The art of the egg

State Archives to exhibit collection of Vivian Alexander pieces

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Arts writer

Some people are determined to get what they want regardless of price or circumstances, and the lady sitting next to Todd Cutrer's brother had no doubt that she would walk away the winner.

She was a prominent figure in the community, and she knew her price would be right. And it was. That is, until the auctioneer asked for a price $100 more than what she bid.

Not many would have contested; she'd set her sights pretty high. But Cutrer's brother knew differently. "He said, 'You may want it, but he's going to get it,'" Cutrer said.

He laughs now. Winning the pelican was a rush. Tracking down anything is a thrill. That's where the true fun is, and once a transaction is made, the thrill becomes love. Because Cutrer truly loves every piece in his collection of Vivian Alexander pieces.

The Vivian Alexander collection is created and produced in the Louisiana town of Maurice. It's where Alex Caldwell has lived on his farm for the last 30 years and where he and life partner Vivian Tullos began decorating excess eggs left behind by their chickens, geese and peacocks.

What began as a hobby blossomed into a specialized art after Caldwell and Tullos attended a Mardi Gras ball in New Orleans. Caldwell was struck by the contrast between the beauty of the women's ball gowns and the stark dullness of their beaded evening bags.

He was suddenly inspired. He would combine artistry with high fashion by designing egg purses.

Those purses have since evolved into the Faberge-like pieces for which Vivian Alexander is known today. And that includes the pelican that Cutrer so coveted. He prizes the Vivian Alexander pieces in his collection. That's not discounting the other antiques in his home and office. Each piece has a story.

Like the one about the Majolica bust that stands on a Renaissance-age pedestal in the corner of his dining room. He saw it on the cover of an antiques catalog, but the piece wasn't for sale.

So, he called the publishers, who gave him the contact information for the owner, who lived in Boston. It was Cutrer's show from there.

"I told him who I was and asked if he still had the bust," Cutrer said. "He said, 'Yes,' and asked me why," Cutrer continued. "I told him I'd like to buy it, and he said, 'So, you think everything has a price.' I said, 'No, things have a price only if you're tired of them.' And he said, 'Son...'

Cutrer knew he was about to receive a harsh berating, and he wasn't going to argue. Cutrer knew what it was to be close to a piece, so close that it became a part...

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WHAT: An exhibit featuring Port Allen businessman Todd Cutrer's collection of Vivian Alexander eggs.

WHEN: Exhibit opens with a reception from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday, May 18, and runs through Aug. 31. Hours are 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: Louisiana State Archives, 3851 Essen Lane.

ADMISSION: Free. Building is wheelchair accessible.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 922-1000 or visit http://www.sos.louisiana.gov/archives.

Todd Cutrer's favorite Vivian Alexander piece is this egg featuring lockets that open to reveal 18th century characters. The show at the Louisiana State Archives will be the second time Cutrer has exhibited his collection. The first time was in Opelousas.
of him.
What he didn’t know was this man had developed no connection to the bust. In fact, it didn’t belong to him.

“Son,” he began, “that piece belongs to my wife, soon-to-be-ex-wife.”

“He told me how much he wanted it for his collection,” Cutrer said. “And one of the Vivian Alexander pieces — most of them eggs — are attached to a memory or an experience or a pursuit.

Which is kind of sad in a way, because those stories won’t accompany Cutrer’s Vivian Alexander pieces when the Louisiana State Archives features them in the exhibit Defining and Redefining the Art of Fabergé Eggs by Vivian Alexander.

The show opens with a reception from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Tuesday, May 18, and runs through Aug. 31, meaning there will be plenty of time to see those sparkling wonders.

But anyone wanting to hear the stories will have to attend the opening reception. Cutrer definitely will be there.

Cutrer Caldwell is a man with a story, and each one of his work would really have to come from his collection.

A collection that is made up of 177 Vivian Alexander pieces at that. And that includes the peculiarity of the first story about the lady at the auction? It’s true some people are destination shoppers, but not what they want. But it’s also true that some people’s love for artwork and fine antiques is so great that it becomes even the toughest competitor.

