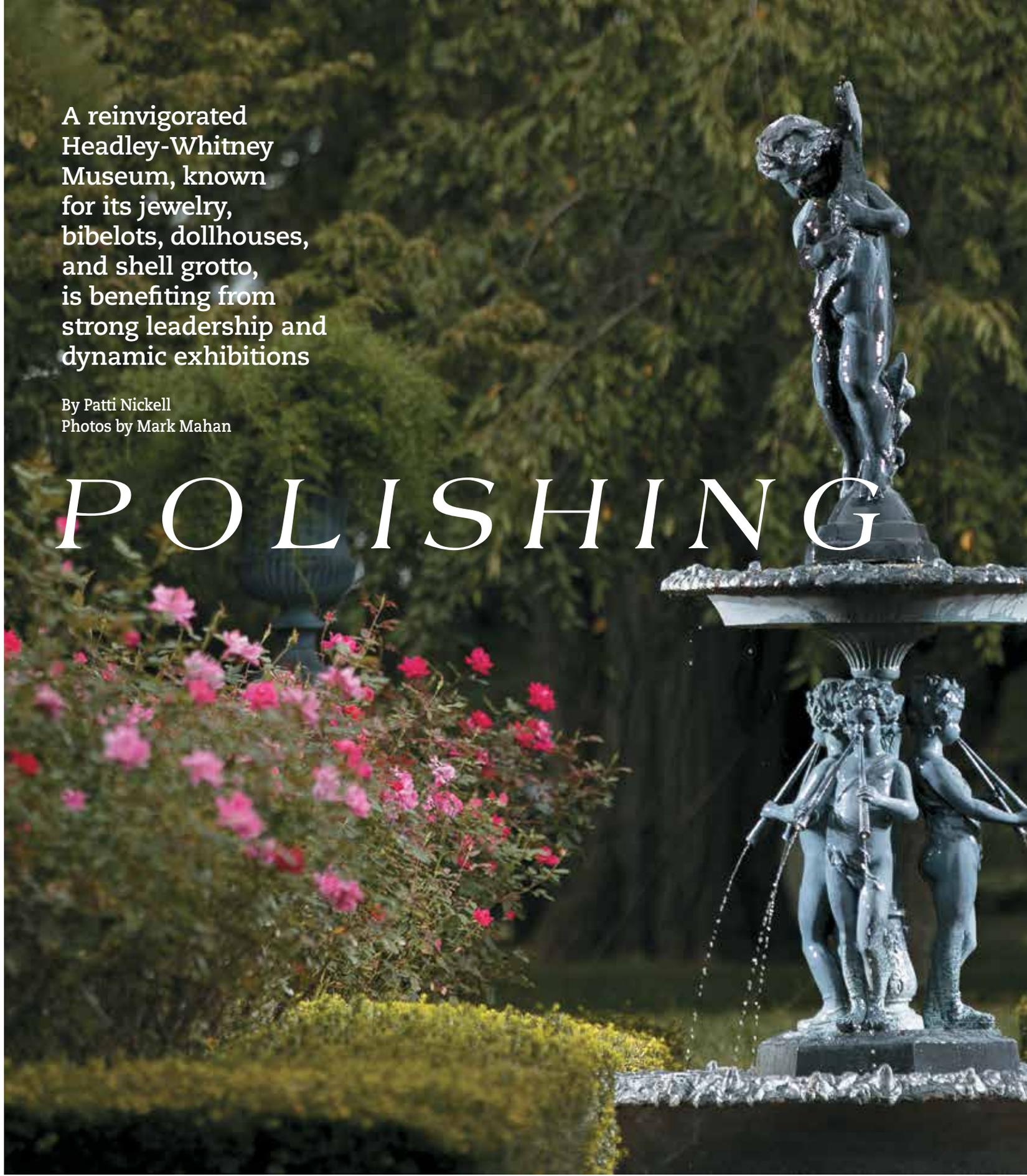


A reinvigorated
Headley-Whitney
Museum, known
for its jewelry,
bibelots, dollhouses,
and shell grotto,
is benefiting from
strong leadership and
dynamic exhibitions

By Patti Nickell
Photos by Mark Mahan

POLISHING





A JEWEL

If the suave, sprightly ghost of George Headley still roams his family farm, La Belle, on Old Frankfort Pike, he's surely delighted with the current goings on. For the museum that bears his name and is located on the property is getting its mojo back after languishing the past few decades.

