



Ornaments Through the Ages

Take a walk down memory lane with vintage Christmas ornaments we've cherished for decades.

BY KAREN WILHELMSSEN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN DAVID KENT

1. THE ROARING '20S

These colorful, glittery ornaments from the 1920s are made from cardboard and are rare, author Bob Richter writes. In mint condition, it's possible they were never even displayed on a tree. They depict nostalgic images of the past—a rocking horse, doll carriage and wagon—that were seen under the tree in the form of gifts.

2. MERRI CHRISTMAS

Author Bob Richter nabbed this rare complete set of WWII cardboard ornaments made by the Merri-Lei Corporation in its original, brightly colored blue box. "Representing both servicemen and their modes of transportation, along with the things they were fighting for back home, these decorations speak volumes about the patriotism in this country during the war years—especially at Christmastime," he writes.

A Christmas tree's style is defined by its most important component: ornaments. And while today they come in all shapes and sizes, the classic glass ball is still a favorite.

ornaments. And while today they come in all shapes and sizes, decorating the tree is a relatively recent practice. To delve deeper into the history of Christmas decorating, from trimming the tree to outdoor décor, Bob Richter penned the book *A Very Vintage Christmas: Holiday Collecting, Decorating and Celebrating*.

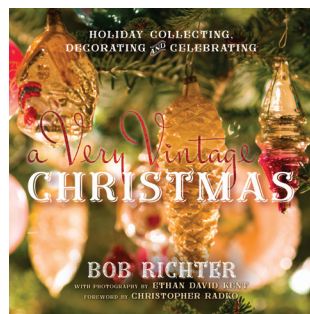
“With the saturation of Christmas ornaments, lights and décor on the market, it’s hard to believe that just 100 years ago only one in five American households had a tree at the holidays,” Richter writes. “And 25 years before that, they were pretty much concentrated in Europe.”

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3



A Very Vintage Christmas: Holiday Collecting, Decorating and Celebrating by Bob Richter, published by Globe Pequot, © 2016; globepequot.com.

A SYMBOL OF HOPE

The first Christmas tree farm was established in New Jersey in 1901, but many Americans chopped down their own trees through the 1950s, Richter writes. With candles and paper decorations proving too dangerous, the advent of string lights came in 1880, invented by Thomas Edison. That same year, Woolworth’s department store started stocking traditional blown-glass ornaments imported from Germany—which had a monopoly on them until the 1920s, the author writes.

“Since store-bought ornaments were also more expensive and considered a luxury, homemade ornaments were quite common,” Richter writes. During the Great Depression, a tree cut from the forest decked out in low-cost ornaments offered more than just style: it became a beacon of hope for distraught families.

AMERICAN MADE

With World War II approaching, citizens pining for American-made products got their wishes granted in the late 1930s, when Max Eckhardt created Shiny Brite ornaments with the Corning glass company. Uncle Sam even made a cameo with Santa on its boxes, Richter writes.

During the war, patriotic-themed ornaments became popular, as metal caps and silvered glass pieces were replaced with paper caps and painted glass ornaments due to the rationing of metal. The postwar era brought a shift towards brightly colored ornaments that evolved into fun shapes during the midcentury.

Here, let’s take a look at some of the most famous and highly sought-after ornaments that have stood the test of time through the ages.

3. GLISTEN AND GLEAM

“Mostly balls, Shiny Brite ornaments were thicker than their European counterparts,” Richter writes of this popular collectible. Mass-produced in a number of designs, they were made using an efficient assembly line that “reportedly produced roughly 2,000 ornaments a minute by harnessing the same technology that was used to make light bulbs.” Hence the name Shiny Brite was adopted.

4. AGE APPROPRIATE

A lucky estate-sale find, this collection of ornaments, most of which are over a century old, was found as it is shown here. Richter adores the “opalescent-luminescent quality” featherweight glass ornaments take on when they fade with time and lose some, if not all, of their colorful paint. He suggests hanging aged beauties like these on a prelit white tree.



4



In general, *the older and more detailed ornaments are*, the higher the price they command.

—Bob Richter



5. SWEET AS CAN BE Kentlee manufactured these rare mercury-glass candy cane ornaments in the 1940s. The beauty of these is how versatile they are: Hang them on a tree, or take a cue from Richter and display them in bowls or on trays for a fun seasonal accent. Find them in their original box and in a range of colors, most often faded from use over time.

6. RETRO REVIVAL These funky, vibrant teardrop-shaped ornaments date back to the 1970s and were distributed by the Liberty Bell company. Accented with silver glitter and with each depicting a different pattern, they are just as in fashion today as they were four decades ago. Find a similar set of your own for about \$20 on online auction sites or at flea markets.