



THE VIEW FROM BONAC

A Bonac Jewel

BY KELLY ANN SMITH

Mr. and Mrs. Leiber hosted a cocktail party in the garden of the Leiber Museum, at 446 Old Stone Highway, Springs, on Memorial Day weekend to welcome the Leiber Collection's fifth season. If you haven't seen the Leiber Collection, run, don't walk. I was lucky enough to visit with Mr. and Mrs. Leiber as well as Mrs. Leiber's only sister, Eva, a week after the party. They are 90, 91 and 93, respectively, and three of the loveliest people I have ever met.

Judith Leiber is the world's best known handbag maker. Gerson, her husband of 66 years is an abstract painter who paints every day either in his studio on Park Avenue or in Springs, as he has done for more than 60 years. He is an "intense" gardener who designed the couple's amazing six and a half acres. He has also encouraged his wife every step of the way to becoming a true fashion icon.

The couple met in Budapest where Mrs. Leiber was born in 1921 and was 23 years old when she met Mr. Leiber, a Brooklynite in the Army who was living on the mezzanine floor of her family's apartment building.

"We lived on the fourth floor," she told me as we sat on a bench in the garden.

"We got friendly and married a year later," said Mrs. Leiber.

Of their meeting, Mr. Leiber said, "Pure joy. It was love at first sight." "Pretty much," Mrs. Leiber agreed. Mrs. Leiber had already learned her trade at a factory in Budapest when she had met her husband, first as an apprentice, then journeyman and finally master handbag maker. She said she went into the trade because "Jews in Hungary could not go to college." "My parents sent me to England to study chemistry," she said. "During a visit home in 1939, the war broke out and I never got back. I looked for a



Elephant's Head Minaudiere in clear rhinestones and semi-precious stone detail, c. 1988. Right, Faberge-inspired egg with multicolored crystal rhinestones, 1973.



trade I liked." "She was the first woman in the Hungarian Handbag Guild," added Mr. Leiber. "It was very nice work. I loved it," she said.

In 1947, the newlywed couple took the "Bride Ship" to America to begin their new life in New York City.

After designing bags for different fashion houses, Judith Leiber formed her own company in 1963. If you were anybody, a Hollywood movie star, a First Lady, the Princess of Wales or even a New Jersey housewife, like my mother, you had a Judith Leiber bag. If you didn't have one, you coveted one. That still holds true today even though Mrs. Leiber sold the company in 1993.

In her day, she designed 3,500 styles, all of which were handmade in her factories in the city. Now, they are made abroad. The turning point came when a metal frame made in Italy came in damaged.

"It looked so bad, so I put rhinestones on it. It sold for \$3,500 and the company is still doing it today," she said of her favorite bag in the collection, called the Chatelaine.

The small purse looks like what a medieval maiden might wear around her waist, except gold or silver plated and adorned with Swarovski crystals and drop-in chains. The Chatelaine was pointed out to me by Eva as we browsed the museum's second

floor. It is also Eva's favorite bag. "I like simple," she said.

"Some are very busy," Mrs. Leiber said.

Indeed, the color and the details on the bags boggle the mind. Some are made in the shape of animals and vegetables. Many have art deco details including one Mrs. Leiber points out of the New York City skyline, "before the Twin Towers were torn down."

There are 222 bags in the new display on the main level of the Italian Renaissance style brick building and each one is very different from the next. About half, the day bags, are made of leather, exotic skins or silk, and the other half are beaded evening bags, including her most famous minaudières, which fit in the palm of a woman's hand.

"A lady's trifle," said Mrs. Leiber.

I asked Mrs. Leiber how it felt to be the best in the world at making handbags. She paused and then replied, "I guess I was pretty good at it."

When the business was sold, part of the deal was that the bags in the Leiber collection went with the new owner. Since then, however, Mr. and Mrs. Leiber have started a new collection. They are well on their way to collecting one each of the 3,500 bags that she has designed over the years in order to display in the museum. Each bag is a work

of art and should be shown as such.

The museum is next to the Leibers' "country" home where they spend weekends all year-round and, of course, all summer long. The only time the couple stay away from Springs is when forced by a winter storm, but that hasn't happened in a while. Mr. Leiber says in a short documentary, which plays on a screen in the museum's foyer, that he was such an avid gardener, he would come out from the city for a few hours just to weed. The Leibers started with a farmhouse on one acre and over the years purchased neighboring properties to build more gardens.

"The garden has slowed down," said Mrs. Leiber, but a visitor would not be able to tell. It is magical and peppered with sculptures. Eva points out "The Human Condition," a bronze sculpture made in 2008 by Mr. Leiber, a profile with a hand wrapped around the back of the head.

"It changes colors, depending on the light," the artist's sister-in-law said, obviously a fan. She urges me to take a closer look and it brings up strong emotion when I do.

The museum and the grounds surrounding it, is, much like a Leiber bag, a real jewel, in the heart of Bonac.

The Leiber Museum is open Saturday and Sundays in the summer from 1 to 4 p.m. Gerson Leiber is exhibiting seven paintings in the Visual Vernacular show at the Southampton Cultural Center opening Thursday.



Kelly Ann Smith lives on Accabonac Harbor with her husband and three dogs and is fascinated by Bonac culture, pop culture, agriculture, poetry

and nature--human and otherwise.