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BUTTERFLY BALL: Opera Louisiane hosts gala fundraiser for upcoming 'Madama Butterfly' production.

BY ROBIN MILLER
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Butterflies will take flight for "Madama Butterfly" at the City Club of Baton Rouge on Monday.

That's figuratively speaking, of course, because the butterflies in Hunt Slonem's 2014 painting, "Spice Bush Swallowtail," are forever in flight.

And they'll make an appearance during the live auction at Opera Louisiane's Butterfly Opera Ball.

"Mr. Slonem donated the painting to benefit our production of 'Madama Butterfly' on March 8," says Leanne Clement, the company's general director. "We received the painting last week, and I was very careful when opening it. I couldn't believe it — it's so beautiful."

Bidding will begin at \$4,000 for "Spice Bush Swallowtail," one of three items to be auctioned. A trip to New York and jewelry from the Gilded Lily also will go to the highest bidder.

The Butterfly Opera Ball, however, isn't simply a night of auctions and eating. Sure, the City Club of Baton Rouge will be serving up hors d'oeuvres, a buffet, desserts and a full bar, but the atmosphere will be different.

"This isn't just an event where you go, hang out for a little while, then leave," Clement says. "It's a real ball.

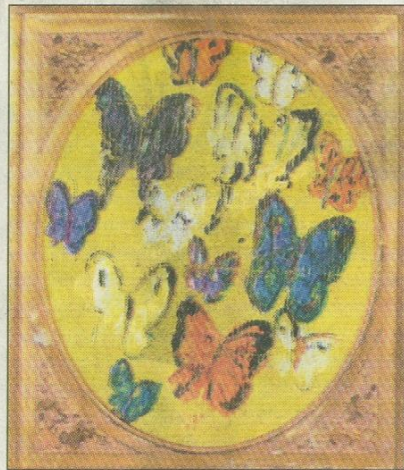


Photo provided by Opera Louisiane
Artist Hunt Slonem donated his 2014 painting, 'Spice Bush Swallowtail,' to be auctioned at Opera Louisiane's Butterfly Opera Ball.

We'll feature performances by artists who are part of the production of 'Madama Butterfly,' and the Magnolia Strings Quartet will be performing in between for those who want to dance."

Not to mention that this is a dress-up event. Black tie is optional, but attendees definitely will want to wear ball attire.

■ A Butterfly Opera Ball

WHAT: Opera Louisiane's gala fundraiser for its upcoming grand opera production of "Madama Butterfly"

WHEN: 6:30-9:30 p.m. Monday

WHERE: City Club of Baton Rouge, 355 North Blvd.

ADMISSION: Tickets are \$150 per person and \$275 per couple.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: (225) 377-2029 or operalouisiane.com

"Madama Butterfly" will be Opera Louisiane's first grand opera production since its 2013 production of Gaetano Donizetti's "The Elixir of Love." The Giacomo Puccini opera will be performed in the Baton Rouge River Center Theatre for the Performing Arts.

The opera debuted in 1904, telling the story of a Japanese girl's ill-fated love for an American sailor. It is regularly listed among the most popular operas, and its title, alone, inspired the company to approach Slonem.

"Actually, it was the brainchild of Astrid Clements, one of our board members," Clement says. "We knew we needed to do more fundraising for this production, and she thought of Mr. Slonem's butterfly paintings. She knew he was very generous to nonprofit organizations, and she made

contact with Beth Fuller, one of his collectors."

Fuller then told Slonem about the company's opera ball, and he donated "Spice Bush Swallowtail."

Slonem's work is known worldwide, and his collectors include politicians and Hollywood celebrities. He is a Tulane University graduate and owns two houses in Louisiana — Lakeside Plantation in Batchelor and Albania Plantation on the banks of Bayou Teche in Jeanerette.

Slonem makes his home in Manhattan. He traveled to Baton Rouge last May to sign copies of his book, "Bunnies," at the Louisiana Art & Science Museum, which featured an exhibit of his bunny paintings.

But he won't be coming to the capital city for the Butterfly Opera Ball.

"He's not able to make it," Clement says. "But we're so grateful for his generous gift. It means so much to us for him to make this donation without knowing us before this."

Those who want to place bids on any of the auction items must attend the ball.

"We're limited to 150 tickets for the ball," Clement says. "And I want to stress that this isn't just a come-and-go party. It's a real event inspired by the Vienna Opera Ball, and this marks the first time we've hosted an opera ball."