**James Avery still sketching designs at 90**

By Richard A. Marini | February 9, 2012

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When members of the Art in Public Places program in Kerrville looked for an artist whose work would represent the city and the surrounding Hill Country, they quickly decided on [James Avery](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22James+Avery%22).

"His work is simple, elegant and timeless; and he's well-known and respected in the community," says [Peter Lewis](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Peter+Lewis%22), an architect and design committee member.

And so on this coming Mother's Day, a 12-foot-tall replica of one of Avery's most popular creations will be unveiled in front of the Kerr Arts & [Cultural Center](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Cultural+Center%22).

Mother's Love is a single, off-center heart that represents a mother gazing lovingly at her child. Countless daughters, mothers and grandmothers wear versions of the design on charm bracelets, necklaces and earrings. Other women and men wear Avery's religious jewelry - images such as crosses, chalices, doves and fishes that make up about 20 percent of the company's offerings.

Avery credits the company's uncomplicated designs for much of its success.

"You've got to know when to stop with complexity. You can get carried away being cute and frivolous," he says. "It's like architecture or writing. The most important things are those you take out. It's the same with design; what we take away is important. But that's tough to do. We humans tend to make things too complex."

One sign of the success of this "keep it simple" philosophy: The company continued growing even during the recent recession. This year, it plans to open stores in Kansas City and St. Louis, its first ventures into Missouri.

Privately held and family owned, the company is unusual in the industry for being "vertically integrated," meaning it designs, manufactures and sells all its own products. It's a strategy that has served the firm well.

"You can't price-shop their jewelry," says [Michelle Graff](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Michelle+Graff%22), senior editor of [National Jeweler magazine](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22National+Jeweler+magazine%22). "If you want to buy one of their designs, you have to pay what they ask. You're not going to find it cheaper on the Internet."

Avery, whose 63 eponymous jewelry stores span eight (soon to be nine) states, recently turned 90. He grew up in the Chicago area and served as a B-26 bomber pilot in World War II. After graduating from the [University of Illinois](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22University+of+Illinois%22) with a degree in industrial design, he taught at [the University of Iowa](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22The+University+of+Iowa%22) and the [University of Colorado](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=life&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22University+of+Colorado%22). Married to his fourth wife for the past 20 years, he is the father of six sons and helped raise five more from two of his wives' previous marriages.

He started his business in the 1950s in a two-car garage on his in-laws' property in Kerrville. With a slim volume published in 1949 titled *How to Make Modern Jewelry* as his guide, he began creating.

"I learned how to solder, cast, all that stuff," he says. "I'm self-taught, as far as the technique."

He soon opened a small retail shop in Kerrville and, because of the religious tone of so much of his early work, had immediate success selling on consignment through area churches. A store opened in Dallas in 1973, was followed by outlets in Houston and San Antonio.

And while he no longer runs the family-owned business, having passed the reins in 2007 to his son Chris, Avery remains closely involved in its operation. He still maintains his office at the company's 25-acre compound in Kerrville, coming in almost every day to sketch ideas, attend design review meetings and act as the public face and ambassador for the $156 million-a-year business.

"I don't want to micromanage the boys," he says of Chris, now CEO, and another son, Paul, who serves as executive vice president of sales. "I don't want to say, 'Oh, you're doing it wrong. Here's how to do it better.' "

Then, he laughs and says, "So I spend most of my time just dilly-dallying around, sketching, things like that."

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