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BROOKS BROTHERS / New York



THE SILK PLUSH was spun from looms that no longer exist. The hand stitching recalls a long lost skill and patience. And the salt lines in the cracked leather sweatbands reveal the high water mark of gentlemanly style.

Artist Hunt Slosser is perhaps the single greatest living champion of that classic men's headwear known variously as the top hat, opera hat, and stovepipe. Slosser is a self-described "collector" in the broadest of terms. He has amassed collections of antiques, oddities and fauna, ranging from Neo-Gothic chairs and crystal candlesticks to dead butterflies and live tropical birds. He also collects magnificent old houses, and when he purchased his second antebellum home, Albania Plantation (in Jeanerette, Louisiana), a large empty closet in the master bedroom begged to be filled by something worthy of its grandeur. Thus began Slosser's steady acquisition of top hats—purchased at minor expense (around \$50 apiece) at flea markets and antique malls across the continent. "And I don't plan to stop collecting them anytime soon," says Slosser. Like his world-renowned neo-expressionist paintings, Slosser's spirited stash of top hats is a collection worthy of exhibition. In fact, he displayed them alongside a showing of his portraits of Abraham Lincoln (now starring, so to speak, in the Steven Spielberg film) at the Ogden Museum in New Orleans. Currently, his collection of vintage top hats—more than a hundred strong—is on permanent display in the master closet of his circa-1842 plantation on Bayou Tache. "I keep them out of their boxes on the shelves where I can see them," says Slosser, "because in South Louisiana you never know what's

waiting what." And furred beaver and silk plush are likely both delicious from the point of view of the cicadas and moths of the bayou swamps. "I prefer the hard-top to the collapsible kind," he says, referring to the spring-loaded opera hats designed for easy storage in open house costrooms. "Anything that moves like that scares me. And I always think they're going to break." Inside of each hat, crests and the names of formerly significant cities and stores on the Eastern Seaboard are the only visible pedigree other than a hundred and fifty years of patina. Where they've been and what all they've seen is rightfully left to the imagination. Slosser makes no secret of his interest in the supernatural, and he's brought mediums to his homes to communicate with unseen residents. The darker ones are cleansed, the playful ones embraced, and for the protective ones, their opinions on renovations are duly noted. The spiritualist said one that still cling to Slosser's hats have made themselves at home at Albania. "My caretaker has smelled cigar smoke coming from the hat closet when I'm not there," he says. And no, he doesn't wear the hats. "I lend them out to friends for costume parties and Halloween," says Slosser. And there is no better testament than that to what has become of the chosen hats of presidents, tycoons and noblemen. They have reached the same costume status as the powdered wigs and tri-corner hats that came before them.

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