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The Southern History and Decorative Arts Museum

Freshman

Epergne

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The Impact of the Epergne

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At Houston Christian University, the Museum of Decorative Arts holds a beautiful antique from the early 1900s called the “epergne”. “Epergne” is derived from a French word meaning, “saving.” An epergne is a centerpiece with multiple functions or purposes that can save one space on the dinner table, able to “save” space for items ranging from fruit to flowers. As a viewer, one can appreciate the invention of the epergne by its efficiency, beautiful design, its economic value, and its fascinating history.

At first sight, an epergne may look like a miniature carousel. They are made from pure silver or pure gold. This increases the value dramatically. Epergne vases are filled with beautifully detailed designs and embroidery. The artistic detail provides the viewers with art and a story. The vases can be described as long and skinny in the middle, with an open top to put flowers. Attached all around the vase are candle holders and dishes. In the later models, these attachments can be removable and rearrangeable providing many designs all in one. These make a beautiful centerpiece filled with flowers, candles, and even fruits and other small food. At first glance, these centerpieces look expensive and delicate, as well as a work of art, but behind the physicality, the vase holds unimaginable history.

As they evolved, people started experimenting with varied materials to make these beautiful vases. Not only were they making them with metal, but the designers also started experimenting with glass, such as ruby glass, Vaseline glass, and carnival glass. Ruby glass as stated by Bisson was made from, “traces of gold oxide. Ruby glass was layered on top of clear glass to make it appear lighter in color.” (Bisson). Unlike ruby glass, uranium glass was used to make vaseline glass. Bisson also writes, “depending on the amount of uranium added, the glass often took on a very opaque look. This opalescent glass became known as ‘Vaseline glass’”

(Bisson). Lastly, the third most known glass epergne was called the carnival glass epergne. Bisson described this as “glass objects using iridescent glass.” (Bisson). These are some of the many variations of how epergnes evolved throughout the 1700s and 1900s.

Epergne vases were invented in the early 1700s. Britannica supports this by writing, “The earliest record of an epergne is in 1725, and extant pieces date from the 1730s.” (Brittanica). They emerged from France and spread throughout the rest of Europe. They became famous when these vases were used for Queen Victoria’s ascension to the throne. In other words, Minsker explains, This French creation from the 1600s reached neighboring England during the 1720s, and the middle class gained access to epergnes during the Victorian era (named after the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901).” (Minsker). After this significant event, these beautiful centerpieces started to cause influence among the wealthy. Due to their price, these vases were a symbol of wealth and power amongst the people. Epergne vases became a popular trend, spreading the influence and need for demand worldwide. These French vase influence made it to the United States when President Harry Truman was seen in a picture with the vase next to him. As small as this antique vase was, it was becoming a big part of everyday life.

The famous epergne vase has had such a major impact and influence that this antique still exists today. Many college museum's besides Houston Christian University hold this antique as well. Iowa state University informs us, "New materials, along with the Industrial Revolution, allowed expensive tableware to be more accessible and the demand for a well-laid table continued to grow.” (Gennett). In other words, by the vase being more accessible, it allowed the vase to continue to exist and grow in popularity. Although lots of museums have these beautiful vases, many wealthier families still have and use them for special occasions. Because of its importance in history and the age of this antique, the price to purchase an epergne range from

\$300 to higher than \$7,000. This price clearly shows its value, importance, and rareness among the people. Not only is the antique valuable because of the gold and silver material it is made from, but also because of how it has impacted and influenced people all around the world.

A popular known epergne is the Rayburn Epergne. To let the readers imagine the vase, Justin Minsker writes, “The Rayburn epergne stands 48 centimeters (about 1.57 ft) high by 22 centimeters (about 8.66 in) wide. The top portion is made of blue and white glass with gold painted details, making the design resemble a tulip. This top connects to the center piece with brass machine bolt connectors. The center is a shallow bowl made of milk glass with a gilt-edge trim and decorative flowers painted on the outside. Holding up the epergne is a clear, cut-glass stand.” (Minsker). This description allows readers to visualize the details that go into making the vase. Because the Rayburn family was extremely popular amongst the Americans, we as readers can see how these vases are widely appreciated even by those who are famous, or important.

Overall, the viewer can find deep and meaningful appreciation for this remarkable antique. The beauty, economic value, and its multi-purpose function is the perfect combination. When looking at an epergne, not only are you captivated by its amazing beauty, but the viewer can see the history in the details of the antique, and the fragility and elegancy in the art that makes up this French-originated centerpiece. An Epergne, a French word meaning “saving,” is not just saving space on the dining table but rather saving the appreciation of beautiful and remarkable antiques in history.

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