

Molding Christmas memories

Holiday season a fine time to visit Vaillancourt Folk Art Studios, maker of distinctive chalkware figures
By Chuck D'Imperio, Special to the Times Union
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Courtesy Vaillancourt Folk Art Studios Visitors tour Vaillancourt Folk Art Studios in Sutton, Mass., which is best known for its Christmas-themed chalkware figures. ()



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For a Dickens of a Christmas this year, it's hard to beat Vaillancourt Folk Art Studios in Sutton, Mass.

Vaillancourt, an hour west of Boston, is a premier shopping destination for the legendary Christmas ornament business founded here by Judi Vaillancourt in 1984. And it all started with three old chocolate molds. "Yes, my mother saw the beauty in these old molds and her chalkware creations have now grown to include a mold collection numbering more than 3,000," says Luke Vaillancourt, the company's director of digital marketing. "Of course we are always looking for more, but we do have the largest private collection anywhere. And, yes, we still do have the original three molds that started it all."

These exquisite handmade Christmas ornaments are widely popular with collectors. Hundreds of them can be seen at the Vaillancourt Studios in Sutton. Housed in a magnificent 1826 four-story stone textile mill (once owned by Fruit of the Loom), this graceful old structure is now a whimsy-laden fairy tale, which thrills both visitor and collector alike.

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Tours are given of the facility and guests can see the painstaking process, from filling the molds, painting them in stages, drying them in a heated vault, trimming and smoothing the edges of each ornament and more. Birds and rabbits, storybook characters, glassware, old-time villages and more Santa Clauses than you can shake a cinnamon stick at are all on holiday display here year-round. There are several sections to this popular tourist destination: the touring section, the retail gallery, the museum and the 166-seat theater.

The size and price range of the different items offered for sale here are as vast as the imaginative creations you can view. The prices can run from as little as \$20 for an ornament all the way up to "Big Boy Santa," which is an exquisite hand-painted, 5-foot-tall Santa with leather driving gloves and gold-foil trim. It weighs a hefty 100 pounds and carries an equally hefty price tag of \$6,500.

"We did a giant one-of-a-kind Easter Bunny once too. It cost \$4,500 and was sold within 10 minutes of putting it on the floor," laughed Luke Vaillancourt.

"We work hand-in-hand with the Starlight Children's Foundation to help provide children's 'fun centers' at regional pediatric centers. For over 20 years we have created new collectible Santas to benefit this worthy cause," Luke said. "But watch out, you ought to see this place on the day that the newest Starlight Santa is revealed for sale. We have people who come the day before and sleep in tents outside our door so they can be the first to get a low-numbered Santa. Amazing," he said.

For the last three years, Vaillancourt has hosted [Gerald Dickens](#), the great-great-grandson of author [Charles Dickens](#), for their holiday season kick-off. "He lives in London and comes to the U.S. once a year to recreate his famous relative's holiday classic. He does all the different voices and characters in the story. More than 750 attended his five performances. You talk about a magical evening! The audience was mesmerized by his one-man show," Luke said.

Many high-end retail stores carry Vaillancourt ornaments, including Macy's, Lord and Taylor and [Neiman Marcus](#). There are some smaller mom and pop stores that also carry these holiday items. They are also available at www.valfa.com.

The old mill where these delightful Christmas ornaments come from is a perfect Currier and Ives backdrop to a delightful little New England town that embraces the Christmas spirit.

Chuck D'Imperio is a freelance writer in Oneonta.

Want to go?

Where: Vaillancourt Folk Art Studios, 9 Main St., Sutton, Mass.

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday.

Getting there: Sutton, Mass., is about 2 1/2 hours from Albany via I-90 east. Take exit 10A to Worcester/Providence. Follow Route 146S for 9 miles to Exit 5. Make a right on Whitins Road, go 2 miles to studio.

Info: (508) 476-3601 or www.valfa.com

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