New Year's Eve, Spanu met the truck in the parking lot of the Mohegan Lake Home Depot, transferred the animals to his own truck, and drove them home.

“They are the grandparents of the herd,” Spanu said.






— The Magazzino herd is descended from a breeding pair Spanu had shipped from Texas in 1998. (Alexa Hoyer / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art)


Chip, Voyle and their descendants lived in Garrison for 20 years until Spanu and Olnick received what he called “unpleasant letters” from a neighbor more than a mile away, complaining about the donkeys’ braying. “They only do this when they are getting a late dinner,” Spanu said.

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A barn was built at Magazzino and, in 2017, the donkeys were relocated. “We moved the noisy boys first,” Spanu said.

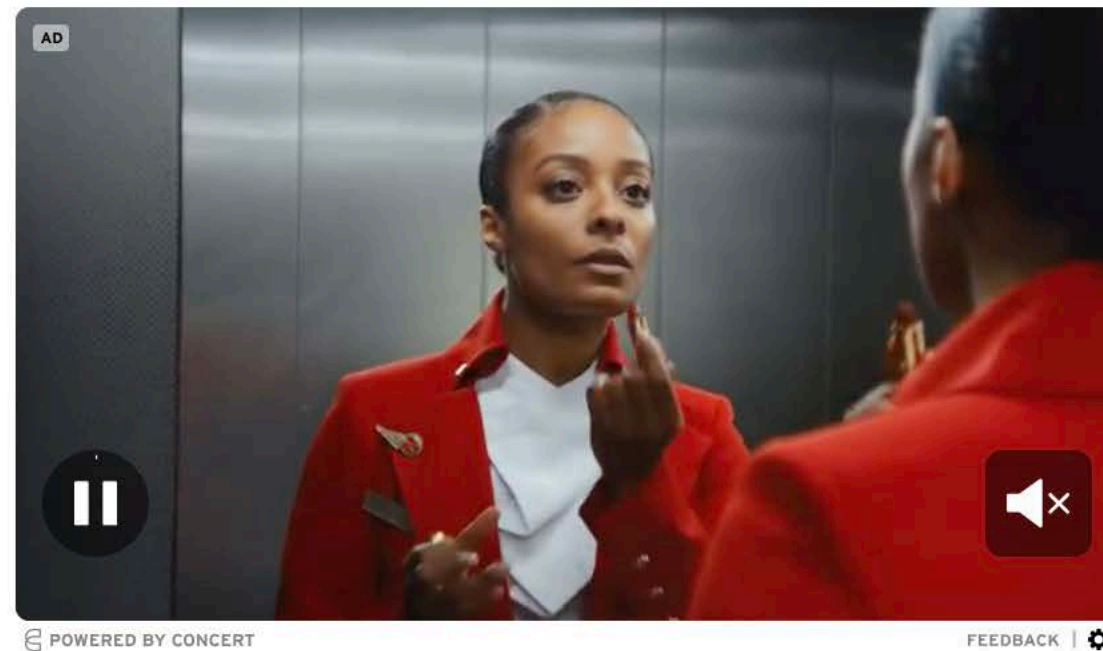
The herd has grown to as many as 18 but now stands at 14. Two donkeys were given to Tilly Foster Farm in Garrison for use in a BOCES animal care program and another for children with special needs.

“I personally love the donkeys,” said Lisa Walker, farm manager at Tilly Foster. “They’re incredibly playful with each other. They put on quite a show in the morning.”

Other donkeys went to local farms to protect their chickens. “Coyotes don’t come when the donkeys are nearby,” Spanu said.

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The Sardinian donkeys at Magazzino Italian Art in Cold Spring.

Alexa Hoyer / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art

All of Magazzino's donkeys have names that start with the letter "D" (for "donkey," Spanu said) — Dino, Destiny, Dolce, Dolly, Dante, Darius, etc. — with the exception of Max. Max was named after a farmer's dog who was killed by a UPS truck on the day the donkey was born.

In 2021, as part of a Magazzino program, artist Namsal Siedlecki created a site-specific sculpture for the museum. It consists of a feeder and an abstract sculpture made from coins collected in the Trevi Fountain in Rome, which the Vatican sells in bulk when their countries of origin don't want them back.

The projects in the series are meant to be temporary, but Siedlecki donated his sculpture to the donkeys. Spanu said the donkeys seem to appreciate it. "They like to eat the food that's in the sculpture," he said.





— All but one of the donkeys' names start with the letter "D" — for donkey.
Marco Anelli / Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art

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