French antique seller says business gets better with age

By NANCY REGENT
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LAFAYETTE — Jane Fleniken took one look at the movers loading an 18th-century French armoire onto a truck and decided she’d better step in.

Four men were needed to move the 9½-foot antique, a 200-year-old find Fleniken picked up during her travels in southern France. The gregarious 5-foot-4 Fleniken couldn’t help giving a few words of advice. “Don’t pick it up by the feet,” she screamed. “It’s 200 years old!”

Fleniken is used to moving antiques. Each year for the past 21 years she has traveled to France in search of unique buys for her Lafayette customers. She and her husband Carroll, who died a year and a half ago, were among the first in the South to sell French country furniture.

People told her the antiques would never sell in Lafayette.

The couple decided to take the risk, sold their West Bayou Parkway home in 1971, and built a French cottage home and shop on General Mouton Street.

The antiques don’t stay in her store long, and most of the furniture is sold as it is unloaded from the truck, Fleniken said.

“I love living with my business,” said Fleniken, 66. “So much of my business is built around me, and it just gets better with age.”

Fleniken said her family decided 26 years ago to spend a summer vacationing in Europe. She said she was immediately fascinated with the French culture, and the family decided to return to France five years later.

During the second trip, Fleniken looked extensively at the manner in which the French conducted their business. Their homes were often located above their stores, and the women sold antiques while caring for their families.

The couple decided to go into business French-style, living with their business. Their living quarters were built on the second floor over the antique shop, and a third-floor apartment was added for a renter.

Carroll Fleniken left his lucrative job with the oil industry to go into business with
his wife. He spoke fluent French and had an eye for structure — two reasons why the business was instantly successful, Fleniken said.

"I fell in love with the French furniture," she said. "The French are very frugal, and their antiques are never varnished or shellacked. Just waxed. I think the beautiful wood and soft lines attracted me."

Fleniken knows she sells the best of the best, and her prices aren't for the thrifty. People who walk in her shop are "serious shoppers," she said, and often they have been referred by architects and interior designers.

"Almost anything you buy is in good taste because she has good taste," Baton Rouge architect A. Hays Town said. "She knows styles, she knows periods, and she rarely makes a mistake on a piece. She is sincere, she is honest, she treats people right and she doesn't charge too much."

Fleniken said her antiques are "reasonable" for good quality. She refused to quote prices for the article.

Her courtyard is filled with 17th-century olive jars she found in Provence, and price tags on the jars were marked in the thousands.

"I tell customers that they have to fall in love with the piece before they buy it," Fleniken said. "If you have to force yourself to buy something, then forget it."

Buying an antique is an investment that only appreciates with age, Fleniken said. It is a showpiece in a home, something that can be displayed without bric-a-brac.

"The good gets better, and the bad only gets worse," she said.

Like her French counterparts,

Jane Fleniken in her Lafayette shop, where she sells French country antiques.

Fleniken has an eye for beauty. She once spotted an 18th-century vasseller — a serving piece with an attached rack for plates — in the corner of a country cottage in France, the top piece turned upside down and leaning on the wall. She immediately knew the piece was of value, but so did the French owner.

"You can't sneak anything past them," she said.

She refused to quote the price she paid for the piece, or for what price it sold.

The pieces in her home all have price tags. It doesn't matter that the end table won't sell, or the armoire stays awhile. Fleniken buys the furniture for herself.

"If I don't sell it, I have to live with it," she said. "That makes a difference in what you buy."

Lafayette resident Elaine Abell said she first discovered French country antiques shortly after she and her husband began furnishing their home. Abell fell in love with country French and bought many pieces from Fleniken.

"She has a wonderful flair for decorating," said Abell. "When she entertains and you see a piece, it's for sale. You can buy it."

Advocate staff photo by Brad Bigley