

In Good Taste with Sheryl Popp

Artist sparks urge to buy his work as collectibles, gifts



Sculptor Dick Cooley is shown with his most recent creations. It would be hard to select a favorite, but the mining shovel is pretty neat.

Dick Cooley of West Bend can guarantee you a one of a kind piece of artwork at an affordable price. He might even be able to throw in a good tale about how he got the idea for the piece. Dick makes metal sculptures of from all sorts of found, antique, old and discarded objects, but his core idea was generated by a spark plug. Most of his works are of people doing something, or on something, or with something. More recently, Dick has been making larger sculptures of machines, such as mining shovels. I visited Dick recently to learn how he found his unique niche, and see some of his pieces. We thought it would be fun to preview his art, since the public can have a chance to visit Dick's booth at Holiday Marketplace at Washington County Fair Park on Nov. 21.

Dick has lived in the same home on Silver Lake since he was six. He and his wife have remodeled the home recently, and it serves as both a great showplace for their own collectibles and as a peaceful, lovely place to be inspired. Asked what generated his first sculpture,

Dick answered, "I was with Sundance Photo when I went on an interview for a welding job. I saw how much money they made and that's what really motivated me," he laughed. Dick went to MPTC for welding training and was challenged in one class to be creative. That struck a cord with Dick. He had to back up a bit to explain the spark plug connection. "My dad owned Cooley's in West Bend, a truck dealership. He sold Champion spark plugs there. My dad was a carpenter, a mechanic and a pilot, really handy. He won trips through the dealership and he was on one when I called to ask him if I could buy a certain tool for the welding class. He said 'sure, just make it worthwhile.' Then he passed away before returning home and never saw anything I made. The spark plug idea, it had a lot to do with him." Dick was a professional welder for 20 years. After his tinkering produced a number of small figures, Dick started giving them away as gifts to friends. Soon they were asking to buy additional pieces. "One of my friends," Dick recalled, "has a piece from every year I've

done this. I did them the hard way at first. I would heat and bend pieces of metal to the shape I wanted."

The first building blocks of Dick's pieces were bolts, followed by spark plugs. The first bolt man was about 1979. Works have always been on a smaller scale, and have always been people doing "things." Today, people order pieces incorporating a particular brand spark plug, if it has meaning for them. Naturally, there is a ton of interest in Harley Davidson spark plugs. "I had an order directly from Harley for their 150th anniversary of 150 pieces," said Dick. (This is a good spot to send out a big thanks from Dick, to the garages, small engine shops and Harley dealers who save spark plugs for him.) For a while, this work was only a hobby for Dick. Then somewhere between 15 and 18 years ago, he started doing small, local craft shows. A pivotal point in his art career came when he won a best of show ribbon at a Racine show 10 years ago. "Of course it didn't hurt that the judge was a big recycler," joked Dick. After that, Dick won a prize that he credits just to his enthusiasm at a Menomonee Falls show called the Cheery Cherry Fall Fest. "I really love the way people react to my stuff," he said. "I keep getting more and more ideas - more ideas than time to build them." Of course, when your special orders start coming in hand over fist, your new ideas do take a back burner.

"I had a request for a three legged dog to be included in a piece," said Dick. "The customer was surprised that I asked which leg, but as a pet owner, I wanted it be accurate." He's done pets on pontoon boats with their owners, and owners on their pontoon boats in wheelchairs. He depicts people in all sorts of professions and many different hobbies. Not only has he done hunters in tree stands, he's done them with all types of game below, and an equal number with animals strolling past while the hunters snooze in their perches. He's made Harleys, dirt bikes, and big pieces of equipment, like the



I saw a photo of this piece in Dick's sample book. It so reminded me of Edgar Degas' Little Dancer sculpture that I fell in love with it.

mining shovel. Color is minimal, and used as an accent only. Part of the charm of these pieces is that while it's fun to see what they are - it's just as much fun to note the objects that leant themselves to the sculpture and helped define it. The biggest sellers? Musicians (drummers, guitar players) and tractors.

Found objects include old headlights, ladles, saw blades, telephone bells, silverware, gears, old toasters, irons and tools, roller skates, wheels, etc. Dick hits flea markets and thrift stores to find parts, and has a number of buddies who keep an eye out for him. "I try not to pay much for parts because I don't want my pieces to cost a lot of money. I want people who want to buy one to be able to afford it. Pieces cost anywhere from \$10 for a very small airplane, to \$100 for the big mining shovel. Most are in between there. What's cool to a lot of people is that I found this store that sells vintage parts. So, a John Deere tractor can have a John Deere part in it, for example. Also very cool is a web site that's dedicated to recycling all sorts of stuff that would otherwise end up in a landfill." Even so,

Dick's workshop is a one car garage, so when people offer him scads of old stuff, he just can't store it. (If you do think you have something he might want, contact Dick through the web site below.)

Dick has now been a full time artist for about 10 years. He exhibits at at least 26 shows a year. It fluctuates because acceptance at juried shows one year does not guarantee admission the following year. Some shows have hefty booth rental fees. "I might be next to someone who has a \$5,000 sculpture, and there I am with my \$45 guys. But even at those high end shows, people haven't been spending that type of money - so I do okay and the expensive guy doesn't." Dick feels very well rewarded by his work and career, no regrets. "It makes me really happy to think of my piece being a Christmas gift that someone will think is the coolest thing they got. Or when people get them as retirement gifts and say 'hey, it's not a mug.'" People who can't stop at the show at Fair Park can still check out Dick's work on his web site. Items for Christmas can be ordered up to the last minute (really) if the piece doesn't have to be shipped. Go to www.sparkplug-guy.com to learn more. Dick's wife didn't have to think twice when he told her he had to submit a recipe for this story. He is always expected to bring this appetizer to friends' and relatives' parties. He also mentioned that the red and green colors provide a festive dish for the holiday season, in addition to being healthy.

Dick's Fresh Salsa

- 2 med. tomatoes
- 1/4 med. sized white onion
- 4 sprigs of fresh cilantro
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 tsp. garlic salt
- 2 tsps. fresh lemon juice
- 1/3 green pepper, seeded
- jalapeno pepper (seeded) to taste:
- 1/3 for mild, 1/2 for med. & whole pepper for hot.

Coarsely chop and mix ingredients with a hand chopper or food processor. Serve with tortilla chips and enjoy. Yields one cup.