

ART & DESIGN

A Shoeshine Box, With a Luster All Its Own, Emerges From the Shadows

By EVE M. KAHN JUNE 8, 2014

A 1930s shoeshine stand bedecked with gilded knobs and beaded fringe, which was once exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art — where it played a role in a famous director's ouster — resurfaced last month and is headed back into the public eye.

The [Fenimore Art Museum](#) in Cooperstown, N.Y., purchased the imaginatively decorated stand, which was created by an Italian immigrant bootblack, Giovanni Indelicato, who ran a makeshift booth on lower Broadway and sometimes went by the name Joe Milone. The Fenimore bought it a few weeks ago for \$10,000, after the New York folklorist Joseph Sciorra of Queens College, a specialist in Italian-American culture, alerted the museum, which has a specialty in American folk art, that the piece had re-emerged after decades in obscurity.

The sculptor Louise Nevelson met [Milone](#) in 1942 and admired his



Part of an ornate work box made in the 1930s by an Italian immigrant bootblack in New York, who painstakingly decorated every portion. Discovered by the sculptor Louise Nevelson, it has been bought by the Fenimore Art Museum.

Richard Walker/Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York

handiwork enough to bring it to [MoMA](#), where it was put on display. The museum's news release at the time described his assemblage of upholstered cushions and platforms as "completely encrusted with gay baubles and brilliant ornaments gathered over a period of years from pushcarts and 5-and-10-cent stores."



Another part of the work box.
Richard Walker/Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York

Nevelson called the stand "an epic of Mediterranean culture." Alfred H. Barr Jr., [the museum's founding director](#), known for his broad vision of Modernism, described the stand as "festive as a Christmas tree, jubilant as a circus wagon" and set it up in the lobby. Nevelson's discovery of the shoeshine stand was reported in newspapers across the country, and she started working on her famous sculptures incorporating found objects, often spray painted to disguise their origins. But the museum's conservative trustees chastised Barr for showing this glittering shoeshine stand, and it helped pave the way for his forced resignation from that job.

Cherylann Indelicato, the maker's granddaughter, had long kept it in storage at her home in Point Pleasant, N.J. She tried to interest major auction houses in it. "I was getting a no, I was getting a no, so it went back into the box," she said in an interview.

In May, the family briefly considered leaving it as trash at the curb but instead consigned it to [Concepts 1 Auction House](#) in Point Pleasant. It sold for \$3,390 to a local antiques dealer, Pat O'Shea, and the Fenimore Museum bought it from her and will put it on view Aug. 9.

A private collector also contacted Ms. O'Shea. "I had a higher offer from a snob, and I didn't like the man," she said in an interview. The stand "belongs in a museum," she added. "That was my conviction."



[Mr. Sciorra](#) had extensively [researched](#) the piece six years ago, analyzing its relationship to Italian traditions like feast day decorations and describing it as "presumed lost." At the auction, he said in an interview, "I was really moved to be in its presence."

Part of the work box.
Richard Walker/Fenimore Art
Museum, Cooperstown, New
York

Paul D'Ambrosio, the Fenimore's president, had long seen the stand in black-and-white photos from the 1940s. "It appears in every history of MoMA," he said in an interview. "It's so surreal to see it in person."

He was impressed at its substantial construction, reinforced with hammered copper, he added. As for the recent purchase, he said, "Everything about this was a total fluke."

In the galleries, it will join works by artists who, like Nevelson, perpetuated and interpreted folk art traditions, including Elie Nadelman, Ralph Fasanella and Grandma Moses.

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