

Antique Christmas



On view through January 7, 2018

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On the cover: From the Collection of Kathy and Stewart "Greg" Gregory, 2017

Feather Trees

Feather trees, like those seen throughout *Antique Christmas*, were the first “artificial” Christmas trees. They originated in the late 1800s in Germany and became popular in the United States in the early 1900s. While live trees were still brought indoors, many people deplored the idea of cutting down a beautiful conifer to stand for just a few days as a Christmas decoration. During the 1920s, the use of feather trees in the United States grew—especially among European-born Americans who followed the customs of their native countries.

A feather tree was made from turkey or goose feathers. After being dyed, the feathers were stripped from their quills and wrapped around heavy wire, with the end of each feather secured by a small, thin wire. A new feather was then attached in the same manner. When completed, the entire branch was circled with feathers resembling pine needles. The individual branches were then attached to a central wooden pole and placed in a stand. The end of each branch was usually finished with an artificial red berry or a metal candle holder.

Notice the feather trees’ sparse branches. They resemble the native German white pines most commonly used there for Christmas trees. This sparseness also allowed candles to be used more safely and provided ample space to load the tree with ornaments and other decorations.

Feather trees came in many sizes, but smaller, two- to three-foot trees were the most common. An antique feather tree taller than five feet is a rare find. Later, feather trees prewired with lights became available. Feather trees waned in popularity, however, in the years prior to World War II. After the war, manufacturers began producing artificial trees in synthetic materials.

Glossary

Belsnickle: a stern-looking Santa figure made in Germany from about 1870 to 1920, constructed of papier-mâché, composition, or stapled cardboard. *Belsnickle* is derived from the German term *Pelz Nichol*, or “Nicholas in Fur.”

bisque: unglazed, hard-fired white porcelain with a matte finish that is often employed for decorative art objects and doll bodies.

composition: a glue and sawdust mixture that can be molded into three-dimensional shapes and painted.

embossing: pressing paper with a metal tool to create a raised design.

Erzgebirge: a region in eastern Germany renowned for its hand-carved and painted wooden decorations and toys in the 1800s and early 1900s. Artisans still produce these traditional items there today.

lithography: a printing process in which the image to be printed is rendered on a flat stone or metal plate that is run through a press. The image areas retain ink while the non-image areas are treated to repel ink. *Chromolithography*, or color lithography, requires a series of inked plates, one for each color.

papier-mâché: sheets of paper and glue layered successively onto a frame, or wet paper pulp placed in a mold to make three-dimensional objects such as figures, boxes, ornaments, or masks.

scrap: printed paper cutouts—also called die-cuts or chromos, short for chromolithographs—often embellished with cotton batting, metallic tinsel, or other materials to make ornaments.

Second-Floor Landing by Fifth Third Gallery

A German Village

People celebrating Christmas in Germany have set up displays like this one for over a century. These cardboard and paper houses are probably from the mid-20th century. Because German artisans still make them, they are difficult to date more precisely. Some clues to their age are present, however. The first houses of this sort, from the early 19th century, had wooden bases, openings in back where a candle could be placed, and holes in the roof to vent the rising heat from the candle. Later houses like these had composition bases and smaller openings for lightbulbs. The cardboard figures throughout the display were part of a winter village set.

From the Collection of Mike Ciancio

Christmas at the Dime Store

Many people cherish childhood memories of Christmastime visits to neighborhood dime stores. The colorful gifts and decorations displayed at these stores brought excitement to the holiday season. This display recreates that experience for those who remember, and introduces it to a new generation.

Here you see advertising booklets, counter displays, and signs, as well as various decorations for the home. Christmas tree lights, wrapping paper, tape, and cards complete the festive mood.

From the Collection of Linda and Thomas Martin

A German Christmas

The wooden nativity set on the left features figures and buildings made in Germany between the 1850s and early 1900s. The buildings were intended to evoke the architectural style of Bethlehem as people imagined it in the 19th century. In the center of the display hangs an Affenleuchter, or monkey candelabra, hand-carved and painted in the town of Wiesa in the Erzgebirge region around 1890. Germans traditionally displayed such chandeliers during Advent. On the right stand two large Belsnickle nodders—figures that move when wound with a key—made in the Sonneberg region around 1915. The shorter one wearing a fur-trimmed coat was discovered in a trash can in Germany about 45 years ago.

From the Collection of Susan Bickert

Historic House Entry

Christmas Fruit and Lambs

For centuries, people have decorated with fruit for the holidays. In the 19th century, because real fruit was not always available in winter, Germans started making glass fruit ornaments. This glass fruit was fragile and moderately expensive, so cotton fruit ornaments like those in this display became a sturdier and more affordable option. The maker hand-molded cotton into a fruit shape, covered the shape with lacquer, painted it, and sprayed it with tiny glass particles called “Venetian dew.” Beneath the feather trees—one of them a rare pink tree—stand several Steiff lambs, including one rare lamb on wheels. Marguerite Steiff founded her stuffed toy company in 1880, and it is still in business today. Smaller stick-legged sheep complete the flock. Finally, a doll sits in her cart, awaiting Christmas Eve.

From the Collection of Kathy and Stewart “Greg” Gregory

Pop-Up Fun at Christmas

Jack-in-the-boxes were popular toys and gifts in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They featured a variety of pop-up human and animal characters. Color lithographs typically decorated the wooden boxes with hinged lids. Their hand-painted, composition heads were mounted on cloth-encased springs. When a child released the small latch on a lid, the head would pop out. German, and later Japanese, toy makers produced these toys. The jack-in-the-boxes here include clowns, a rabbit, a lady, and a child. An 1890s advertisement for Pearline Washing Compound features a child holding a jack-in-the-box.

