

# Museum of Everyday Life has new exhibit on scissors

by Joseph Gresser

GLOVER — As she has every June for nearly a decade, Clare Dolan stood in front of an old dairy barn just off Route 16 Saturday to welcome visitors to the opening of a new exhibit at the Museum of Everyday Life. Ms. Dolan, the founder of the unique “self-service” museum, is officially the institution’s chief operating philosopher.

Over the years she has justified the magnificent title by creating shows that illuminate seemingly trivial objects such as pencils, safety pins, dust, and toothbrushes in a revelatory light.

The 2019 exhibit, the ninth, is devoted to scissors, as indicated in the manner of old-time shop signs by the pair of oversized shears balanced on one tip in the barn’s dooryard.

Like everything featured in Museum of Everyday Life exhibits so far, scissors are common objects that become deeply unfamiliar once removed from the confines of normal experience.

The show’s subtitle, “The Pivot and the Blade,” hints at one of the odder aspects of the useful item, which would be useless if made with just the listed parts.

In fact scissors are a singular item with a plural name. Nowhere can one find a scissor, only scissors. Shears, a synonym, also is always plural.

Although scissor can be used as a verb, it does not refer to the act of cutting.

Before the opening ceremony — a ribbon cutting, of course — Ms. Dolan read a short excerpt from the introduction to the exhibit giving an overview of the subject.

“Undoubtedly the blade came first — arrowheads, spears, knives,” she said. “Combining a sharp cutting blade with the ingenuity of the lever was the innovation that changed everything, yielding the elegant and indispensable tool we have been using for millennia.”

In Ms. Dolan’s view the lightweight, ever-ready, implement has a domestic aspect and is “stereotypically thought of as a markedly ‘female’ tool.”

A world that too often sees feminine as the equivalent of inconsequential may miss the power of the pivoting blades, but Ms. Dolan was quick to celebrate their use as an instrument of “revision, collage, pastiche, selection, parsing, styling, shaping, cutting free, liberation, transformation!”

The qualities Ms. Dolan applied to the object of this year’s show happen in great measure to be those she uses in her yearly examination of the vital, yet commonly overlooked, items that taken together shape human life.

As is always the case with the museum’s



A solemn toad sits watch over a pile of dissection scissors. Photos by Joseph Gresser



Device maker Peter Hamburger’s small, gear-driven machine presents a delicate pas de deux for two pairs of scissors when its handle is turned.

shows, the scissors exhibit is a straightforward exercise in intellectual curiosity leavened by Ms. Dolan’s dry wit.



The Moirai, or Fates, were depicted in Greek myth as three sisters, one of whom spun the thread of a human life, one who measured it out, and the third who cut it short. At the Museum of Everyday Life only the sisters’ hands were revealed.

A pile of dissection scissors on one shelf is guarded by a stolid toad, a relative of many victims of the same implement in the hands of high school biology students.

Hair styling, a very common use of scissors, is discussed in a corner of the museum that has been turned into a barber shop, complete with a mechanical chair and rotating barber’s pole.

On opening day the chair was put to full use as Sophia Cannizzaro gave free haircuts to museum visitors.

Ms. Dolan bought the pole and chair from an online discounter specializing in odd lots, but the

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# Some of the scissors were loaned for exhibit

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hair styling area features a display of tools that belonged to Clifford Elmer Schall, who left school in sixth grade to begin sweeping up hair in a barber shop.

Mr. Schall got his barber's license almost 100 years ago in 1920. His granddaughter Delilah Bingle lives in Greenfield, Indiana. She remembers getting her hair cut by Mr. Schall and sent his clippers along with a homemade barber's cape to Ms. Dolan for the show.

Another donor was Trudi Cohen, a longtime friend of Ms. Dolan's, who loaned a pair of fabric shears owned by her grandfather Isaac Axelrod, a tailor who had a business in New Haven, Connecticut.

Like Ms. Bingle, Ms. Cohen included family photographs. In addition, she loaned pictures of Mr. Axelrod's shop and the label he sewed into his finished garments.

An article in the *New York Times* caught the attention of Harley Spiller, an archivist and artist, who offered to loan Ms. Dolan a portion of his collection of "over 800 pairs of inexpensive and oddly designed scissors."

Among them were pairs decorated with portraits of cartoon characters Tom and Jerry, and Woody Woodpecker.

One case of scissors from Mr. Spiller's collection is particularly eye-catching, featuring several pairs of scissors each of which has twice the number of normal finger holes. The extra holes were for an instructor to help guide a student in the proper use of the tool.

Other friends of the museum offered brief outdoor performances as part of the museum's opening day exercises.

As always Adam Cook performed his singing commercial for the museum, by now a sing-along celebrating the institution's "mission of glorious obscurity" and providing the museum's address in a single verse.

Ms. Cannizzaro gave a timed two-minute hair cut to Marcella Houghton, who was an extraordinarily good sport about the experience, although she did feel the new length of her hair with an expression of moderate alarm.

An ad hoc dance troupe

composed of interns from the Bread and Puppet Theater went through its choreographed paces under the direction of the scissor dance's creator, Maura Gahan.

Last, but very much not least, Jennifer Miller risked her life and the lives of the nearest audience members as she juggled a trio of huge knives while going through a stream of patter carefully honed over years of street performance.

As she moved into the final and most complex portion of the act, in which she passed the blades behind her back, Ms. Miller urged herself to "bring it home."

In a moment of perfect sweetness, Ms. Miller, who is Ms. Dolan's wife, murmured, "I am home," as she successfully completed her dangerous performance.

Scissors have many other uses than cutting fabric or hair. In the show Ms. Dolan has an assortment of medical instruments, including a benign pair of scissors for cutting bandages along with devices designed for more intrusive tasks.

The inclusion of those scissors is particularly appropriate given Ms. Dolan's day job as a registered nurse.

She is also a skilled graphic artist, and that aspect of scissors is not neglected. The exhibit contains a number of cut-out images, including a stunning scene in silhouette portraying a tree filled with birds and an insect being attacked by a swarm of wasps.

A table at the back of the museum is well stocked with paper and shears. Above it the wall is already filling up with images created by museum visitors.

Scissors appear in literature, but not always in the most pleasant light. Ms. Dolan includes a version of the famous illustration from the German children's classic *Struwwelpeter (Shock Headed Peter)*, in which a boy who refuses to stop sucking his thumb is punished by a tailor with a huge pair of scissors and a willingness to remove the offending appendages.

A rendering of the classic Greek myth of the fates takes the form of hands reaching out of a wall. As in the ancient tale, one set of hands spins the yarn of a person's life,



Chief Operating Philosopher Clare Dolan welcomes guests at the Museum of Everyday Life's 2019 opening celebration Saturday.

another measures it out, the last cuts it.

Ms. Dolan is a sure handed curator. Her selection of material for the show cannot be faulted.

Along with the items mentioned there are many that add to the story of an essential piece of technology. Their labels are informative without being tedious and, while there is nothing jokey about the museum, everything is presented with a light touch.

On one wall, without label or explanation of any sort, is a tiny group of paper athletes each bearing a miniscule pair of scissors.

In pride of place there is a beautiful device made by Peter Hamburger that serves no purpose other than to inspire wonder in the onlooker.

It is composed of two pairs of scissors mounted atop a wooden cigar box full of handcrafted gears. When the viewer turns the small crank on the box the scissors perform a little dance, opening and closing separately to the quiet accompaniment of the gears clicking through their set paces.

Mr. Hamburger's work is unnecessary, fascinating, and utterly perfect, much like the museum that contains it.

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