

Torn by love's first blemish

By Ruth Ostrow

ABOUT a year ago I fell in love. Deliriously in love, with a piece of sculpture I just had to have. Like all dizzying love affairs, I was prepared to pay any price and the cost was ridiculous.

Well, let me rephrase that. The cost equalled the amount of craftsmanship in the sculpture but for me to spend that amount of money under the circumstances was ridiculous.

I was in the middle of home renovations. The money was to go towards a new kitchen. I had already chosen the cabinets when I popped into a local shop to meet a girlfriend and set eyes on the most exquisite work of art. It was love at first sight.

I have to explain here that this wasn't just any old sculpture. One of my fascinations is the erotic artwork that adorns the temples of Khajuraho in central India. I've written extensively about the engravings that so captivated English explorer Richard Burton he went home to Britain and translated then published the Kamasutra, on which many of the carvings are based.

The sculpture, brought into Australia by a business called Shikara Design, was handmade by Indian artisans and based on one of my favourite temple pieces, a woman and a man engaged in an erotic embrace. One of the outstanding features of the piece is the genitals, which are doing what genitals do, amid the lush, rounded shapes of buttocks and breasts.

Julian, who sold me the statue, approached as I stood gaping at it that fateful day and told me that everyone who came into his shop had the same primitive and voyeuristic reaction, standing mouth open, shocked at the explicitness of the sexuality, aroused and ultimately staggered by the beauty of the forms emerging from the raw stone.

Goodbye sensible kitchen. But the story has an interesting development.

I put the statue in my lounge room where it could be seen. Every person who entered my home would stand in front of it captivated by the energy, passion and open expression of love.

But over time I stopped seeing, or rather feeling, the sexual energy because something else began to capture my attention. A strange white dot was forming on the brownish statue's face, a sort of freckle. Then another.

The male figure, symbolising the Hindu god Shiva, had four significant white dots on his cheek and forehead. I tried to ignore these measles and get back into the erotic energy the piece engendered, but every time I went up to it I noticed the dots.

Then other strange discolourations started appearing. Three on the buttocks of the female character, the goddess Shakti. "This is magnificent," guests would

say, running their eyes over the statue. "Yes, but look at this strange dot," I'd say, lifting their gaze from the love-making to the flaws.

"Ohhhh, that is odd, isn't it?" they'd say, suddenly looking concerned.

I tried to live with the dots but every time I looked at the objet d'amour I saw only flaws. Like any true love affair I was no longer captivated by the sexuality but rather became consumed by the imperfect bits that were slowly emerging, until I could take no more. I drove the statue back to where I bought it. "It is full of marks," I told Julian, who nodded.

He took me around the shop and showed me all the pieces made by the same artisans. "They all have flaws. The Indians wash over them with a brownish mix before selling them, but the dye fades over time. The blemishes are in the stone itself: shale, limestone, etc. The artisans never know what's there until they are well under way. I can rewash for you, which will give temporary cover but, ultimately, you just have to live with the flaws."

I grimaced. "But why on the face? Haven't you got something similar without white dots on the face?" He smiled again. "Most others are worse than yours, come see."

One statue had a big, white dot that appeared next to her nipple, which looked really silly. Another had a huge crack running through her head. A statue similar to mine was missing part of a leg, amputated because the blemish coming through was too big and jagged.

"You were actually very lucky with this piece. The flaws are imperceptible. Unless you want to dwell on them that is," he said grinning at me, knowingly.

And I looked at my sculpture in comparison with all the other flawed pieces and suddenly felt very lucky indeed. Just then a woman walked towards the piece with her mouth agape, and I once again saw the statue through the eyes of love. "This one's already sold," I said happily, carting my statue home.

Of course there are flaws in all things and people we love. But I've worked out something very valuable from my expensive purchase. It's only ever where we put our focus that determines what we see. The choice is entirely ours.

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