Robert Edward Smith of Breaux Bridge shows off some of his French antiques that he offers for sale in a room of his home and shop. Smith, an architect, spends about six weeks each year living in France and gathering antiques to be sold from his home.

Life's work, lifestyle immersed in history

BY BRUCE SHULTZ
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BREAUX BRIDGE — Robert Edward Smith doesn't just sell antiques and restore old homes, he lives the past as a refined, debonair Renaissance man of the early 1800s. He has made concessions to the present at his restored plantation complex, such as a burglar alarm, air conditioning, phone and fax.

But he tries to hide the modern features. Electrical outlets are obscured in the faux marble baseboard molding and air conditioning vents are hidden by 200-year-old furniture.

He drinks from antique glassware, sits on Louis XIV chairs, listens to period music and from time to time dresses in aristocratic finery of his favorite era, 1750 to 1840.

Smith says he doesn't watch TV or read newspapers.

"I would have been the perfect O.J. Simpson juror," he admits, revealing that only recently did he learn basic details of the murder case during a dinner party conversation.

"He loves the history in such an all-encompassing way," said longtime friend Susan Edmunds of New Iberia. "He's so involved in re-creating whatever he's working on."

Edmunds' work at the Iberia Parish Library requires Smith's expertise from time to time with historical exhibits. She said Smith insists on displaying the proper items faithful to the era, down to the species of houseplants common to a particular period.

Lafayette architect David Courville remembers Smith's work as curator at the Lafayette Natural History Museum. He said he was impressed by Smith's patience.

"He's an excellent teacher in that he lets you discover on your own what you want to do in the first place," Courville said.

Cabinet maker Harold Bernard of Lafayette refurbishes furniture for Smith.

"He's always been a pleasure to work for because of his involvement," Bernard said. "He doesn't just give you something to do; he takes you through it."

Bernard said he is amazed by Smith's attention to detail, and his purist demand for authenticity.

"He wants it done with old tools and the whole nine yards," Bernard said. "I can't say enough about his attention to detail when it comes to restoration."

Historical restoration isn't just Smith's passion; it's his profession. He is an antique dealer, a consultant and architect for restoring homes and gardens.

To stock his antique business, Au Vieux Paris Antiques, he makes annual shopping forays to France with business partner Liz Hampton of Baton Rouge.

He is expecting a 40-foot container to arrive any day now in New Orleans, check full of armories, paintings, tables,
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chairs, glassware and an 8-foot clock - all the linens of his Breaux Bridge home by appointment and at a Ferrier Street shop in New Orleans.

Smith meticulously builds his antique inventory with not just curvaceous grands like the 19th-century mirrors, but also with intricate glassware and other accessories. He enjoys dressing up the sheets and potteis, all from the 18th and early 19th centuries.

"The work hard at getting all the things it takes to furnish a house," he says.

"As far as I know, I'm the only antique dealer who specializes in cur- tains," he continues. "I've made a lighted armoire that revealed row after row of finials and tie backs.

And Smith also possesses a wide assortment of crystal.

"Thomas Jefferson had crystal just as he had a fireplace," he says, gazing at a delicate liqueur glass.

He recently rented two truckloads of crystal from the museum for the filming of "Interview with a Vampire," New Orleans author Anne Rice's dark, sensual story. "I think people will see the movie and learn how the film- makers used the crystal," he said, enormous olive trees of glass and diamonds.

"They needed a service for 75, and I had them," he said.

The art and decorative products company also relies on Smith's expertise to re- main historically faithful to the set.

"In the end, it was fun for me," he said. "I think the movie was on the 10 o'clock at night and I was there. And I was in the kitchen."

"...They had ice for cold water then," he said, "and maybe now in the winter."

His architectural work currently is focused on restoring the plantations home, Austerez, near New Orleans, a house in the Creole style at 5001 N. Le. He decides that what previous reno- vations will be to preserve the structure as they were originally built.

He refuses to use a computer in his line of business.

"I don't think I'll ever do that," he said.

Smith's own home is a showpiece. He started buying antique structures to the nine-acre site 20 years ago at Anne La Butte.

On the threshold of his Pe- tite Maison, built in St. Martinville in the 1830s, one feels like a time- traveler to a bygone era. The house is opened upon a small mahogany table adorned with personal effects from 200 years ago. The wallpaper was made in Louisiana, including a clock once owned by Jacques Roy, governor, given in 1839-31.

The detail is everywhere in the house. Smith's island, man- guana and cedar wood and beech were owned by his historical mentor, Al exander Vail, a prominent architect and builder in St. Martin Parish in the early 1800s. In the center of the room, above a marble mantle, appears to gaze over one room in apparent app- lower floors.

"Knowing Alexandra as well as I do, he paid particular attention to detail," Smith said. "He said that Smith took on a renovation project with the Petite Maison that would have over- twenten years of work.

"There was actually no floor left in that building," Bernard said. "The studs were rolled out."

The Henry Vail home, circa 1821, serves as his office and antique shop. The upstairs loft in- cludes the costumes of Azadian and Creole bedrooms.

The jewel in Smith's crown is his house, modeled after a late 19th century Sacred Heart Academy in Grand Pteau, which duplicated a Catholic bishop's gown in Meaux, France. He has used plants carefully selected from native or imported species.