

Portable Art

Jim Johnson, director of the Benz Gallery, finds a new art to shopping — the bag, that is.



BY KIMBER HUFF
THE BATTALION

Some people enjoy collecting things. The more common collections consist of baseball cards, stamps, books, CDs or foreign coins.

Jim Johnson, a senior lecturer in the Horticultural Science Department and director of the Benz Gallery of Floral Art, is the sponsor of a different collection — shopping bags.

Johnson first got the idea for a shopping bag collection when he heard about a similar collection in the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York.

"I thought, 'That's something students could be doing here,'" Johnson said. "It's fun, it's unusual, and it's free."

Johnson began his collection by talking to Edith Flynn, a benefactor of the Benz School of Floral Design who agreed to donate old shopping bags from her attic to the collection.

Johnson began asking for shopping bags when he spoke during tours or to groups of people in the floral art field. In two months, he had collected 100 bags.

The first exhibit of the portable art collection, held in '88, sparked comments from professors and students.

As publicity increased, the collection grew, and more people began donating bags from around the world.

"I found bags on my desk and under my door, appearing out of nowhere," Johnson said. "I got to be called the Bag Man."

The collection grew and received more publicity when Johnson was chosen to be the co-chairman of the National Symposium on Floral Design, held in Dallas in 1991. The theme of the symposium soon became "Bag an Idea in Big D."

In 1992, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum began receiving more shopping bags than it could hold, so the museum director of-

ferred to redirect shopping bag donors to the collection housed at the Benz School. Johnson estimates that the collection includes over 1,000 shopping bags.

These bags date back to the '50s and come from throughout the U.S., England, Ireland, Canada and Eastern Europe.

Shopping bags are a unique form of art, since they are supposed to define a company's image through color, design and logos.

For example, the collection includes a bag from Hermès, a French boutique famous for its handmade clothes. The Hermès shopping bag is handmade and sports a distinctive orange color. Johnson said the color has become a well-known trademark of the bag.

Some shopping bags represent its company's image through artwork.

Johnson said one of his favorite designs is an unfinished puzzle on a Tokyo Plaza bag.

Other bags may be interesting because they have an unusual gimmick to them. Several years ago, during a tough economic period, many flour companies were heading toward bankruptcy. The companies decided to earn extra cash by selling used flour bags as gift bags or sacks.

The collection contains many unusual bags, but Sharon Duray, senior academic adviser for the horticulture department, said a Harley-Davidson shopping bag surprised her the most.

"You just don't think of having a shopping bag from motorcycle parts," Duray said.

The shopping bag that is the most difficult for the collection to acquire is a Salazar Christmas bag decorated with cows. Pat Hermes, a friend of Johnson's, first saw a bag like Houston carrying it around. Thinking it would be the perfect shopping bag to add to the collection, Hermes gave a canvas shoulder bag to the relative woman in exchange for the per bag.

Johnson said many bags in the collection have a Christmas theme because "that's when stores use more bags than any other time of year."

Duray said the bags in the portable art collection bring "memories of going shopping special things at Christmas."

Dr. Jayne Zajicek, an associate professor of horticulture and science, said the exhibit has the same affect on her.

"It brings back memories," Zajicek said. "Sometimes bags were as neat as the gifts."

Ann Boney, secretary of the Benz School of Floral Design, has learned to appreciate portable art since she began work with the collection.

"I had looked at shopping bags since I was a little girl, but had never really seen them until I took this position," Boney said. "You can get a different story from looking at them. Now the walls at home are nothing but (portable art)."



Jim Johnson stands beside his collection of bags from around the world.

Rony Angkriwan, THE BATTALION

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