

Rudy Rotter's Museum of Sculpture

Manitowoc

(excerpted from the book "Great Little Museums of the Midwest" - by Christine Des Garennes)

Ah, if only we all could have had dentists as gentle and fun loving as Rudy Rotter. (We probably wouldn't be so terrified to make an appointment.) Nearly 90 years old, Rudy Rotter, a retired dentist, greets every visitor to his sculpture museum and workshop with a grin and twinkling eye. He'll often stop hammering away at his latest piece and take his visitor by the hand to lead him or her around his sprawling warehouse, sharing stories about his parents and grandchildren along the way. Maybe you'll walk away with a little gift.

Rotter is not in the art business to make money, but to create "happy, beautiful things" that keep him going, he says. He derives joy from creating original pieces of art out of teak, plywood, plastic, and sheet metal, among many other things. He will pick up a carpet remnant given to him when a local carpet business that closed or metallic shavings swept up from the floor of a trophy factory and construct a sparkly, gemlike piece to which he always signs his name and his slogan for the year: "Happy! RR, 2000."

Without relying on any preliminary sketches or preconceived notions of what he will create, Rotter "just does" his art, he says. A self-taught artist, his work has been categorized as folk art or vernacular art by academics and industry professionals. Whatever you want to call it, it's hard to take your eyes off his creations. Stroll down the aisles piled high with chunks of wood painted with faces, page through a book of sketches, kneel down before a tabernacle-like sculpture. He has stained glass productions, carpet remnant sculptures, the "purge series" of plastic molds, and "a girl's best friend is mink" installation. Considered one of Wisconsin's most prolific artists, Rotter has created more than 16,000 pieces since the 1950s.

The son of Russian immigrants, Rotter grew up in Milwaukee above a flower shop. After graduating high school, he attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, studied zoology, and played on the football and track teams. After graduation he started working at the Milwaukee Public Museum, where he had spent a lot of time on the weekends with his family while growing up. A few years into the job, after realizing it would take a long time to work his way up the museum ladder, Rotter enrolled at Marquette University's dental school. In the late 1940s, he moved to Manitowoc to open a practice and has remained there ever since.

For many years he and his family lived above his practice and Rotter tinkered in the basement with wood and stone. He started carving human figures, Rodin-like pieces such as a woman with long, flowing hair and her arms tucked under her legs. His early art consisted mainly of wood carvings of people in religious scenes, with Judaic, Christian, Greek, African, Indian, and American Indian themes. Many of these carvings are located in the front of the museum. You'll recognize figures like Moses and King Solomon. Head toward the rear of the museum and you'll see how Rotter branched out over the years and started working with materials like tin and plastic. Instead of images of Moses, you'll see many faces of ordinary women painted on items including old computer parts.

Rotter is truly an inventive man. While he was sculpting and filling cavities, he also happened to be whipping up his own inventions: a sugarless chewing gum, a shoeshine roller and a sterilizing autoclave (a dentist's tool). But you won't hear him bragging about these projects; he is also quite humble. "Yes, I invented a sugarless chewing gum," he may casually remark while taking a visitor through his museum.

In 1987 he retired from dentistry and transported the artwork from his office into part of a warehouse at 701 Buffalo Street. Since then he's taken over all three floors of the approximately 21,000-square-foot building. In spite of the arthritis that has plagued him for the last several years, he usually goes to his museum and workshop every day.

His collection won't disappear when he passes away, thanks to the Friends of Rudy Rotter organization whose objective is to ensure that Rotter's collection remains accessible.

(Note: Now, almost two decades since the artist's passing, his son is working to make the art visible and to distribute the work into the world, much of which still remains in the same warehouse.)

Visit <http://www.rudyrotter.com> for links to more information about Rudy Rotter.