Thanks to a determined new board president, an active volunteer board, a knowledgeable curator, and a public that seems to have a renewed interest in Headley's unusual creations, the museum is regaining its place as a cultural highlight of the Bluegrass.

The biggest thanks should go to Headley himself. As the son of one Bluegrass horse family who married into another, he could easily have become a dilettante, flitting from racetrack to racetrack, mint julep in hand and Racing Form at the ready. At the very least, he might have been expected to join the family business.

Instead, he chose bibelots over bloodstock. A one-time student at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and friends with the likes of Alexander Calder and Salvador Dali, he made a name for himself designing bibelots, one-of-a-kind decorative ornaments using precious and semi-precious gem stones.

But we're getting ahead of the story. Before Headley brought his bibelots to the Bluegrass, he was known as the jeweler to the stars, as well as a crackerjack marketer.

A protégé of celebrity jeweler Paul

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Flato, Headley operated an exclusive jewelry boutique at the Bel-Air Hotel in Los Angeles in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Although his creations were inspired by such diverse artists as Dali, Renaissance goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini, and Russian jeweler Peter Carl Faberge, he had a secret weapon none of the others did.

He would often entice potential customers sunning poolside by sending his dachshund, Ernie, out to circulate, wearing a diamond or emerald necklace as a collar.

A bejeweled Ernie proved an effective marketing tool as Headley, during his tenure in Tinseltown, draped his creations around famous necks such as Joan Crawford, Mae West, Judy Garland, and Fanny Brice, as well as a bevy of socialites, jet-setters, and international royalty.

In 1949 La La Land lost its allure, and Headley returned to the bucolic green pastures of horse country to oversee the family farm. It wasn't until 1968, however, that he and his wife, Barbara Whitney, decided to establish a unique museum on the estate as a showcase for their extensive collection of bibelots and jewelry. To enhance the effect, he displayed them in a dimly lit room designed to mimic a jewel box.

Headley also built a separate facility to house his vast collection of books and curios, ranging from a pair of candlesticks made in London from ostrich eggs and ivory, to the tusk of a narwhal, an Arctic whale. His eclectic style came both from a love of travel (incorporating everything from sloped Thai roofs and stately Greek columns to a French floor design and English Georgian moldings), and his delight in the unusual — to Headley, the narwhal tusk was just as beautiful as a multifaceted jewel.

The museum proved successful from the start, and five years later Headley converted a three-car garage into the Shell Grotto, a fantasy pavilion modeled after architectural “follies” of 17th and 18th century France, Italy, and England.



George Headley designed many beautiful bibelots, including the Fountain from Fez, top left, the Bird Cage with its intricately carved figurine, top right, and the bejeweled Icicle, above left. Other treasures include an 18th-century Italian urn, above right.

Marylou Whitney, Headley's sister-in-law, recalls the hours she spent sitting on the floor helping George and assorted friends “glue thousands of shells and polished stones to walls, doors, and window moldings.”

From the coral slabs of the floor to the mosaics on the ceiling, from twin heads of Aphrodite and Neptune sculpted in seashells to an iron chandelier encrusted with scallops, cowries, and nautilus shells, Headley made his vision of an exotic sea environment a reality.

In 1978, the main museum gallery was

constructed, and the Headley Museum officially became the Headley-Whitney Museum with the increased involvement of Marylou and her then husband, Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, Barbara Headley's brother.

“When George first started the museum, it was primarily for the enjoyment of family and friends,” said Marylou, who added that it quickly evolved into much more.

“George loved people and he loved to share his art,” she continued. “He loved to tell people about the objects he col-

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The Marylou Whitney Rose Garden honors the longtime museum supporter. Whitney's husband John Hendrickson gifted the garden to the museum in 2004 as an anniversary present to his wife.

lected and how he put the bibelots together.”

So delighted was he to share his creations that he could often be found, accompanied by his dogs, acting as tour guide for museum visitors.

Known for his lavish soirées and larger-than-life personality, Headley marched not just to a different drummer but to an entirely different orchestra. The man who, even as he was dying in 1985, set up a bar in his hospital room (but not before the “respectable” cocktail hour of 5 o’clock) was as big of a draw as his creations.

If not exactly the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Headley’s brainchild was perfect for the genteel Bluegrass, proving popular with art connoisseurs and general public alike — at least until one very fateful night in 1994.

