

Contemporary Collectibles: Feather trees and 'evergleams'

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

In holiday seasons past, this column has covered a wide variety of Christmas collectibles - vintage creches, Santa Claus and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, Christmas greeting cards and postcards, Christmas jewelry, Christmas tree lights, Dresden porcelain, glass, cotton, paper, wax and treetop ornaments. What's next? How about the tree itself?

Obviously it's not very practical to start a collection of live Douglas firs - unless you have a sizable estate - but artificial trees have been around long enough to be of interest to the collector.

The earliest examples, known as feather trees, originated in Germany, the country responsible for so many Christmas traditions and styles of decoration. Made of dyed goose, ostrich, turkey and, later, swan feathers attached to metal wires or sticks to form the branches of the tree, they were stabilized on round and square wooden bases. Some of them had red composition berries attached to the tips of each branch, while others supported candle holders.

The process consisted of dyeing the feathers, stripping them of their quills, then carefully wrapping each of these green feathers around heavy wire. Later, they were made available in a wide spectrum of colors: light and dark green, white, blue and gold. These feather trees gradually made their way to America, the smaller ones brought over by immigrants who for the most part lived in confined spaces, and they began to catch on in the early 1900s, first appearing in the Sears Roebuck catalog in 1913.

The use of artificial trees in the U.S. was advanced by conservationist President Theodore Roosevelt's campaign against the Christmas tree as an agent of deforestation, inspiring some people to create their own trees, ranging from the most humble to the most elaborate. Montgomery Ward offered a 21-inch tree in an enameled wooden pot with 18 fancy ornaments in 1926, all for the price of \$1. Feather trees were still being produced by the Germans, who began to be more innovative with their color schemes - some were dark green with light green and white shaded tips, or died pink, blue, purple, white or orange, finished off with blue or white berries. Cellophane was another material used in the 1930s.

In the 1940s, manufactured American artificial trees were primarily made of visca (rayon with the feel of straw), though some feather trees were still made in the early years of the decade, despite wartime scarcities of paper and wire. At this time it was emphasized that they were American made, though in fact some shopkeepers would actually sand off the "Made in Germany" stamped on their bases. By 1949, Montgomery Ward was selling flame-resistant, straw-like viscose trees in three sizes (up to 96 inches), while Sears offered five different heights, with 24 to 75 branches, priced from 49 cents to \$4.53.

In the 1950s - the era of flocked trees and aerosol-dispensed simulated snow (aka aerosnow) - prewar feather trees were once again on the market. Especially popular were German-made, 18-inch trees fashioned of real

goose feathers and set in white wooden bases, which were equipped with 24 miniature glass ornaments, while at the same time Macy's was selling flocked trees in pastel colors. Visca trees grew more and more realistic - there were now 6-footers with 300 dense, soft branches. A major development took place with the introduction of the aluminum tree around 1950, some of them advertised as "evergleams." They were offered in various silvery tones - ice blue, green, fuchsia and chartreuse. The Aluminum Specialty Co. of Wisconsin marketed a stainless-aluminum tree that employed Reynold's aluminum and came in pink, green and gold as well as silver.

These gleaming metallic creations worked perfectly with the contemporary modern furnishings of their day, just as vintage examples would with today's revival of mid-century modern.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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