

Getting, Giving, and Glowing with Vintage at the Holidays

A Chat with Bob Richter by Judy Gonyeau

There are those who are born with the “eye” — they can spot the perfect gift or decoration for that special someone from a mile away. It appears almost effortless as they pull out the old and bring in the new, creating a holiday atmosphere that takes you back to an innocence long forgotten, but always treasured.

Enter Bob Richter, lover of all things holiday and vintage. Bob has always loved the Christmas season with all its trappings and traditions, and over the years has amassed “around 2,500” collectibles centered on keeping the spirit alive. According to his celebratory book of his lifelong addiction titled “*A Very Vintage Christmas*,” he started collecting when his father, who would bring Bob to auctions with him, “handed me a box of beautiful ornaments, including a blue jay, a Santa Claus, some bells, ice cream cones, and other special figures. ‘It’s time you started collecting something,’ he said, ‘... and I know you like Christmas.’”

GETTING VINTAGE

When choosing to give someone a vintage holiday gift, Bob advises to start looking the day after Christmas. Unlike shopping for contemporary items in a retail store, in the world of vintage you have to **get it when you see it**, because you may not be able to find it again.

Flea Markets are Bob’s go-to resource for vintage holiday all year long. “In the summer months, this décor is literally a quarter of the price it will be in October to December, when many dealers mark it up for impulse shoppers who are in the holiday mood and on a mission.”

To get the best of the best, **start early**. “Not everyone realizes how challenging work can be for flea market (and antique) vendors. Many of them spend time digging through attics and basements at estate sales just to find a handful of special things to bring to a market. Since I can’t get to as many estate sales as I would like, I count on these dealers to find me special things.”

There are still bargains to be had as the holidays get closer simply because the volume and selection of vintage holiday items available booms at this time of year. On the day after the celebration, **look for sales and mark-downs in antique shops and malls** for those things you want to add



Bob Richter’s living room decorated for the holiday season.

to your personal holiday collection, even if you put it away for next year. The “buy it when you see it” rule applies at all times. A tip: keep a separate storage area for your holiday collection with plenty of additional empty space to store gifts and collectibles as you find them year-round. It will save you from hunting through bags and boxes as the holidays approach.

GIVING VINTAGE

The best part of giving Vintage is the ability to spark memories of good times and family. Your gift may inspire the recipient to start their own collection, or if you know what they collect, **ask your favorite shops and vendors to keep their eyes open** for something out of the ordinary. You never know what they will find for you, but you will know the effort and thought that went into finding them the perfect gift. “It really is the thought that counts!” notes Bob. “Sometimes I take a vintage item and personalize it, like framing a piece of vintage sheet music from their favorite song, placing their business card in a beautiful vintage wallet, or giving them a vintage wristwatch or piece of jewelry with their name engraved on it.”

Another way to give a touch of vintage is to add it to a contemporary gift. “If they are receiving a grill, add a vintage grilling cookbook, or if the person is going on a trip, a vintage travel book can add another joyful dimension to their tour,” says Bob. And with digital printing and on-the-spot photos being taken with your phone, “place a grouping of photos in small vintage frames with ribbon attached for hanging on the wall or on the tree. These wonderful, personal ornaments are often the most prized as the years go on.”

Going to a holiday party and bringing a host/hostess gift? “Bringing flowers is nice, but then the host has to find a vase and cut the flowers and arrange them. Instead, bring the flowers cut and arranged in a beautiful glass or ceramic vintage vase. Or bring an antique bowl with vintage ornaments and tissue paper in it. This makes a beautiful keepsake and decoration with no wrapping required.” **Keeping it simple and easy** for the host means they get to spend more time with you at the gathering rather than having to take on added work.



Rare set of WWII cardboard ornaments by the Merri-Lei Corporation still in their original box. These decorations speak volumes about the patriotism in this country during the war years — especially at Christmastime.



The Barclay Company was a leader in manufacturing lead figural toys in the 1920s through the 1950s. Some of their most popular figures were these ice skaters, which were often displayed in large winter scenes on mirrored ponds.



Vintage gift shop year-round at your fave shops and flea markets.

“What looks great under a tree decorated with vintage ornaments? Gifts wrapped in vintage paper of course! I find that both rolls and sheets are in plentiful supply. Just like today, people bought extra when it was on sale and then it was tucked away in an attic or basement for decades.”

GLOWING WITH VINTAGE

The sight of gleaming lights all around is a wonderful part of bringing warmth to cold winter days. But when it comes to vintage, Bob says *safety first*. “Because they are older electrical items they can potentially be a fire hazard. Never leave a tree lit when you are not at home, and if the wiring on old lights appear questionable, it is best to pass them by.” It is wonderful to stay true to the vintage style, but even Bob uses new lights. “While I love vintage lighting, on most of my own trees I use new lights for safety reasons and because, given the scale of my largest trees, new lights are easier to work with.”

For the shop owner and dealer, decorating your sales area with vintage holiday items can also draw the buyer’s eye to other items that may be just what they are looking for as a vintage gift. “A Victorian cut glass bowl with filigree work can hold fruit the other months of the year, but at the holidays fill it with vintage Christmas tree ornaments or a selection of special antique cookie cutters you want to highlight.”

And don’t be afraid to get creative with color. Pink, blue, maroon and purple can be grouped together with like-colored vintage ornaments, china, kitchen tools and collectibles, lanterns and other antique lighting, books, glassware, and much more.

Sneak in vintage winter items everywhere you can think — deer, snowmen, sleigh bells, quilts and blankets, oil lamps and more. This is all good for cross-selling gifts and décor, and gives buyers ideas of how to mix it up in their own homes. Even adding some vintage cards with greetings for a happy and healthy new year tucked here and there can delight buyers and visitors alike.



This multicolored bottlebrush star features a foil rosette with small mercury glass balls and American Flags.



1950s pinecone gnomes

It comes down to enhancing the season with great memories as you create new ones.

“One day I received a call from a lovely older woman who read a ‘Christmas Items Wanted’ ad I had placed in a local paper when I was ten years old. She said she had vintage Christmas items in her home and would be happy for me to come by and take a look. My Dad drove me there and after we entered, she brought in some old boxes filled with wonderful ornaments, lights, and decorations. I made an offer on the spot, and purchased them all. ... To this day, many of the things I purchased on that afternoon are still in my collection, and frankly, they are still some of my favorites. However you find your vintage holiday treasures, enjoy the journey, and don’t be afraid to *be creative!*”

Bob Richter is the author of “A Very Vintage Christmas,” his 224-page book with over 300 images where he shares his delight for and vast knowledge of all Vintage things Christmas, available on Amazon or at your favorite bookstore. Bob is regularly featured in media outlets including the “New York Times,” “The Huffington Post,” “Redbook,” the “Boston Globe,” FOX, CBS, ABC, and HGTV. Bob delights in sharing antiques, design, and bargaining advice. As “The Designer” and breakout star of the PBS series “Market Warriors,” Bob uses his personality and expertise to strike deals at flea markets all over the country and he remains a fan favorite. He also hosts “Flea Market Minute” and “Minute Makeover.” His tongue-in-cheek mantra, “More is More,” speaks to his love of art and antiques, which he culls from around the globe.

This article was written thanks to Bob Richter and his generosity in sharing his book and his thoughts on this timely topic. All photos are courtesy of Bob Richter, and taken by photographer Ethan David Kent.

