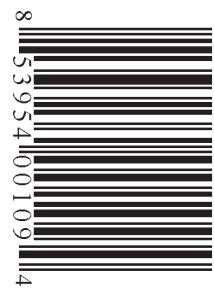


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Jewelry will sparkle at Nye

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Van Brocklin collection to highlight
Kimball Sterling sale

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Above Left: This Santa, his sack an empty planter, was priced at \$15.50 and for sale at the Emmitsburg (MD) Antique Mall. Not in mint condition, the addition of spaghetti trim makes him appealing to collectors. **Above Middle:** Pairs, such as Santa and Mrs. Claus, were popular when introduced more than a half-century ago. **Above Right:** One of the largest importers of mid-century Christmas ceramics was Lefton China. Note the hand-painted eyelashes and fur trim on this Santa planter, which bears that company's label.

Have yourself a very kitschy Christmas

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

From holiday specials on television and popular Christmas songs on the radio, to the appearance of Santa at the downtown department store and the arrival of toy catalogs in the mail, children growing up in the 1950s knew the signs that Christmas was just around the corner. As Christmas approached homes began to fill with Christmas ceramics, some functional but others just to bring a smile to the face.

Japan became the manufacturing source for a flood of seasonal gewgaws. Inexpensive and readily available, the ceramics were anything but pretentious; whereas they were saved from year to year, they were never intended to become family heirlooms. By the end of the 1960s, however, the mood of the country was neither optimistic nor innocent. And Christmas ceramics from an earlier time were relegated to a box shoved to the back of the attic, at best.

As the next generation purged their families' household goods, mid-century Christmas ceramics were either tossed out or sold at yard sales. Some "Made in Japan" knickknacks were donated to thrift shops or sold at flea markets and were deemed of little value and, as such, could be purchased for a dollar or less.

But there were those who recognized the nostalgic appeal of Christmas ceramics. One such collector is Jimmie Bucci. A serious collector of mid-century wares (and president of the Vintage Tablecloth Collectors Club), Bucci began hunting out these ceramic novelties approximately 20 years ago. He explained that much of his fascination with these quaint reminders from the past are due to memories of his grandmother's home. Bucci, who lives just outside of Boston, continues to feel that strong emotional connection by surrounding himself with these holiday decorations.

And as it turns out, Bucci was ahead of his time. Today, interest in these collectibles is strong. Picking up something for a dollar is rare. Additionally, competitive collectors have driven up prices for choice pieces. "It's absolutely crazy," he said. Explaining why millennials are intrigued, he proposed, "I think younger people 'get' the kitsch factor."

Mid-century Christmas ceramics had humble beginnings. When they were introduced in the 1950s, these imports were sold at dime stores (including Woolworth's, Kresge's, and Grant's), as well as at local Mom-and-Pop variety shops and through catalogs (including Lillian Vernon). Original tags that have survived indicate that "15, 16, or 29 cents" was not an unusual price, Bucci explained. "They were all cheap – that's the beauty of this."

A number of American companies imported these wares from Japan, he continued. They were competitive and not above copying each other's successful ideas. The family operated Lefton China company was "probably the biggest of them all," with competitors that included Josef Originals, Holt-Howard (with wares considered "higher end"), and Napco (the National Potteries Company). Of particular note is the Kreiss company for its line of what is referred to as "psycho ceramics" ("they're bizarre – Santa often has rhinestone eyes and looks insane," Bucci said).

A wide range of objects were made, from simple figurines to quirky items such as kerosene lamps and bobble heads. Tabletop items included salt-and-pepper shakers (Bucci admits to having more than 100 sets), sugar bowls and matching creamers, luncheon sets, and "coffee and cake" sets. Candlestick holders were often paired with matching "candle huggers," which were connected to the holder with a small chain. Bucci pointed out that it is unusual to find one of these sets intact, as the chains required considerable dexterity to manipulate and were, consequently, discarded.

Among other pieces for holiday entertaining were candy and nut dishes, liquor decanters, and, to a lesser extent, cookie jars. Ashtrays, sometimes sold for card parties in sets of four plus one larger

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Left: A "December" angel. Companies that imported Christmas ceramics didn't stop there, as they offered month-of-the-year angels as well as birthday angels.

