

New exhibit showcases Hackner family's legacy of fine craftsmanship created for nation's churches

Gavin Michaelson May 30, 2024

Growing up in rural Bavaria, Egid Hackner was fascinated by churches and, particularly, the art within them. He turned his passion for church altars and furnishings into a lifelong career that can be found in churches in La Crosse and across the nation.

As the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration celebrates its 175th anniversary this year, the La Crosse County Historical Society and other community groups have collaborated to create an exhibit honoring the Hackner family's legacy by showcasing their range of creations.



Josh Nelson of La Crosse Movers wraps the bishop's chair for Historical Society's Hackner exhibit on Tuesday, May 21. Carved in the late 19th to Early 20th Century by the E. Hackner Co, the chair was used as a throne when the bishop of the diocese presided over profession and ceception ceremonies.
Saskia Hatvany

“All of these pieces come together for this story of the Hackner family, the company and their place in La Crosse and the broader world of church furnishings,” said Amy Vach, a curator at the historical society.

The E. Hackner Co. began after Egid Hackner immigrated to La Crosse in 1880, bringing his years of travel and expertise in European art to the Driftless Region. His business, which started as a two-man operation, eventually employed more than 100 people who helped create furnishings that can be found in churches in at least 34 states across the country today, Vach said.

“Hackner worked on a lot of churches in La Crosse like St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral, and even like First Lutheran, Holy Trinity and St. James,” said Vach. “For a lot of people, it’s personal history that they maybe don’t know about yet. I think it just really helps us connect to our past and learn from it.”



Jane and Pat Nichols watch as the marble bust of Egid Hackner is removed from their home on Tuesday, May 21, to be featured in the La Crosse Historical Society Hackner exhibit. The bust was made by carvers in Pietrasanta, Italy, as a gift to Hackner, who was visiting his suppliers on a business trip. Saskia Hatvany, River Valley Media Group

Community collaboration

Through months of searching, Vach uncovered countless one-of-a-kind pieces created by Egid and artwork created by his daughter, Sister Marietta Hackner.

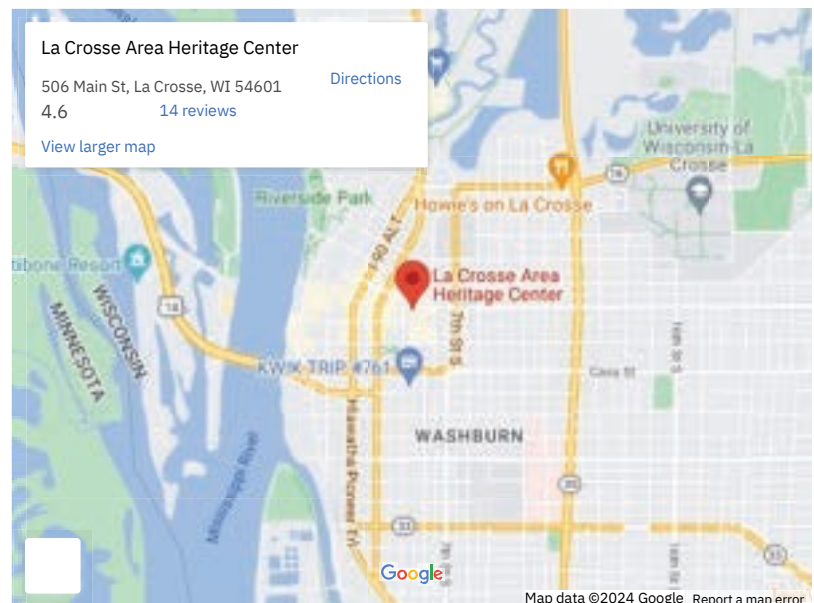
If you go

What:The Hackner Touch: a Legacy of Sacred Craftsmanship exhibit

When:10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday now through Oct. 5

Where:La Crosse Heritage Center, 506 Main St., La Crosse

Information: www.lchshistory.org



Hackner's descendants played a key role in pulling the exhibit together and offered a number of items, including Hackner's bust.

Hackner's great-granddaughter, Jane Nichols, jumped at the chance to inherit the bust when her father passed. The marble carving had always been a prominent feature in her childhood home, and she recalls her family decorating it with hats and other accessories throughout the year.

"He was always in the front entryway, and he was kind of part of our house. ... We would always dress him up in the winter," Nichols said.

Nichols and her husband, Pat, keep the bust in their home in La Crosse, where it was retrieved by the Historical Society earlier this month to feature in the exhibit.

Community collaboration efforts can be found throughout the exhibit. In addition to work from the historical society and the Franciscan Sisters, other partners included Western Technical Community College, where students welded stands for some large pieces in the exhibit, and David Anderson, a UW-La Crosse archaeology professor who is working with his students to create a permanent, digital version of the exhibit items using 3D imaging software — ensuring that the historic pieces will live on.



Movers carry the bishop's chair down the stairs of the St. Rose Convent in La Crosse on Tuesday, May 21.
Saskia Hatvany, River Valley Media Group

"It's that documentation preservation — we can have a digital duplicate of it if something were to happen to the object," said Anderson.

The 3D models, which serve as exact digital replicas of the exhibit items, will soon be featured on the historical society's website, ensuring that anyone can see some of Hackner's work.

"It's also an accessibility thing," said Anderson. "Somebody who can't physically come to the exhibit because of accessibility issues can do it from home. They can still experience the exhibit, nearly the way you would here, but, in some ways, you can even see it better."

River Valley Media Group Visual Journalist Saskia Hatvany contributed to this article.



Jane Nichols stands outside her La Crosse home on Tuesday, May 21. Nichols' great-grandfather was Egid Hackner, who established the Hackner Co. in La Crosse in 1881.
Saskia Hatvany, River Valley Media Group



Sister Laverne Wilichowski admires Hackner's marble bust.
Gavin Michaelson



Josh Nelson and Michel Ryberg wrap a church pew on Tuesday, May 21. The E. Hackner Co. made altar pieces for churches across the country.
Saskia Hatvany, River Valley Media Group