That’s not saying the woman didn’t love The piece, but Cutrer simply loved it more.

And what wasn’t love? The pelican is a fiberglass pelican that Caldwell emulated and bejeweled for Lafayette’s Parade of Pelicans in 1975. The parade was much like that for the Louisiana State Archives permanent collection.

“The pelican is beautiful,” Secretary of State Jay Dardenne said.

The State Archives are under the direction of his office.

“We haven’t talked about where we’re going to display the pelican, but we know we want to find it a permanent home in the archives,” Dardenne continued. “All of the Vivian Alexander pieces are unique pieces of Louisiana art that remind us of the unlimited creativity that flourishes in our state, and we’re proud to have this exhibit created by an artist from Louisiana loaned to us from the extensive collection by a collector in Louisiana.

Which once again brings up a point. Caldwell earlier had mentioned that Cutrer owns more pieces in the Vivian Alexander collection than Caldwell himself. Which takes pride in knowing each individual design. Which makes him more than a collector. He could be called the curator of Caldwell’s work.

And he’s eager to share. Not everyone has the opportunity to see this kind of artistry on a daily basis.

So, Cutrer makes it available to the public, first at the tourism center in Opelousas. Now at the State Archives.

“Some states have gold mines, and they display their pieces of gold in a museum,” Cutrer said. “Louisiana doesn’t have that. Artists are our treasures, and many times they’re not found in the big cities but the small towns. And we display their work.”

And immortalize it.

For there’s more than collecting at stake here. Cutrer is preserving the timeline of Caldwell’s work, as well as the history behind each piece. Add his personal stories to this collection, and you have a true saga.

Take the egg on the bottom shelf of the antique pharmaceutical case, for instance. It’s Cutrer’s favorite.

“I love the lockets on each side of the egg,” Cutrer said, carefully holding the egg in both hands. “The lockets open up, and you can put your pictures in them if you want.”

Caldwell has filled each frame with an 18th century character.

“I like the way it is, so I left it alone,” Cutrer said.

Then there are the bigger eggs in the glassed-door armoire in the dining room. An exact reproduction of Faberge’s Duchess of Marlborough egg stands at 13½ inches on the top shelf. The egg was commissioned by the Forbes Galleries in New York, which once housed a collection of Faberge originals.

The Duchess of Marlborough was among them.

“The museum wanted reproductions made of their eggs, and they formed an alliance with Vivian Alexander to make them,” Cutrer said. “I gave Alex the start-up money for this project, and I got the first egg.”

He carefully removes the egg from the armoire. It’s been signed on the bottom by both Caldwell and Tullos. “And Todd won’t let me touch any of them,” Caldwell said.

He’s been my financial and legal advisor, and he relays them to the two artisans he’s trained to work with him.

And what wasn’t to love? The pelican, a fiberglass pelican that Caldwell emulated and bejeweled for Lafayette’s Parade of Pelicans in 1975.

The Parade of Pelicans was on display, Cutrer said. “We haven’t talked about where we’re going to display the pelican, but we know we want to find it a permanent home in the archives.”

Some are adorned with jewels such as diamonds and sapphires and garnets and other precious stones. The adornments may be mounted in white or yellow gold. According to the story’s legend, the egg pears are fashioned using real eggshells that are enameled and decorated with American crystals, cabochon gemstones and 18 karat gold plated embellishments.

For Cutrer, each piece has special meaning. He takes pride in knowing each individual design. Which makes him more than a collector. He could be called the curator of Caldwell’s work.

For love makes all the difference. Even in collecting.

Especially in collecting.

The prized piece in Todd Cutrer’s Vivian Alexander collection is an exact reproduction of the Faberge Duchess of Marlborough egg.

Todd Cutrer also collects 19th century pieces made of ostrich eggs that he commissions Vivian Alexander founder and artist Alex Caldwell to embellish. These pieces include a pelican, a frog, a mallard duck and a peacock.