

Hunting for Antique Christmas

BY GREGORY LEFEVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

BETH KARP BLENDS VINTAGE ORNAMENTS
WITH A CLASSIC DOLL COLLECTION TO
CREATE ENCHANTING HOLIDAY DISPLAYS.



A whole neighborhood inhabits Beth and Jay Karp's den with porcelain sisters leaning over dollhouse balconies, together peering down at the neighborhood urchin walking his dog—little suspecting around the corner comes Santa, his bag laden with toys. On one table a few feet away a crèche merges seamlessly with a farm scene while another Santa takes wing, complete with a team of reindeer, and flies past inches above a waiting chimney.

Were the dolls suddenly to come to life—hundreds, even thousands of them—the sound would be that of an overjoyed amusement park highlighted by moos, mews, bow-wow-wows, and ho-ho-hos echoing all around. It's a fantasy world that spreads across the full width of the Karp's low-slung ranch house—spilling from sunroom to kitchen, from dining room to den—and from there across at least two centuries.

Beth clearly has a passion for both dolls and Christmas as well as a unique talent for combining the two into cohesive scenes that other hands might make overwhelming. With Beth arranging and matchmaking, the crowds of bisque and papier-mâché faces not only make sense together but tell stories, some intimate, many amusing. You can almost hear the dolls thinking and chattering—and wondering why we are staring at them.

And you do stare. You can't take your eyes off the glitter, the snow, the greenery, and bounty—so much you can't take it all in on a single day. We tried, and even equipped with several digital cameras we couldn't capture it all. Treasures are

everywhere, and everywhere are surprises. Although purist collectors of either dolls or Christmas might scoff at the pairing, the two sides of the collection work together as magically as elves at the North Pole.

Beth Karp's two-pronged passion began innocently enough about forty years ago, shortly after she and Jay

married. "I had a few old Christmas ornaments and, frankly, I don't even remember how I got them," she explained. "But you know, sometimes you see something and say, 'I really like this; it's so beautiful, and so old.' That's how you get drawn into antique Christmas. You're drawn to it even if you don't know about it."

Although displayed among a grouping of Beth's dollhouses, this piece is more likely an architectural model of European origins. It was her first acquisition in what has grown into a substantial collection of dollhouses. Unlike typical examples, this one lacks access to the interior.



A narrow feather tree, likely designed for a hallway, is resplendent with assorted ornaments in front of a den window. The table holds a house, stable, and barn along with groupings of animals and people. The most notable feature in the vignette is the Santa with four reindeer on the roof of the yellow house—an early German pull toy that Beth calls "a spectacular piece." Another stable sits on the floor beneath the table. The window-seat, which runs the length of the room, holds some of Beth's dollhouse collection.



This candy container Santa is one of Beth's favorite pieces. When she acquired him at auction, he was in bad shape—broken and covered in soot. She restored him and cleaned his antique red coat and hat. Today he proudly holds a feather tree.



This rare, late 1800s "Christmas Fairy" stands nearly 15 inches tall. She is a wax doll and originally may have been a tree topper, although Beth displays her on a stand.

The sideboard in the dining room displays a number of Beth's small dolls and several Santas as well as two feather trees. The decorative wagon on the right end of the table is inscribed "Dealer of Good Things."





These are just some of the rare, 1920s snow babies Beth has collected and displays on a three-tier table. Grout gives a snow-like appearance to the babies' snowsuits.

She started with the pretty stuff, old ornaments like Dresdens—colorful, embossed cardboard ornaments mostly made in the Dresden-Leipzig area of Germany from about 1880 until the early decades of the 20th Century.

"I didn't even know what Dresdens were then, but I had a couple and I loved them," Beth said.

Then she became attracted to snow babies—small childlike figures of bisque decorated with white grout that resembles snow—that were marketed in the 1920s and 1930s. They are like tiny dolls two or three inches tall, and they started an idea glimmering in Beth's brain.

"I liked snow babies, and from snow babies I got interested in regular dolls," she explained. Old dolls. She acquired a number of classic 19th-Century figures produced by Germany's most esteemed doll and toy makers—Johann Daniel Kestner, Cuno & Otto Dressel, Kammer & Reinhardt, and Gebrüder Heubach, among others.

Then she noticed that the Heu-

bach dolls, for example, had porcelain heads and fit with the Christmas theme and antiques. Her unique style of displaying her collections was born, her combinations setting her apart from Christmas-collecting peers. On tabletop displays and in vignettes beneath trees, dolls stand alongside Belsnickels, Santas, and *putz* animals.