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Ceramics

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receptacle; cigarette lighters; and wall pockets were also manufactured.

Decorative holiday planters were popular: Over the years, Bucci has purchased planters that still retain pieces of Styrofoam, which suggests that they were used for artificial flowers on a seasonal basis before being stored away for the rest of the year. On the other hand, he pointed out that the only piece of Christmas ceramics that he enjoys on a year-round basis is a Santa planter in the shape of a log; he purchased it with a philodendron plant that, unlike the one he got in a matching planter featuring Mrs. Claus, will not die.

Angels, reindeer, and elves are among favorite themes, as are men and women dressed in their holiday finery, as well as Santa and Mrs. Claus, snowmen and snow-women, and boy and girl choristers. Sets with the letters “N,” “O,” “E,” and “L” are popular among collectors as well.

Those who purchased these knickknacks in the 1950s did so for one reason: They bought what they liked and used them as decorations during the holiday season. This is in contrast with today’s collectors, who might specialize in a specific line, design, or theme. And it is not unheard of for enthusiasts to have a “Christmas room” that is intact year around.

As for pricing, ceramics with original labels are good, but those found in their original boxes, sometimes with nesting straw, are even better. Collectors love when they find an intact foil sticker, bearing the name of the company that imported the piece and the

Below: This sweet-faced young lady is typical of the feel-good mood of Christmas ceramics. Collector Jimmie Bucci believes that a new generation of collectors are drawn to these mid-century knickknacks for their “kitsch factor.” (Image by Barbara Miller Beem)

Right: A strange sight indeed: A ceramic Santa bobble head. This oddity was found at the Emmitsburg (Md.) Antique Mall and was priced at \$45. (Image by Barbara Miller Beem)



Above: Deck the halls with mid-century Christmas ceramics! (Image courtesy Jimmie Bucci)

word “Japan.” Condition is definitely an important factor. Sometimes, as a result of handling or cleaning, paint has been wiped away, leaving white spots on the otherwise painted wares; this condition is known as “cold paint loss.” Even though these wares were mass-produced, they were hand painted, but unfortunately, the paint used was not of a quality that would endure a half century of exposure. Also affecting value is the addition of squiggly “spaghetti trim,” netting, and feathers.

A collection can be begun with a simple \$5 angel figurine, and salt-and-pepper shakers might be purchased for \$10 to \$12. Simple “NOEL” letters begin at \$50 for a set. Prices for head vases with a Christmas theme, because of their cross collectability, reach into the hundreds. “NOEL” snowmen with ski masks are coveted by enthusiasts, and when “NOEL” is accompanied by pink poodles, “they might be \$300 or more.” For those seeking inspiration, as well as a comparative guide to values, Walter Dworkin’s book, *Vintage Christmas Ceramic Collectibles* is recommended. (Note: A few years ago, this book could be purchased new at a reduced price at bookstores. Today, it is once again in demand.)

Finally, Bucci believes that collecting mid-century Christmas ceramics that spread holiday cheer has its positive points. “The prices are fairly reasonable, they’re easy to pack, easy to display, and they don’t take up much room.” He paused. “Unless you have as many as I do.”



One thing most Christmas ceramics have in common is a sentimental view of Christmas. Santa salt-and-pepper shakers like these might be the start of a fun collection. (Image by Barbara Miller Beem)



Above: Until the philodendron dies, the Santa planter on the right will remain on display year-round in Jimmie Bucci’s home. (Image courtesy Jimmie Bucci)



Above: A Christmas tableau in Jimmie Bucci’s home. Not only is Bucci a Christmas ceramics collector but he is also president of the Vintage Tablecloth Collectors Club. Both collections work well together. (Image courtesy Jimmie Bucci)



Above: Santas and elves and choristers – oh, my! (Image courtesy Jimmie Bucci)

Below: A joyful corner in Bucci’s home, featuring a display of planters. Head vases are particularly desirable because of their cross collectability. (Image courtesy Jimmie Bucci)

