

Antique ornaments

While the first Christmas trees were decorated with fruit and nuts, and other edible ornaments, by the middle of the 19th century, elaborately decorated objects began to adorn the increasingly popular evergreen.

Handblown glass balls, called *kugels*, have added shimmering beauty to pine boughs since they were first made in Germany in the early 1800s. Available in elongated as well as round shapes, *kugels* could be had in a variety of sizes and colors, as well.

Molded glass ornaments originated in the latter part of the 19th century, also in Germany. The earliest shapes—pine cones, fruit and icicles—were joined by a wide range of others, from fairytale characters to animals. Santas to edifices, as manufacturers became ever more inventive.

Paper ornaments were also popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These took two major forms: "Scrap ornaments," colorfully printed, thanks to the newly refined process of chromolithography; and Dresden ornaments, whose cardboard base, both die-cut and embossed, was painstakingly decorated with gold, silver and other colors of paint.

Among the most popular subjects for scrap ornaments were angels and snowmen, and Santa himself starred in many an eye-catching chromolithographed scrap ornament.

While scrap ornaments were always two-dimensional, Dresden ornaments were often carefully worked into three-dimensional shapes, such as vehicles (including early depictions of airplanes and zeppelins) and animals. Superb detailing characterizes these ornaments, which are among those most treasured by collectors of antique Christmas decorations.

Considerably less elegant, ornaments of spun cotton were popular for their low cost as well as for the wide range of subjects they represented.

Animals, fruits, clowns and angels joined innumerable Santas in these three-dimensional ornaments formed by combining cotton and cellulose fibers, over a base of cardboard or wire. Their hard outer surface, on which decorations would be added, was created by the application of glue.

By the 1930s, virtually all of these charming, early decorations had become obsolete. However, today they are heirlooms, prized by collectors and exhibited in museums.

A NOISY CHRISTMAS TRADITION

Despite their name, Christmas crackers are not another Yuletide culinary delight. Rather, they are colorful paper bundles which, when pulled open, emit a loud noise. Within, contributing to the merriment of the occasion, are holiday favors and papers containing sayings or riddles.

Traditional in Britain, Christmas crackers date to the reign of Queen Victoria.

But baker/confectioner Tom Smith's creation may be, like the lighting of Christmas bonfires once common in various parts of Great Britain, a descendant of the ancient custom of setting a ritual fire—a common way of marking the rekindling of the sun, the rebirth of life in the midst of the cold, white, snowy winter season.

This celebration of life and warmth in the midst of death and coldness is itself an ancestor of the Christmas holiday, as Christ's birth, death and rebirth are symbolic of the triumph of life over death which is at the heart of Christianity.



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