



Christmas Tree Ornaments

By Gene Bradberry



In keeping with the Christmas spirit, I would like to share with you some interesting information about “glass ornaments” and decorations which adorned our earliest Christmas trees. I found it to be fascinating reading as I gathered information for this article. I will cover only the highlights of their development.

The earliest known decorated Christmas trees in America dates to 1747, where, at a German Moravian Church’s settlement in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, wooden

pyramids were made and covered with evergreen boughs and decorated with candles, apples and pretty verses.

Prior to the 1850s, the most famous Christmas poem or story ever written, “T’was the night before Christmas” (originally entitled “Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus”) by Clement C. Moore, written for his children and published in the Troy, N.Y. *Sentinel* December, 1823, gave the first account of eight reindeer (by name) and mentioned “the stockings were hung by the chimney with care,” but no where did it mention or reference a Christmas tree.

The oldest record of Christmas trees in a major city in America was in 1825 when Philadelphia’s *Saturday Evening Post* described “trees visible through the windows...decorated.”

On to the glass ornaments!

The first commercially produced tree ornaments were cast of a soft tin and lead alloy by German tinsmiths and toymakers



of Nuremberg, Germany. These date from the later part of the 1700s and were very popular in America from 1870 to 1900. By this time, glass ornaments had begun to take





their place.

By 1880, no one would have dreamed that the glassblowers' creations would be such a success. They were first imported from Germany by a wholesale house in Philadelphia that had been selling from variety store in Lancaster, Pa., by the name of F.M. Woolworth its goods. Woolworth had to be coerced into trying the new glass ornaments with a money back guarantee, but he did try them and, much to his surprise, they were sold out in two

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days. Of course, it was too late to get any more that year.

Woolworth also never realized that these ornaments would account for such a large amount of the vast fortune that he would acquire over the next few years.

By 1890, Woolworth had grown to thirteen stores, was having tremendous success with these little glass ornaments and decided to go to Germany himself. He arrived in the little German village of Lauscha in February, and in the next few days, bought 200,000 ornaments. This was a far cry from the original batch bought for \$25 just one year before.

During the 1840s, Lauscha was the birthplace of virtually all blown glass Christmas ornaments. The ornament maker's home was his factory and he worked in an attached workshop, where he sat all day over a flame, melting glass and blowing ornaments of all shapes.

After the ornaments were blown, they were slivered on the inside by a solution that usually was a combination of silver nitrate, quicklime and milk sugar. This tedious task was usually performed by the wife and consisted of filling each ornament one fourth full of the solution, then shaking it. To get it to spread evenly inside, it would be dipped in hot water several times, then she would hold five or six in one hand at a time by their long six-inch stems, or "pikes," to speed up production.

After the inside coating was completed, she would pour the excess solution into a basin where the silver would be chemically separated and used again. The piles were then slipped over nails protruding from long boards and allowed to dry while hanging from rafters above the store.

When they were dry, they were dipped into various colored lacquers. After dipping, the ornaments were returned to their nails so that the excess lacquer would run down the pile without spoiling the even finish on the ornament.

Often, working 8 to 15 hours a day, a family could produce as many as 300 to 500 ornaments a day.

The first written record of Christmas tree ornaments being produced does not appear until 1848, when "six dozen Christmas ornaments in three sizes" were recorded in a Lauscha glassblowers book. Molds were developed there in 1890 that



enabled them to produce many varied shapes of ornaments. Among these shapes were apples, pears, oranges, corn, beets, potatoes, pickles, dogs, cats, monkeys, bears, clowns, storybook characters, Christian symbols, including the Christ child, houses, churches, and of course, Santa. A conservative estimate of 5,000 has been made to the number of different types of ornaments made there.

After a brief lapse of importation during World War I, by 1930, Woolworth, Kresge, Kress and America's largest importer, Max Eckhardt, had warehouses in Sonnenberg that was a much larger town near Lauscha. Imports to America were in the millions.

The glassblowers of Lauscha had their lives completely changed by the war in 1939. After the end of World War II, Lauscha found itself ten miles inside the border of East Germany and thus the valuable American market was lost.

A brief attempt was made to revive the industry in West Germany after the war, but it never really quite made it. Between 1950 and the early 1960s, about 20 percent of American ornaments were again imported from West Germany, but this was short lived due to the economics of the glassblowing by hand and the lack of artisans available.

There was, however, a ten year period of black market ornaments from Lauscha, but again this was short lived for numerous reasons.

In 1938, Corning Glass began experimenting with ornament molds, and by 1939, could machine produce in a single minute more than a glassblower could make in a day. Eckhardt, who was instrumental in initiating this venture, formed his own company called "Shiny Brite" and bought ornaments from Corning and silvered and decorated them himself. However, by 1944, no silver could be had, and hence, "Clear Painted" ornaments came into being. Following the war, Shiny Brite became the largest ornament company in the world.

In the late 1960s, Corning returned to not only making glass ornaments, but also decorating them while continuing to supply "blanks" to Shiny Brite and other finishers. In one way or another, Corning still produces most of the glass ornaments made in America today.

There is so much detail about the development of glass ornaments that is just fascinating. It almost seems an injustice to not devote more space to this article. I hope that I have whetted your appetite and aroused your curiosity to further read up on this aspect of our glassmaking ancestry.

Some sources for further reading are:

The Christmas Tree, Daniel Foley, Chilton, Ohio, 1960.

The Glass Christmas Ornament: Old & New, Maggie Rogers & Judith Hawkins, Timber Press, 1971.

The Christmas Tree Book, Phillip Snyder, The Viking Press, 1976.

