Hill Memorial Library exhibit brings three centuries of Baton Rouge to life

From Red Stick to River Capital

BY ANNE PRICE
Advocate Arts critic

A visual tour of Baton Rouge history at Hill Memorial Library on the LSU campus celebrates 300 years of architecture, people and social and military history of the city through paintings and drawings, photographs and rare documents.

"It's a chance for old time Baton Rougeans and new arrivals to learn about the history of the place where they live," said H. Parrott Bacot, executive director of the LSU Museum of Art and curator of 19th Century Baton Rouge in Paintings, Prints and Drawings, displayed in the library's first floor gallery.

The second floor gallery exhibit, From Red Stick to River Capital: Three Centuries of Baton Rouge History, includes manuscripts, photographs, maps and art from the Special Collection department of the library. The curator is Faye Phillips, assistant dean of libraries for special collections.

"As we are getting geared up for Franco-Fête and Bonne Fête, it's also important to step back and think about our history," said Phillips. "We need to reflect on our history at the same time we're enjoying crabfish and dancing."

"This gives us a chance not just to celebrate where we are today, but where we came from and remember all the people who have been here before us. We also need to think about what we are leaving for future generations."

The Tricentennial exhibitions illustrate development of the city since the day in March 1699, when French explorer Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, first glimpsed the ceremonial "Red Stick" on the bluffs of the Mississippi River.

"The wonderful thing about this show is that we've gathered in two rooms some of the most significant art, photographs and documents related to Baton Rouge in existence," Bacot continued. "To my knowledge, this will be the biggest show that has ever been done.

Art and history earn equal attention in the first floor gallery, where a trio of rare paintings by the Franco-American artist Marie Adrien Persac are shown. Persac came to Louisiana where he met and married Odille Daigre of Manchac, and created artistic records of some of the area's grand structures. Four of his fragile gouache paintings survive, and three are in this exhibition, all on loan from the LSU Museum of Art.

A magnificent view of the main cabin of the "Steamboat Princess" is a unique vision of the precrafted floating palace that catered to wealthy planters. This is the boat the Persacs chose for their honeymoon trip to New Orleans, and the couple is pictured in the foreground of the painting.

Extensive detail and marvelous color gives the viewer an accurate idea of the splendor of the decor and accommodations of these legendary vessels. Persac paintings of the Louisiana Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb and "Hope Estate Plantation" are equally generous with details, and pair art and history very well.

Hope Plantation, located about four miles south of the town of Baton Rouge, was one of the earliest painted by Persac. The house, outbuildings and grounds are depicted in exquisite detail, and the clarity and color of all the Persac paintings is remarkable.

Hope Plantation was swallowed by the river after a levee setback in 1870. The Deaf School marked the southern edge of Baton Rouge when Persac made his painting of the Gothic structure. Again, he recorded a piece of grand architecture before it was gradually torn down over the years. In 1947, the last major destruction took place, but Persac left an artistic record of the original structure.

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"Main Cabin of the Steamboat Princess," top photo, and "Hope Estate Plantation," below right, are gouache with collage paintings by the Franco-American painter Marie Adrien Persac and provide an exceptional record of life in the mid-18th century in Baton Rouge.

The double portrait of father and son dentists Frederick H. and Frederick J. Knapp, above, is an oil on porcelain panel by German-American artist Rudolph T. Lux.
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Most of the works in the paintings and drawings exhibit are from the permanent collection of the LSU Museum of Art, but the oldest, a pair of 1821 watercolors by W.T. Kummer, and the newest, artistic renderings of the Old State Capitol and Magnolia Mound by contemporary architectural archival expert Jim Blanchard, are the property of Magnolia Mound Plantation.

This a rare public showing of the Kummer works, which are not on display as a rule because of their fragility. One shows the U.S. Military Preserve (Pentagon Barracks) and the other, “Best Part of Baton Rouge,” is a wonderful view of a small town with little frame houses perched on the river bluff.

Kummer was a Philadelphia military officer and amateur artist who was traveling west and keeping a record of his travels in his sketchbook. These are the earliest known correct views of early 19th century Baton Rouge.

Blanchard’s watercolors are faithful renderings of the three historical versions of the Old State Capitol, based on extensive research. The first shows the building designed by James H. Dukin in 1847. The second shows the building in its 1882 remodeled state following the Civil War fire, and the 1993 painting shows today’s structure, remodeled as a museum of political history.

His Magnolia Mound works show the original building as a settler’s cottage, circa 1800, and the 1815 version, enhanced and enlarged to suit the taste of its new owner, Armand Duplantier.

The exhibit is mounted generally in chronological order, and subsequent views of the city show growth. A pencil and watercolor drawing by Josephine Favrot, (1834-36) shows a larger town, with the tallest of with the tallest object in the skyline the steeple of the First Methodist-Episcopal Church. An 1833 drawing by Frederick Hawkins Perry views the town from the west bank, and shows for the first time the new Gothic Revival statehouse (Old State Capitol). An 1855 engraving shows Perry’s drawing as an engraving for publication.

A lithograph, made around 1855 by Persac, also from the West side of the river, shows growth in the town since Perry’s view was created two years earlier.

Paintings and drawings of Civil War events in the Baton Rouge area, significant historical maps and a fascinating portrait of a father and son, by Rudolph T. Lux, are also on view. The portrait is unusual because it is oil on porcelain, and believed to be the largest double portrait on porcelain ever done in 19th century America. The subjects are two dentists, Dr. Frederick H. Knapp and his son, Dr. Frederick J. Knapp.

Selection of striking photographs with a time frame of 1870 to 1989, represent some of the most prominent local names in photography in two centuries.

The oldest is an Andrew Lytle image of “Baton Rouge National Cemetery.” There’s a rare photograph by Jasper Ewing of a moss gin, and another Ewing print showing a steamboat year 1876.

An aerial photo by Fonville Winans shows the LSU campus covered with snow, and Elmore Morgan Sr. documents “Ruins of The Cottage,” the grand plantation house south of LSU that was destroyed by fire in 1960.

The 1935-36 corpus in Baton Rouge is recorded by A.E. Woolle in one of the few images of this historic event and a student peace rally photo comes from LSU Public Relations.

Views of natural disasters are by A.J. Meek, whose records of the 1939 “Exxon Fire” and flooding in 1990 are included.

David King Gleason is represented with a 1991 photograph of “South University.”

And for those of us who still mourn its destruction, there’s a 1920 photograph of the “Paramount Theater” by Chester Robinson.

While photographs catch the eye first, the exhibit includes a wonderful selection of documents and artifacts.

Oldest document on exhibit is a 1797 land grant from the Spanish governor Gayoso.

A large number of original letters, business correspondence and slave documents are displayed in cases.

A selection of Civil War artifacts, including a grenade and sword, are on loan from the LSU Rural Life Museum.

Other fascinating objects include a bust of Huey Long, donated to the library’s Special Collections by his family. The sculpture is by an unknown artist, and has eyes that seem to follow the viewer, much like the historic “Uncle Sam Wants You” recruitment posters.

Another bit of history is a small silver tiger, made especially for Thomas Boyd who kept the tiger on his desk while he was president of LSU.

The exhibit is dedicated to the memory of Mark Thomas Carleton and Marshall Stone Miller. Carleton was author of the book River Capital: An Illustrated History of Baton Rouge and Miller provided the pictorial research. Carleton was a history professor at LSU and Miller with the LSU Libraries Special Collections for many years.

The exhibit is made possible through a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.