Heist in horse country

Somewhere between midnight and 7 a.m. on July 18, 1994, the phone lines to the lightly guarded museum were cut, bypassing the silent alarm system. Over a period of several hours, Headley’s collection was systemically decimated. When it was over, 103 pieces valued at \$1.6 million had vanished.

Had it not been such a disaster, Kentucky’s largest art theft would have made great fodder for a crime caper comedy. It was pulled off by a trio of Mafia wannabes from Ohio (aided and

abetted by an octogenarian getaway driver) hoping to impress the big boys on the East Coast.

None of the pieces was ever recovered, effectively bringing the museum to its knees, said Linda Roach, a 15-year board member who served as president for four of those years.

“Going to the Headley-Whitney was a chance to step into an exquisite jewelry box and marvel at George’s fabulous creations,” she explained. “If the bibelots are gone, what’s left?”

Plenty, as it turns out. Not all the bibelots had been taken. The thieves inexplicably left behind treasures such as the terra cotta pigeon with ruby eyes and feet of pink gold, sporting a gold pendant with rubies and diamonds. Neither did they take a mask of Bacchus, Roman god of wine, fashioned of delicate coral and backed with a tangle of intricate gold grapevines.

They failed to abscond with the Bird Cage, featuring the figure of a Chinese woman intricately carved of Persian turquoise and sitting on a cushion of lapis lazuli inside a gold cage accented with diamonds and sapphires. They bypassed one of the most unusual bibelots, Fish in Cave, depicting a mudfish swimming through a cave-like opening of volcanic rock. Adorned with gold whiskers set with diamonds, the fish dangles a large black cultured pearl from its jaw and is surrounded on the rock by seven gold



Left, the immense attention to detail is reflected in this formally set dining table found in one of the dollhouses donated by Marylou Whitney. Right, George Headley's library houses 1,500 volumes as well as some unusual items from his collections.

starfish with square-cut green tourmaline bodies.

"Still, most people got the idea that the museum had been depleted," said Roach.

The number of visitors kept decreasing, despite the obvious lure of the remaining jewels, the exquisite dollhouses commissioned by Marylou Whitney for her daughter Cornelia and donated to the museum, and a series of quality exhibitions over the years that have showcased Georgian silver, Chinese woodblock prints, photography, fashion, and equine-related objects.

"While jewelry definitely is a focus, we don't limit ourselves," explained museum director and curator Amy Gundrum Greene. "If you come every three months, you will see a totally different exhibit."

One exhibit that especially resonated with Lexingtonians was sprung from the pen of the late *New Yorker* magazine cartoonist William Hamilton, who spent more than a decade dissecting upper crust East Siders with the precision of a surgeon brandishing a razor-sharp scalpel.

Hamilton's widow, Lucy Young, daughter of the late businessman and Overbrook Farm owner W.T. Young, curated the exhibit, which featured 133 cartoons.

Even with prestigious exhibits such as this, the Headley-Whitney was failing to

get the message out that it was a museum worth supporting. Becoming a prestigious Smithsonian affiliate in 2003 didn't enhance its profile. Cash reserves dwindled; the Shell Grotto deteriorated to the point where it became unsafe to keep open, and the 2008 financial crisis nearly sounded the museum's death knell.

It took a Herculean effort by the board to keep the teetering institution from slipping over the abyss into financial ruin. Under Roach's guidance they took steps to shore up cash reserves by selling *La Belle*, the family mansion, and by "deaccessioning" pieces from the collection that were seldom shown and others that proved too costly to conserve.

These steps, along with dynamic new leadership, some generous donations, and a renewed interest in Headley's art have given the museum a new lease on life.

Getting its mojo back

Martine Head was exposed to the Bluegrass at an early age by her father, Alec, a trainer and breeder of Thoroughbred horses on their farm in Normandy, France. Head recalled coming with him as a child to Keeneland for the yearling sales and falling in love with the area.

It was years later, however, when she

was living here that she was asked to be a member of the Headley-Whitney board. As Roach explained it, "We hand-picked Martine because we felt she had the creative touch and drive to take the museum to the next level...she saw things that we didn't.

"Plus, she has that elegant French flair," added Roach.

For her part, Head was nothing if not enthusiastic — she started by purchasing *La Belle* and set about refurbishing it. For the past two years she has served as the museum's president, becoming a passionate advocate for what she believes is an important story to be told — both Headley's own and that of the museum.

