

A Man and a Vision: Ledbetter Folk Art and Americana Auctions

BY KATHY JOHNSON BOWLES

One of the maxims of collecting folk art is you never know where you'll find something spectacular. And, you would never guess that one of the newest locations to buy folk art and Americana is in an old warehouse situated on a rural two-lane backroad in Gibsonville, N.C., not far from Elon University, off Interstate 40 between Greensboro and Burlington.

Beginning in 2020 with two auctions, Ledbetter presented its third auction on March 6, 2021, featuring 665 lots. Bidders participated in-person, telephone, and online via *LiveAuctioneers.com*, vying for Southern furniture, baskets, decoys, signs, and long rifles. Also featured were traditional N.C. pottery and face jugs by well-known potters, such as the Meaders family, Albert Hodge and others. Works by self-taught artists included pieces by R.A. Miller, Mose Tolliver, Purvis Young, Aaron Birnbaum, and Jimmy Lee Sudduth.

While Ledbetter is new to many, auctions are not new to the owner, 39-year-old Matt Ledbetter, who grew up in Elon, N.C. He started picking and selling along with his father when he was ten years old and continued through college. By his mid-20s, he was picking full-time along with a friend. The two would pick during the week by knocking on doors in towns as far away as York, Penn., and by Friday sell the items at general antique auctions. No warehouse; just buying and selling as quickly as possible.

Matt says that you learn a lot along the way. "Sometimes it's by buying a painting for \$10 on a Monday and selling it for \$29,000 on Friday, but mostly you learn from losing money. Success is from putting in the time, losing money, and learning." Based upon his recent offerings, it's clear Matt has a keen eye and speaks about Americana, folk art, self-taught, and outsider art with passion, knowledge, and a hunger to bring the best to the auction block.

After years of picking, collecting, researching, and talking about starting his own auction house, Matt made good on a promise to himself, and he has done it with Southern grit, an earned entrepreneurial confidence, and professionalism



Photographs by K. Johnson Bowles for Ledbetter Auctions

that comfortably straddles the intensity of an old-school tobacco auction and a savvy down-to-earth swagger. Matt's expertise shines in the auction's logical flow of items according to market and interest, accurate and reasonable estimates, and professional photographs of objects in his catalogues. His offerings have been from his own collections, works found picking, and consignments from collectors.

Buying from Ledbetter online is what one expects to experience—ease of registration, methodical real-time updates on bidding, contemporary payment methods, and professional handling of pick-up and shipping.

Ahead of arriving in Gibsonville on March 6, we called for a time estimate of when the items we were interested in would be on the block. We came to find the timing perfect. At check-in, we were afforded a check-sheet with all the items (one could also follow along online), a full-color catalogue, and a beautifully designed t-shirt featuring R.A. Miller cut-outs. The staff checked us in and directed us to part-take in complementary barbecue sandwiches, snacks and beverages. It's a warm, homey and fun atmosphere. Matt's voice rang in the space, steadily calling out bids in the kind of fast chatter sing-song rhythm one associates with old Southern auctions along with a hint of

contemporary rap.

The next Ledbetter auction is scheduled for June 11–12, 2021, both live in Gibsonville and online via *LiveAuctioneers.com*. Friday, June 11 features 400 lots of Americana, period furniture, and pottery; Saturday, June 12 features 600 lots of works by outsider, self-taught, and folk artists. More information can be found on their website: www.ledbetterauctions.com. Also, see Ledbetter's Instagram account: *oldfolkart*. Matt Ledbetter constantly posts something interesting and provides sneak peeks at items in the upcoming auctions. 📌



Ledbetter's Ken Lewis holds a painting by Mose Tolliver.