

Dusting Off a Blue Flame

I wasn't expecting to find art at Sarge's Shoe Repair when I went by to pick up a pair of boots that Mary Helen had dropped off for heel replacement.

On my way into the shop in the basement of the plain brick building, I walked by a man lacing up a pair of boots as he sat in in the parking lot. He looked up at me. Grinning, he said, "I've had these boots for more than twenty years. They needed some attention. See how he polished them? They have new soles. They feel so good on my feet. I can't wait to wear them again! That cobbler knows what he's doing."

The man was obviously delighted. I imagined him wiggling his toes inside his refurbished boots.

"I'm happy for you!" I replied.

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In a cramped cubicle surrounded by leather-working tools was an older gentleman I assumed to be Sarge. He had longish gray hair, skin the consistency and color of old leather, with wrinkles around the eyes and creases in the forehead. An exuberant mustache and woolly eyebrows completed the look.

"Can I help you," was the softly uttered welcome.

"My wife dropped off some boots." I handed over the claim ticket. Sarge set off in search of Mary Helen's boots. He disappeared into dark recesses, rummaging with ticket in hand, looking for the matching number. His shop was cluttered, dark, disorganized, irregular like the hours of operation posted on the door.

Meanwhile, I looked at the ceramics haphazardly situated on several shelves. There were several lidded pots with spouts. Intentionally asymmetrical. Interesting. Unusual. Creative. But not decorated in ways that I found appealing. All of them wore thick shawls of dust indicative of years of neglect. They were hard to see in the dim light, especially those on the floor, mixed among unclaimed boots and shoes. On the top shelf at eye level was a big thin pitcher with

conspicuous holes and an exaggerated handle. More decorative than functional, this item seemed to proclaim that the person who made it was an artist.

Among all the pitchers were some abstract shapes. I was unable to discern a consistent theme. At the end of a shelf sat a small intensely blue object dulled by dust. It consisted of elegant irregular curves spiraling upward, converging in a tilted pinnacle. Inside the hollow base were scribbled letters and numbers that were challenging to read.

“What’s the story with these ceramics?” I asked.

“I used to mess around with clay but that was years ago.”

“You made all these?” I marveled.

“Yes, but I lost interest. I haven’t done anything recently.”

“I know what you mean. I did a lot of photography until my best buddy moved to the West coast a couple of years ago, I haven’t taken many pictures since but we were back together on a trip to Sicily and Sardinia in May. It felt really good to be shooting again. I got some pictures I’m very happy with. Maybe you should get back into clay,” I encouraged.

He found the boots and consulted the ticket to determine the balance due. I paid \$20 in cash.

“Tell me about this one,” I asked, showing him the blue one I brought to counter where he laid the boots.

“What were you thinking when you made it?”

He studied it as if he hadn’t seen it in years. Ironically this is the first item an observant customer encounters when they enter the shop. He must walk past it every time he enters or leaves.

“That was a while back. Typically, I just start and things happen. A form emerges. I didn’t have anything in mind. This is what appeared.”

“What do you see?” I asked.

“Looks kinda like a flame, a blue flame.” He spun it around in his thick hands, examining it as if seeing it for the first time, even though it was the product of his creativity long ago.

“Are they for sale?”

I had the strong impression that no one had shown much interest in his art. He seemed surprised that anyone might be interested in purchasing his ceramics. The pieces were not carefully arranged. Not showcased. Not under a carefully aimed spotlight to entice buyers. These pieces, the culmination of his imagination, were unappreciated and neglected by everyone, including their creator.

“This one is talking to me,” I said. “I can see a flame, but, to me, it looks like a bird with an upturned beak, pointing to the sky. It is interesting from every angle. That’s what I like about sculpture.” I didn’t mention that I could also see a monk in a long, hooded robe with one shoe emerging from a fold.

“It needs to come home with me. I’ll put it on a table where it can be enjoyed from all sides. I’ll love it. And the people who see it will appreciate it. How much do you want for it?”

There was a long deliberative pause. I imagined his mental calculations: “How much is this fellow willing to pay? What price might be perceived as outlandish and exorbitant? On the other hand, I don’t want to offer it for a price that suggests, ‘My work means very little to me.’”

“How about an even hundred?” he said hesitantly.

“Sure,” I said instantly. Somehow it seemed inappropriate to haggle over price with an artist. I plucked out my wallet and extracted from a secret compartment a folded hundred dollar bill I keep for emergencies.

“Let me clean it up for you,” he insisted. It was as if this object suddenly had meaning and value to him now that another human being treasured it. He seemed embarrassed by the dust that had accumulated in the deep crevices.

“You don’t have to. I can do it when I get home.”

Sarge ignored me. He blew it off with compressed air. He found a rag and buffed it.

“This one I painted with automotive paint. It should be cleaned with alcohol,” he reminisced, instructing me on how to care for something that he had neglected for decades based on the thickness of the dust.

He seemed surprised when he looked underneath. “I signed this one ‘Manolis.’ That’s my name in Greek. People call me ‘Manny’ but my real name is Manolis.”

I suddenly understood. *Manny* repairs shoes. *Manolis* is an artist.

Before I could ask “Who is Sarge?” he mused, “It’s dated ’92.”

“Do you mind if I get your picture while you’re holding it?” I asked.

Again, he seemed surprised and even proud. He was smiling when I snapped the photo.

“Let me get a picture of it before you go,” he said, suddenly nostalgic at the prospect of parting with this long-overlooked item.

He arranged it on the counter but then decided, “Why don’t you hold it?” I did. With a big grin! He took the picture on his cell phone.

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I was still grinning on the way to my car. Manny had reheelled Mary Helen’s boots. Manolis had sold a work of art. I have a unique sculpture I can’t wait to display. I’m happy for all of us!

GR Davis Jr

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