"If this small museum was in one of the other places George lived — Los Angeles or Palm Beach — it would be overflowing with people every day," she said. "He could have built the museum in one of those cities. We are so lucky to have this special place which pays tribute to his vision."

In a relatively short time Head has put her own stamp on the Headley-Whitney. She brought Tony Leonard's equine photography exhibit to the museum, organized the "Treasures of the Farms" exhibit to coincide with the Breeders' Cup World Championships held at Keeneland in 2015, and started the Garden Affair during this year's

Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event.

Of the latter, Head said, "It proved so successful that we plan for it to become an annual event."

Her can-do attitude has energized other board members. Guthrie Zaring, a Louisville Realtor, shares Head's passion. His first exposure to the Headley-Whitney came in 1998 when he attended the Tuttle Muddle exhibit featuring early Kentucky furniture, silver, paintings, and stoneware.

"I was immediately hooked and joined the board not long after," he said. "I am very interested in local and regional art, and the Headley-Whitney does an excellent job of showcasing that."

Then there's John Hendrickson, Marylou Whitney's husband, whose generosity and commitment to the museum have proved invaluable, according to both Roach and Head.

Aside from the Marylou Whitney Rose Garden, which Hendrickson gifted to the museum in 2004 as a sixth wedding anniversary present to his wife, he was instrumental in the reopening of the Shell Grotto earlier this year and serves on the museum board.

"As with any museum, our goal is finding new ways to connect with the next generation," said Hendrickson, adding that "if all you



Martine Head's creative touch and drive have served her well in her role as the museum's president. She is pictured in the Shell Grotto.

do is look back at dead people's work, the institution itself will die. We should respect and showcase the past, but we also need to be a living, interactive entity.

"We must relate to and inspire the smartphone generation," he said.

That smartphone generation can get an early introduction to the art world with one of the Headley-Whitney's most popular

An advertisement for Central Equipment. The background is a photograph of a brown horse standing in a green field with a cornfield and trees in the distance. The Central Equipment logo is in the top left, consisting of a stylized green and blue 'C' shape followed by the text 'CENTRAL EQUIPMENT'. Below the logo is the text 'Central Kentucky's Farm & Turf Equipment Specialists. Serving the Equine Industry & the Bluegrass Community Since 1972.' At the bottom of the image, the text 'CENTRAL KENTUCKY'S EQUINE DISCOUNT DEALER' is written in large, bold, white letters.

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The Jewel Room and Library, right, lead to the rose garden, which is a replica of Marylou Whitney's Saratoga Springs, New York, garden.

offerings, “Improbable Baubles.”

Now in its 10th year, the exhibit offers kids the chance to channel their own inner George Headley. This year, 1,400 students will take part in the free program. The students — kindergarten through middle school from public, private, and magnet schools in Fayette, Woodford, and Jessamine counties — will have the opportunity to design their own bibelots. Some 150 pieces will then be selected to go on display from Nov. 18 through Dec. 22.

What's in store

In March 2018, the Headley-Whitney will kick off its 50th anniversary celebration with a retrospective of George Headley's work. While plans have not been finalized, the exhibition will feature jewelry and other works not previously seen.

The retrospective might be the upcoming year's biggest draw, but it's just one of the ambitious projects on the drawing

board. Head wants to develop a joint venture with the University of Kentucky Art Museum for future exhibitions, and she would like to see some of the currently unused buildings on the grounds equipped as artists' studios. In her belief that nature and culture should be combined, Head says

“If you come every three months, you will see a totally different exhibit.”

— CURATOR AMY GUNDRUM GREENE

there may even be a butterfly garden in the museum's future.

Gundrum Greene says that they will continue promoting the museum through the current Design Tuesdays, where Headley's designs are posted on Facebook, and Throwback Thursdays, which feature pictures from the past.

She says they will also continue to offer four yearly exhibits averaging eight to 10

weeks in length, designed to appeal to a cross section of people.

As Head sees it, the major goal is to get everyone who has a voice to spread the word about “the magic of this place.”

Roach agrees. “The Headley-Whitney is part of the history and cultural heritage

of Lexington,” she said. “With his bibelots, George brought something new artistically to this area, and we should celebrate and honor that.

“But we should also celebrate and honor the fact that George was a character and we are losing the characters in the world,” she continues.

“By keeping the Headley-Whitney alive, we are keeping George alive.” **KM**