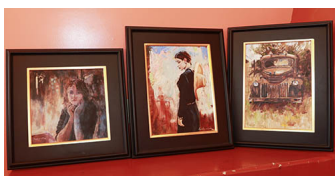


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Written by By Chrissy Largo Sun Correspondent
Thursday, 07 January 2016 13:24



The best of both worlds – life as a silversmith and painter

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Michael Schmaltz loves painting women, all kinds of women, as they go about their daily activities. He photographs them in not your typical pose and what he gets is an image for a painting. However, his current work is a painting of his daughter when she was 10, sitting on the floor reading the “funny papers.”

He plans on giving this painting to her when he is finished.

A once passionate jewelry maker in his prime years, he is now embarking on living his lifelong dream of an artist, something that his parents heavily discouraged him in pursuing when he was a teen. He says that he always knew in his heart since he was five years old that he had artistic abilities.

“I just had a knack for it,” he said. “I was recognized at a real young age at being artistic. But, I was discouraged from pursuing art by my parents, who’d thought it would be a waste of time.”

Schmaltz talks about enlisting in the Army, putting his artistic dream on the back burner, and how he remembers while he was aboard a ship, he was so bored he did some oil paintings. But, that was short lived because once he was out of the Army, he made jewelry making his passion for 40 years, however, he says that he always wanted to paint.

“I didn’t have time to paint because all of my energy went into producing jewelry,” he said. “It takes a lot of concentration and energy to paint. I couldn’t do both until I got to the point where I don’t need to make jewelry for a living anymore. Now, I paint and hardly make any jewelry.”

Born in Winslow, Ariz., Schmaltz has been residing in Gallup since he was four. He is a self-taught jewelry maker and artist. He remembers during the early 1970’s, when jewelry making was popular but he could not find anyone who had the time to teach him how to make jewelry. So, he bought a propane torch, some silver and taught himself the craft.

“The thing about him, he can do anything,” said Perry Null, owner of Perry Null Trading Company and a good friend of Schmaltz’s. “He can do inlay, he can do traditional Navajo, he can work in gold, he can work in silver, he can work in platinum. He can set diamonds. He has

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his own design and he's learned how to make good, clean, beautiful Indian-style jewelry."

To learn more about Schmaltz, please read the following Q & A to find out what famous people he has made jewelry for and what he regrets after all of these successful years.

Sun: Are the majority of your jewelry pieces Native American inspired?

Schmaltz: Yes. In the early seventies, squash blossoms were very popular and so I started making hook-and-eyes for squash blossoms. The shops around town were selling tons of them. The shops would buy them unstrung. A guy told me, 'you know, if you could make hook-and-eyes, for me, I will buy them for 45 cents each. So, I started making those and I was making \$9 an hour in 1973, and that was a lot of money back then. That is how I started.

Sun: What other kind of jewelry do you specialize in?

Schmaltz: I am known for is southwest style. But, I also made a lot of wedding ring sets, gold and gemstone, and diamonds. I learned how to do all kinds of techniques. I just don't do one style. I can pretty much make anything in the jewelry business.

Sun: Where have you showcased some of your jewelry?

Schmaltz: I was in a gallery in Sante Fe for many years, with my jewelry. But, not anymore. I always had orders for my jewelry. I never had to make something and try to sell it. People were always lined up to buy my stuff. They were just waiting for me to finish. The day I finished something it was sold. I really didn't need a gallery. I was just in one for a while just because it was cool to have a gallery in Sante Fe right on the Plaza.

Sun: Where do you buy your stones for your jewelry?

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Schmaltz: I accumulated most of my stones for many years. People would give me stones to use, to make them something and usually part of the deal, I would trade for a few stones of my own. I am using those stones to make stuff for myself and for my family.

Sun: Speaking of your family, would you like the tradition of being a silversmith to be passed down to your children?

Schmaltz: I have three kids but none of them are interested in jewelry making. They do not think they are artistic at all. I tried to teach them when they were small. I knew if I started them around ten, twelve years old, they would grow up and be really great, but they had no interest.

Sun: Who do you look up to as an artist?

