

jokingly by some, but these small brooches are a much-anticipated tradition of New Orleans Carnival.

“I love Carnival pins,” said Aline Walshe, a native New Orleanian whose family has been part of the local scene for generations. “It’s very festive, and my kids will tell me that I look like a sergeant-at-arms when I wear them.”

The tiny mementos are given as gifts to debutantes of the season and other women by a Carnival krewe, krewe captain, ball king or queen. They have a long history: The Mistick Krewe of Comus produced the first pin in 1882, 25 years after it was founded.

“The bestowal of tokens of remembrance by unrecognized maskers upon their bewildered partners was one of the well-guarded secrets of the reborn Carnival in New Orleans,” writes Albert Burton LaCour in “New Orleans Masquerade: Chronicles of Carnival,” referring to Comus traditions.

Early designers included New Orleans jewelers Frantz & Optiz, M. Scooler and Hausmann’s, while Gorham and Lewis Brothers, among

others, were located in the North, according to Lydia Blackmore, decorative arts curator at The Historic New Orleans Collection.

Today, many Carnival pins are made by New Orleans jeweler Adler's. Vice President Tiffany Adler said the store's earliest documented design was for the Knights of Mithras in 1903.

It's a year-round process, Adler said. It's also a secretive one: Adler declined to name which krewes have contracted with the company to make the trinkets.

Krewe pins are usually designed with the ball theme in mind, while those from the king or queen take a more personal tack, reflecting something about the monarchs' interests or personality.

The brooches are made of metal, some embellished with crystals or enamel, in a number of shapes and sizes. The Krewe of Nereus, named for the sea god, has fashioned recent pins in the shape of fish, crabs, stingrays and one year, the Little Mermaid. A queen of Proteus — another sea god — had a pin designed as a crown of orange enamel coral

topped with a sea-blue crystal. The Krewe of Mystery, known as “Le Bal des Roses,” integrates a red rose into its favor.

“All the creations are works of art,” said Mimi Parker Thomas, who collects them. Her family has a long history with Carnival, with great-grandparents, grandparents and relatives ruling as kings and queens in many balls.

“I love the detail work,” said Thomas, a jewelry designer and owner of Parkers Inc. jewelry and gift store in Pass Christian, Mississippi.

Thomas has helped design favors in the past and is a fan of the enamel and crystal pieces Tiffany Adler has created.

Some women string their collections onto a gold chain to wear as a necklace. At balls, debutantes wear them on the front of the bodice or on the back of their dress, where the bodice and skirt meet. Guests at a ball can wear the host organization's pin, as well as the king's and queen's — either that year's or one from the past.

On the other hand, women attending a luncheon or Carnival party can wear any or all of the krewes' pins, in any arrangement they like.

Officially, the only way to acquire a Carnival ball pin is as a gift. However, a quick search on eBay reveals that favors are for sale in their boxes, mostly fetching under \$75.

Local auction houses also have offered them. According to Neal Auction Co. senior vice president Katie Hovas, a 2014 auction of the Isabel Spelman Devereux Collection included pins valued between \$300 to \$500.

Favorite pins can often be seen on blazers and jackets throughout the year. Walshe will wear one occasionally, but she doesn't wear her Rex pin again.

“These are one-of-a-kind, custom-made gifts for you,” Adler said.

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