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LOCAL

88-year-old homeless veteran is happy ... and the focus of new exhibit

Richard Musto, a World War II vet who sells items at his spot on W. 28th St., will admit to occasionally cross-dressing, always has a joke up his sleeve and may be the oldest homeless person in the city. A photographic showcase of his day-to-day life is now on display at Chashama Gallery.

BY [RICH SCHAPIRO](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

SATURDAY, JUNE 15, 2013, 8:40 PM



TODD MAISEL/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Richard Musto is said to be the oldest homeless person in the city at age 88. He has a plant stand on W. 28th St. in Manhattan.

He is a creature of the streets, an irrepressible sidewalk peddler and raconteur.

He is a World War II veteran, former horse owner, professional photographer and occasional cross-dresser.

And at 88 years old, he might be the oldest homeless person in the city.

Meet Richard Musto, the bard of W. 28th St.

In a city known for its larger-than-life characters, perhaps none boasts a personality as outsized and eccentric as Musto's.

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"I often think of him as being lifted right out of the pages of a Damon Runyon story," said Joe Lamport, who lives on W. 28th St. and has spent the past two years chronicling Musto's life.

Musto's colorful life is the subject of a new exhibit at the Chashama Gallery at 266 W. 37th St.



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Musto, who grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, joined the military at 18 and served two tours as an army infantryman during World War II. He's had a dizzying array of occupations: professional photographer, private investigator and luncheonette operator, to name a few.

A native of Brooklyn and lover of Broadway, Musto spends most of his time perched outside his encampment near Sixth Ave., treating the sidewalk as his stage and passersby as unwitting actors.

"Watch this," Musto said to a visitor on a recent day as a middle-aged woman holding a giant black garbage bag approached. "That's a nice lunch you're having today," he quipped.

Minutes later, a young couple holding hands walked past. Musto jumped to his feet, grabbed two flower pots he was selling and approached the pair.

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"You hold these," he said to the man as he locked his arm around the woman and started walking away. "I'm taking her."

Musto, who hawks flowers, toy trains and any other curios he can get his hands on, doesn't complain about his circumstances. In fact, he often waxes poetic on the fascinating people he meets in his open-air living room.

"I could be content if I lived in Times Square, Pigalle or Skid Row," Musto said. "I'm adaptable."

Later, while eating out of a can of Hormel Chili with a metal spoon, Musto pointed to a DVD of a Humphrey Bogart film. "One of my nicknames is 'Bogie'," he said. "I know more about him than I did my wife, and I was married to her for 33 years."



TODD MAISEL/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Musto's larger-than-life personality entertains passersby on W. 28th St. with jokes, skits and songs. His day-to-day life has been documented for a new exhibit at the Chashama Gallery.

Musto was born on Sept. 27, 1924, and grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant. He joined the military at age 18 and served two tours as an Army infantryman, fighting in the Battle of the Bulge and other crucial World War II skirmishes.

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Musto returned to the U.S. in 1950 and, he says, embarked on a dizzying array of occupations: professional photographer, private investigator and luncheonette operator, to name a few.

He developed a fondness for cross-dressing and once owned a horse named Crafty Courier.

In the 1960s and 1970s, he lived in Times Square with his wife, Janet Mecca. The couple, who never had children, divorced in 1983 and Mecca died years later.

How Musto ended up living off the streets remains a mystery, but there are signs that his life started coming undone in the 1980s.

He racked up a handful of arrests between 1982 and 1996 on charges that include grand larceny and possession of burglar's tools.

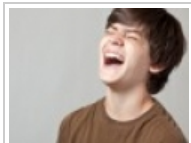
He decamped to his spot on W. 28th St. in 2010, and scrapes by on the nearly \$700 he receives a month in Social Security and veteran disability payments.

"I feel like I'm 40," Musto said, smiling wide and revealing his lone tooth. "You ever hear the expression life begins at 40?"

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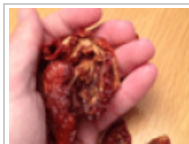
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