From the Collection of Pam and Jim Thomas

North End of Long Hallway

Santa and Clockwork Reindeer

This tall and thin 1920s German Santa appears quite different from the more familiar plump Santa of that period and today. He holds an original feather tree with tiny candles, and separates at the waist to reveal candy or other treats. He was most likely used as a store display. A 1940s wind-up clockwork reindeer accompanies him.

From the Collection of Rick Finn

18th-Century British Paintings Gallery

A German Table at Advent

A selection of 1850s wooden figures adorns this Tischleuchter, or table candelabra, made about a century later. During Advent, Germans decorated these stands with small houses, trees, animals, and human figures, all made in the Erzgebirge region.

From the Collection of Susan Bickert

19th-Century Landscape Painting Gallery

Paper Doll Tree

Popular Christmas decorations and ornaments, paper dolls produced in the late 1800s and early 1900s decorate this German-style feather tree. Paper dolls ranged from the simple to the elaborate. Some sported chromolithographic scraps for heads and limbs, tissue paper clothing, and crepe paper or lace details. Others were embellished with embossed paper or cardboard.

American businesses often gave away paper dolls as promotions that included product or merchant advertising on their reverse sides. Some of the dolls here promoted J & P Coats Thread, Lion Coffee, Diamond Dyes, McLaughlin's Coffee, and the Kis-Me Gum Co. Beneath the tree, an early 1900s Dennison Paper Co. kit contains all the materials and instructions to assemble paper dolls. Two jointed scrap girl figures await their dresses, to be fashioned from the kit.

From the Collection of Pam and Jim Thomas

Longworth Foyer

Christmas Doll Dance

Dolls have always been an important part of Christmas, whether under the tree as gifts or on the tree as ornaments. Here, a group of bisque character dolls from the early 20th century dance around a feather tree.

From the Collection of Beth and Jay Karp

19th-Century Figural Painting Gallery

Beneath the Tree

A magical Christmas morning in 1900 might have included an array of playthings such as these. Imaginative pull-toys like the ones you see here were created in Germany's Sonneberg region in the early 1900s. They were exported worldwide and found welcome homes with children throughout the United States. The realistic goat with startling glass eyes stands upon a sturdy wheeled platform. And, it has a surprise—when a child pushes down on its head, it emits a hearty bleating noise. A hound dog with bobbing head carries a rabbit in its mouth, and a wheeled-platform elephant nods its head as it rolls along.

From the Collection of Connie and Melvin Porcher

Barbizon Gallery

The Many Faces of Santa

Two green German feather trees from the early 1900s feature Santa Claus ornaments in many different styles and materials. The tree on the left features German and American glass Santas in red, white, gold, blue, and green full-figure forms. Other glass ornaments include Santa's face on a pine cone, Santa on a ball, and a Santa with chenille legs. German cotton Santas with scrap faces and Japanese chenille Santas from the 1920s and '30s complete the tree on the right. Beneath the tree, games and a toy Model "A" Ford would have delighted children on Christmas morning in the 1930s.

A large "mask-face" Santa wearing a satin outfit decorates the trees. Popular in the 1930s, this American-made Santa figured in many department store window displays.

From the Collection of Pam and Jim Thomas

Santa in Motion

And you thought Santa only drove a sleigh! Here, 19th- and early-20th-century candy containers, figures, and ornaments show the jolly old elf using other forms of transportation including a tricycle cart, a horse, and skis. Most were made in Germany out of papier-mâché, glass, paper, and other materials.

From the Collection of Mary and Doug Lohman

South End of Long Hallway

Big Belsnickle

Dating to the 1880s and made of molded cardboard, this unusually large Belsnickle would have held plenty of candy for a lucky child. The solemn and stern-looking predecessor of Santa Claus wears a holly-trimmed hood and boots that conceal a tube to hold sweet treats.

From the Collection of Rick Finn

Dining Room

Heavenly Christmas Angels

Among the most iconic Christmas imagery, angels have been produced in a variety of motifs over the years. The mid-20th-century figures here include angel musicians and candleholders by Lefton China; angel bells by Holt-Howard, a popular producer of whimsical ceramics; and three caroling angels by Napco (National Potteries Corporation).

From the Collection of Linda and Thomas Martin

Music Room

Christmas Eve in 1880

During the late Victorian era, wire-wrapped ornaments reflected the love of glitzy decoration. These extremely fragile glass ornaments were mouth blown without a mold, so each is an individual creation. They were dipped in soft pastel colors and wrapped in sterling silver wire. Some contain chromolithographs or artificial flowers. Because of their delicate nature, few wire-wrapped ornaments from this time have survived.

Beneath the tree are vintage toys encircled by a Lionel train that was the collector's childhood toy. Toys from left to right include: three roly-poly toys, one of which is a rare Mother Goose; a cradle and doll with "sleep eyes" that close when she lies down; an 1890s Santa candy container inside a red sack; a child's scrapbook featuring colorful decorations on its cover; an early 20th-century reproduction of a 16th-century lantern clock; and a plush dog on wheels made by Steiff.

Twins Feather Tree Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, made this six-foot feather tree exclusively for the Taft Museum of Art. It is a 2007 handmade reproduction of a late-19th-century feather tree.

From the Collection of Kathy and Stewart "Greg" Gregory