For a while Beth was hooked mostly on dolls then a friend in the nursery business told her about the Golden Glow of Christmas Past, the largest antique Christmas collectors' club in the world.

"My husband and I joined the Glow, where we met all of these other people with the same interest, and that's when we really started aggressively looking for antique Christmas items," Beth said.

Jay is no innocent bystander. A willing and able accomplice, he shares Beth's love of antique Christmas. Both are lifelong residents of Cincinnati. Beth operates a successful, one-woman horticulture and landscape

business, which fortuitously gives her free time around the holidays. Jay's family operated an auction business, which he joined at age eighteen.

Unfortunately, Christmas rarely comes up on the block.

"He's been auctioneering forever, not that he ever gets any good Christmas," Beth said, laughing. "In fact, years ago when he would get feather trees—and I've got to tell you, feather trees, undecorated, are very ugly and scrawny looking—everybody would throw them away, including my husband."

They know better now. Feather trees appear in nearly every room of the house, each boasting an impressive themed selection of collectibles. They have several *putz* scenes—miniature villages comprising people, animals, buildings, and landscaping—decorating tabletops and shelves. They also own a number of rare Noah's arks from the Erzgebirge region of Germany, the world's largest site for toy manufacturing at the



turn of the 20th Century. Several dollhouses from Germany's Moritz Gottschalk factory, the world's leading maker in the late 19th Century, form other displays.

Along with the antiques, the Karp's display several treasured period-style ornaments from Beth's friends, Jerry and Darla Arnold of Cleveland, noted artists who re-create vintage ornaments using a combination of antique and new materials.

Beth believes her early snow babies, a selection of "noddors"—toys with heads or limbs that move either mechanically or upon touch—and some very old Santas are the most noteworthy objects in their collection. But her favorite Santa is a large candy container from the late 1800s that she bought at an auction.

"He was a real mess," she explained. "He was covered in soot and his neck was broken. People store these things in their attics where it gets to be about two hundred degrees and they just crumble."

But this Santa won her heart and she was determined to restore the venerable old guy. "It took a lot of work, but he got put back together and his clothes got cleaned, and I just think he's wonderful!"

Although Beth clearly enjoys displaying her large Christmas collection throughout her home, she admitted, "The fun is in the hunt." She occasionally has found items at antiques malls, estate sales, and auctions, but her main sources in recent years have been two events dedicated specifically to antique Christmas—the annual Golden Glow convention and the Annual Vintage Holiday Show in Columbus, Ohio.

Beth notes that collecting for her has gone in a full circle. "I started with antique Christmas, which got me interested in dolls, and then I went back to Christmas," she explained. "My collection probably leans a little more toward dolls and dollhouses because I

This feather tree in the Karp's entry hall displays Beth's collection of bird ornaments from about the 1930s. The early-20th-Century Santa holds an electric lantern.

