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Art With A Central Mass. Touch

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Today



Photo/Edd Cote

Vaillancourt Folk Art, 9 Main Street, Suite 1-H, Sutton 01590
Pictured are Gary and Judith Vaillancourt
with their son Luke, who joined the family business three years ago.

History — particularly Christmas history — is alive and well at Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton, where artists work year round to create exquisitely detailed, hand-painted holiday figurines that have their origin in folklore from more than 100 years ago.

Vaillancourt Folk Art, which is owned by Gary and Judi Vaillancourt, has been producing American-made collectors' items since 1984. It is also one of a dying breed of such companies.

"This is all done here in the states," said Gary Vaillancourt, co-owner and president of Vaillancourt Folk Art, talking of what transpires in their studio — the creation of what are essentially Christmastime works of art. "There are only a handful of companies left."

American Made

His wife Judi, the other owner, is the creative force behind their unique product line.

Completing the family circle is their son Luke, who is director of digital marketing. Luke joined the family business about three years ago after spending some time working in the advertising world. Vaillancourt Folk Art is located at 9 Main St. in Sutton at the old Manchaug Mills.

Keeping their business profitable when foreign companies flooded the United States with cheap knock-offs has been just one of the challenges the business has faced over the years, said Gary. Surviving the Chinese inundation of lower quality Christmas figurines is a test that the company has been able to meet head on. Vaillancourt Folk Art made a decision that has kept their business alive and flourishing.

“We decided to triple the quality of our pieces and double the price,” said Gary, crediting Judi with the idea. “It was a strategic move that meant the pieces that she created became works of art.”

Judi, who has formal art training, began creating her holiday pieces of art many years ago, when her husband gave her three antique moulds. She transformed the moulds into chalkware figurines with detailed and expressive facial features, and a business was eventually born. Judi creates the originals and a team of artists work off of her original pieces to produce the final product.

“We did not plan to start a business,” said Judi. She began casually working on the figurines, investigating the history and the folklore behind the moulds, some of which are 100 to 125 years old. Judi has always loved history and she particularly enjoys the historical connections her pieces have with other parts of the world. While Judi creates figurines for other holidays, such as Halloween and Easter, Christmas is definitely the focus of the business. A tour of their Sutton business quickly reveals the overwhelming Christmas theme.

“All the moulds are antiques and she is capturing what happened at that time,” said Gary. “She is not trying to fabricate something that didn’t exist.”

“I am really capturing the history of Christmas,” said Judi of her artistic work. All of her pieces are signed and numbered. Collectors of the figurines always keep their eye out for the low numbered pieces, said Luke.

Vaillancourt Folk Art has a retail store at its Sutton location and also sells its products wholesale to hundreds of stores, including big department stores such as Macy’s, Nordstroms, and Neiman Marcus.

Of course, after September 11, 2001, their business, like many others, had to adapt to a changing world and changing economy. Quite a few of the stores that they once sold to had closed their doors.

“We lost about 60 percent of our customer base,” said Gary. But, they were able to adapt once again.

“Judi focused us into the museum and historic worlds,” he said, and they now do business with places like the Ford Theater and the Lincoln Museum.

In addition to a retail store, Vaillancourt Folk Art has its own museum on site, which allows people with an interest in the history of these holiday figurines to educate themselves a bit. During the holiday season, people can stop by and see the place all decked out in old-fashioned Christmas decorations.

As to what the Vaillancourts want to produce, well their goal is pretty simple. They want to create a hand-made work of holiday art that is also a bit of history, something special that can be handed down from one generation to the next.

“Our philosophy, our goal,” said Gary, “is to create a piece of art that you can pass onto your children.”

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