Schmaltz: I had friends who either worked or owned pawn shops and I would go into the vaults and look at the old jewelry. I would try to figure out why it was so much more special than the new stuff. The old jewelry just has a certain look that is classic and never goes out of style. I studied it so I could incorporate that in my own stuff. I eventually evolved my own look.

Sun: There are so many struggling artists everywhere, what have been some of your struggles?

Schmaltz: People think it is a wonderful thing to be able to work for yourself. It is very stressful because you don't have a regular paycheck. Even though I sold everything I made, I've always had this stress of worrying if somebody was going to buy it or not.

I had a store downtown [Gallup], I had a gallery, I had paintings, I had jewelry, I had my own jewelry, I had other people's jewelry, and it was doing well. It was very popular, but it was very stressful, and I have a heart condition. I was told by the doctor to reduce the stress in my life. That is why I closed my business, so now I just paint.

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The jewelry that I am making now is for my family. I never had time to make them anything. I want to be able to leave something to them. I have made a lot of wonderful stuff, but other people have them. I want them to have some of the best stuff I've ever created. I am using some of my finest stones and taking the time to produce bracelets, rings and things that are taken to their ultimate finish, rather than, I've always had to not put too much energy into it because I had to sell it. I always held back because I always knew that I wasn't going to get what I wanted. If would put a lot of time and energy into it, they would say, 'naw, that's too expensive.' But, I always held off in putting the ultimate energy into these pieces of jewelry. But, now I am able to do that, because I don't have to sell it.

Sun: Back to your painting, what inspires you to do a painting?

Schmaltz: Walking. I walk everyday and that's how I clear my mind. It gives me energy to be able to go back and go to work. Walking is the greatest thing. I've always liked to walk. I hate running.

Sun: Do you ever go back to your pieces of art and are amazed at your own work?

Schmaltz: Occasionally, I see a bracelet or something on someone that I recognized that I've made. Sometimes I forgot that I made it. Or I've seen them on Ebay. I would look on Ebay theres a bracelet I made a long time ago. Things like that. I've made a lot of jewelry in my life.

I made a bolo tie for Michael Martin Murphey. It was a Zia symbol bolo. I made a squash blossom for Hubert Humphrey's wife. He was a vice president at one time. I made a cross that was presented to the Pope.

Sun: Where have you been on an international level?

Schmaltz: I've been to China in pursuit of turquoise. I set up a turquoise cutting shop over there with the Chinese people to cut turquoise. They have good turquoise. I've been to a lot of countries in the far East when I was in the Navy. I've always wanted to go back to Hong Kong. When I was in the Navy I went to Hong Kong several times, and I loved it.

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Sun: Do you think that southwest jewelry industry in Gallup can be revitalized?

Schmaltz: I don't know how they could fix that. We missed a great opportunity when they started the Indian Market in Sante Fe. We had all the people coming here for Ceremonial and when they started Indian Market they had it two weeks apart. People who traveled from New Mexico had to choose between Ceremonial and Sante Fe. I think that is what hurt us. They kind of let it go. They didn't advertise. They didn't keep it. I think what hurt the Ceremonial most was moving it out of town.

Sun: When you think back on all your accomplishments and struggles as an artist, what do you regret?

Schmaltz: I just wish I would have started painting earlier and stuck with it. I did start early but I didn't stick with it. I went many years without painting at all. I've always wanted to be an artist. I knew I was an artist. I knew that was what I should have been doing.

Sun: Any advice to aspiring young artists?

Schmaltz: I think that they should learn every technique available. So that they are well-rounded and they are always producing something new. Whenever you get to the point where you think you are the best at whatever thing you are doing, that's when you start to decline.

You can view some of Schmaltz's paintings at the Gallup Coffee Company located in downtown Gallup, where owners, Tiffany and Justin Benson, say his artwork gets a lot of attention.

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“Mike is an awesome painter,” Tiffany Benson said. “He has so many skills. Everything that he has done, I haven’t seen anything that he’s touched that isn’t beautiful. People just love the look of it. It is always an eye-catcher.”

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