

Rudy Rotter – A Warehouse Full of Dreams

by Randy Rotter

Near the center of downtown Manitowoc, Wis., is a 100-year-old warehouse. It's a large, block-wide, unheated, dilapidated space with floors of rough-cut timber which were likely hewn from the same forests which provided the wood for the early local shipbuilders.

Within this building are three full floors housing the art of the self-taught artist Rudy Rotter, who created more than 15,000 works of art in his lifetime. Searching for a form of expression, Rudy began making art in 1956 and did so with energy and commitment until his death in 2001.

Manitowoc, a town of 30,000 located on the shore of Lake Michigan, is currently experiencing difficulties brought about by the Rust Belt economic recession. In the 1850s, Manitowoc was an early bastion of Great Lakes shipbuilding and, later, a center for aluminum kitchenware manufacturing. However, this working-class community has seen better days. The aluminum business abandoned the town decades ago. The Manitowoc Company, which began building boats in 1902 and recently manufactured large lifting cranes, folded shop and left town a few years ago.

In the 1920s, Eastern European Jews migrated to rural towns in the Midwest. These were mostly itinerant peddlers, some traveling by foot, and shopkeepers who settled and founded successful businesses. The post-war arrival of young professionals had the same goal of finding opportunity and security, which often began by joining already settled relatives. Rudy Rotter arrived in Manitowoc at the doorstep of his first wife's extended family, in the late 1940s after his release from the U.S. Army. At the age of 32, Rotter opened a dental practice there.

To Rotter, Manitowoc was a dream come true. He was from a close-knit Milwaukee immigrant family, having grown up in a busy household during the Depression. The transition to living in a pleasant, small Midwestern town allowed him the opportunity to be economically secure, raise a family, join a Jewish community, and eventually, to become an artist in a way not likely possible within an urban setting.

Rotter set up a studio and for decades created art daily. His production was so profuse that in time he moved his studio from the basement of his dental office into an old warehouse. Eventually, the need to store this large body of work became the basis for the self-designated Rudy Rotter Museum of Art.

Rotter spent his last 45 years traveling infrequently, living an outwardly conventional middle-class life and, at the same time, obsessively creating art. While his professional and community life provided him with sustenance and support, he was still an outlier. There were the contradictions of being a Jew in a traditional Catholic town, a professional in a working-class community and an unconventional and inventive personality where stark conformity was the norm. He was a man imbued with an artistic vision in a locale noted for restrained expression. In the end, by not being embedded within the cultural mainstream, he was able to create his own world as an artist.

Although generally aware of the history of art, Rotter had no formal art training. Instead he relied upon his inner muse to provide the substance and style of his work. Commercial success was not a driver; he had an inner compulsion to create. His art was independent of outside demands, but he still yearned for an audience who understood his work. There would be infrequent drop-ins by locals, periodic visits by outsider art dealers and academics, seasonal third-grade class school tours, or a random tourist at the door. But overall, he worked alone and was largely ignored in his unheated studio.

From early on, Rotter developed his own style. He would peruse second-hand art books, visit the Art Institute of Chicago once a year, and show his art to the few who recognized his talent. He experimented with traditional formats such as clay and plaster. Soon he acquired a retired pattern maker's tools which led him to hardwoods and stone. During this formative period, he also drew daily using Japanese crayons. If a patient canceled, that unscheduled time was utilized by sculpting in his basement studio.

Over time his office waiting room, the building's entrance and all other available spaces became filled with his art work. This quirky behavior was accepted by the community, if not well understood. His ever-increasing production finally required him to rent the three-story warehouse space.

Rotter had an adventurous spirit; he was always curious and full of energy. Despite having a traditional occupation, he had a parallel need to create. First, there was a short stint of inventing, then piano lessons, next a year planning to dock a small Bahamian cruise ship in the Manitowoc harbor (fortunately unfulfilled). Then one night he took up a hammer and chisel to carve a head in wood. That was the beginning of his 45-year journey.

His art was derived from the experiences of his youth. He formed a simple tale of a struggling, happy and loving family, their hard work and family joy. This story, while not portrayed literally, was distilled down to father, mother and child groupings. Later, iterations of this theme became even more abstracted with swirling figures, faces, birds and imaginary creatures of his own design. Yet there is always the same underlying essence and vibrancy of interconnection.

All his figures and characters were archetypes. They were actors within his art, almost always without clothing or other indicators of a specific period, producing a timeless, universal quality.

Rotter's simple and direct work reflects both what he thought and how he worked. His use of line and shape is minimal and efficient. The work has a sophisticated abstract structure. His work at times is wistful, dreamlike and serene, but he also periodically portrayed the violence he saw in the world in the hope that art would be a healing force.

His early works in plaster display his artistic ambition, while not yet being mature. Next, he used discarded foundry patterns broken into parts to build roughly constructed, small but grand imaginary architectural models. Later, assemblage pieces were created from thrift-store toys and athletic trophy figures, all small displays in service of a larger vision. During this same period, he continued his figurative work in clay and wood. Finally, near the end of his life, he

produced thousands of drawings using magic markers, found materials and odds and ends. His artwork became more exotic, experimental, and perhaps even more interesting.

Was Rudy Rotter an Outsider Artist? Yes and no. He understood he was making art. He understood his art did not conform to the traditional model. He worked alone but was not isolated from his community. He did not need to produce work to meet other's expectations. Early on, Rotter showed his work locally, but as time passed he felt that his art was not understood or appreciated.

Rotter believed he was an important artist and that his art deserved attention and recognition. By chance, Tony Rajer, a Wisconsin art conservator, found Rotter's museum. Rajer visited Manitowoc often and became Rotter's friend and his source of validation and documentation. Rajer's book, *Rudy Rotter's Spirit-Driven Art: The Odyssey and Evolution of an Artistic Vision*, was published in 1998.

Near the end of Rotter's life, the Kohler Foundation acquired more than 200 pieces of his art. The American Visionary Art Museum, the Wisconsin Museum of Art, as well as numerous university and private collections also contain Rotter's art. His work was included in a 2003 show of Jewish outsider artists at the Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York City, as well being shown at The Portrait Society Gallery in Milwaukee.

By the time Rotter died at 88, the Rudy Rotter Museum building was filled top to bottom with his work. He had done no strategic planning for the future of his art. That would have taken away time from creating and implied there was an end to the art-making process. Neither of those was on his agenda.

Initially, Rotter's second wife Karen, many years his junior, fulfilled the obligation to preserve the remaining art. But after ten years, she experienced the same exasperation felt by so many kin of deceased artists. The available local audience was too small, and the locale was not receptive. Now, 17 years since the artist's death, I, Rotter's son, have taken on the stewardship of my father's collection.

My mission is to catalog, curate and make visible and accessible the best of Rudy Rotter's work. In the meantime, the art sits silent and unseen in this nondescript warehouse where it was originally created. The artist is no longer moving about the building, but if you walk through the space you can feel Rudy Rotter's spirit everywhere.

In describing the meaning of his work, Rotter said, "You see a whole series of interactions. This shows that all of humanity is interwoven and interrelated. And how each one is holding someone, being held, being supported, loving, and being loved. This the dream." With this universal theme, he was able to go forth with a clear purpose for the whole of his artistic life.

RANDY ROTTER is retired from the technology sector and resides in Seattle. He has a MFA from the University of Southern California and was a working artist in New York City in the early 1980s. An informational website is available at <http://rudyroterart.com>. He travels regularly to Manitowoc to work on the collection.

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