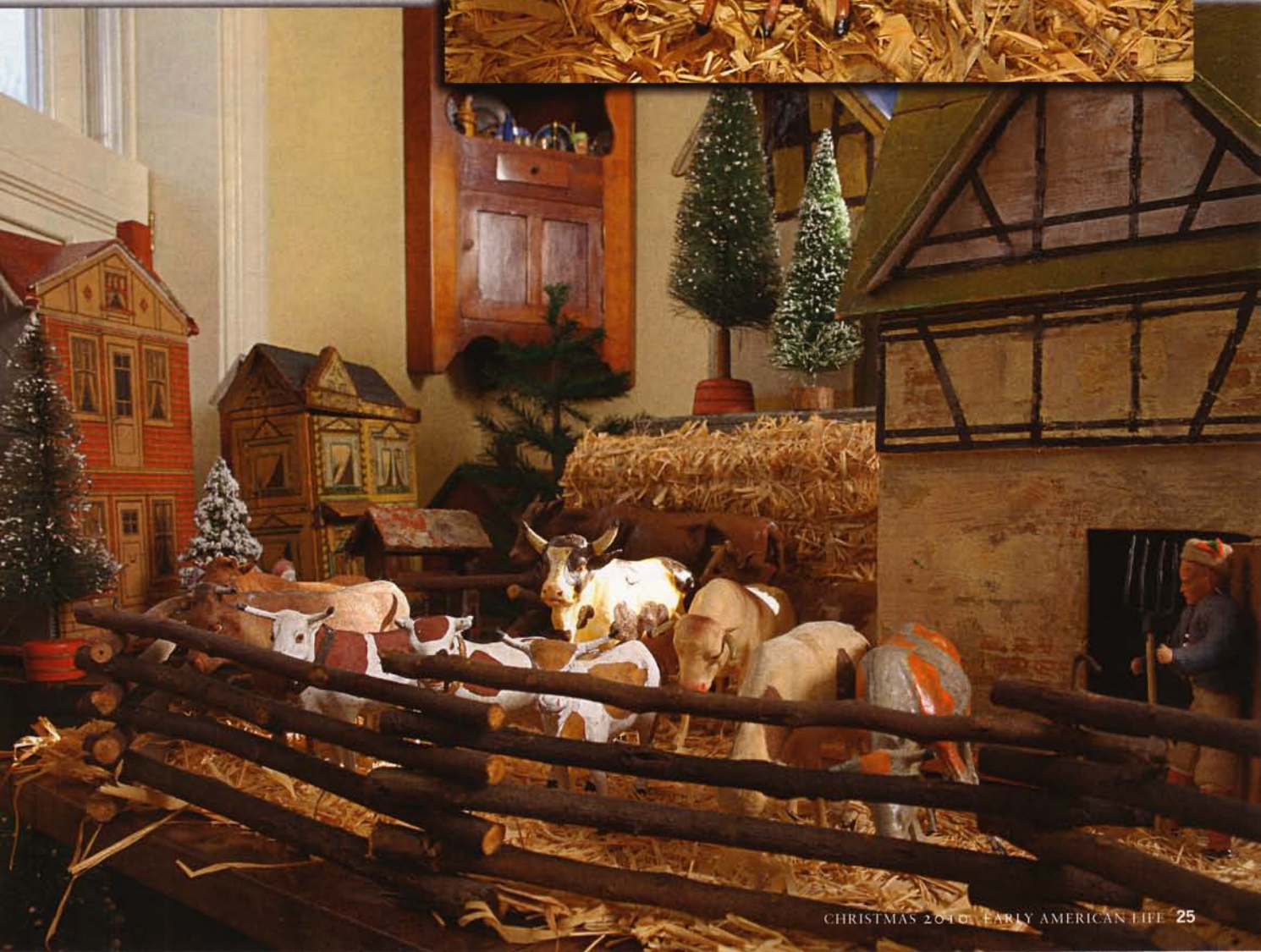
A section of one of the many putz scenes in the Karp home shows two small dolls in a wagon.

really like the dolls, and Jay picked up the ball on the dollhouses. It's definitely a crossover collection."

Of course her focus has changed twice before, so nothing keeps it from changing again. Beth remains flexible in her choices, ready to adapt to the next treasure. "I might be a little more into dolls than Christmas now but that could be completely different next year." ★

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Part of a putz barnyard scene includes a farmer, his cattle, and a farmhouse. In the background are several dollhouses displayed on a window seat, some created by the Moritz Gottschalk factory, Germany's premier dollhouse maker in the late 19th Century.





OPPOSITE LEFT TO RIGHT

This girl ornament is made of composition and is of German origin, dressed in her original native costume.

This celluloid boy is one of many ornaments adorning a feather tree in the home's library.

This large wax angel has spun glass wings and holds a horn.

The red-cloaked girl has a vintage cloth body to which a celluloid head is attached.

A boy "swinger" ornament made of bisque is from the early 20th Century. The name "swinger" typifies this type of ornament suspended from a branch or other support.

This long-braided girl in European costume is made of composition, a material more commonly used for dolls than for ornaments.

This jointed wooden Pinocchio likely is from the late 1800s.

The blown-glass cat nestled in a basket is an early-20th-Century ornament of Russian origin.

The blown-glass violin ornament dates to the early 20th Century.



These three children were manufactured by the famous Gebrüder Heubach toy factory in the early 20th Century. They sit atop an 8-by-12-inch box with a lever that, when turned, causes the dolls to nod their heads and raise their teacups. The sheep in the background moves its head and makes a "baaa" sound.

These two classic c. 1915 German character dolls reinforce the patriotic theme Beth enjoys. The boy is by Kestner and the girl by Kammer & Reinhardt, both prominent German manufacturers of the period.







A step-back cupboard contains a number of notable decorations. The top shelf has three rare Noah's arks from the Erzgebirge region of Germany, with the animals carved in circles along the age lines of a slice of tree trunk. The middle shelves display village scenes, and the bottom shelf features a rare array of snow babies.

An early-20th-Century Santa roly-poly rests among a number of other antique toys as part of the Christmas display.



OPPOSITE Several of Beth's prized Belsnickels line the fireplace mantel in the dining area of the kitchen. The adjacent shelves hold her "transportation Santas," with the jolly man riding in sleds and wagons pulled by reindeer and donkeys as well as cars and other vehicles. In the center, the papier-mâché Santa with four reindeer is one of Beth's oldest decorations, from the 1800s.