Marriage Of True Minds
Leiber love story continues through new exhibition

By Michelle Trauring

Gerson Leiber leans back in his chair, folds his hands and glances down at his lap. "Oh," he says. "Well..."

He pauses, pursing his lips thoughtfully before gazing up at his wife, Judith, sitting across from him in their Springs living room. Unexpectedly, he bursts into laughter.

"We met in the street in Hungary," he nods definitively, remembering the moment. "And I fell in love immediately." He sighs. "Well..."

Mrs. Leiber adds softly, with a Hungarian accent, "Yes, it was, really," her husband agrees. "We were very lucky to find each other," she says of the museum. "They really deserve to be treated as art." And so it was decided that it shouldn’t be just left to posterity without any sort of memorial, Mr. Leiber, 92, said. "It was difficult," Mrs. Leiber says. "But Gus said, 'You are not going to work for any of these schnooks anymore. We’re going into business.' I was scared to death, but we did it."

And they did it big. The designer’s handbags, carried by every First Lady since 1953—starting with Mamie Eisenhower and ending with Laura Bush—are now the property of the Smithsonian Museum. Opera singer Barbara Skin owns a collection of more than 200 Judith Leiber bags and approximately 80 of Mr. Leiber’s bags are in museums across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which also houses work by her husband.

After creating nearly 5,000 different styles of handbags throughout her career, Ms. Leiber decided to sell the company—and the Judith Leiber name—to Time Products, a British watch company. Ms. Leiber was kept on as a consultant for five years and officially retired in 1999.

"I used to tell all the ladies who bought them, ‘It’s a little pouch, so all you need is a handkerchief, a credit card and a key to your house.’"

"No, no," her husband shakes his head. "How did you put it? ‘A handkerchief, lipstick and a $100 bill.’"

"Ah, that’s right," she says. "That’s what I used to say.”

And Mr. Leiber looks up the museum and helps his wife down the museum steps by offering her his arm. They sit down on a bench outside the building and turn to face each other—a taller Ms. Leiber looking down at her husband’s bald head before he looks up to meet her eyes. And then, for just a moment in their 70-year history, they share a knowing, close-lipped smile.

Handbag designer Judith Leiber and modernist painter Gerson Leiber will exhibit their collections from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend at The Leiber Collection, a museum built on their property in Springs. An opening reception will be held on Saturday, May 24, from 2 to 5 p.m. For more information, call 329-3288 or email info@leibercollection.org.