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Deck the halls

Local groups offer up last-minute ideas for unique Christmas gifts

By Nancy Sheehan TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF





Some people are all done with their Christmas shopping. They can sit and sip eggnog while the panic-stricken rest of us finally face the fact that it really, really is going to be Christmas — IN JUST A WEEK. To ease those last-minute palpitations we asked local museums and cultural institutions, who draw support for programs from gift shop sales, for cool, quick items under \$50. Not only can you find uncommon gifts at our local institution’s shops, but you’ll find something else even rarer — competent sales help.

“The three ladies in our shop — Susan, Mimi and Margrata — have each been at the museum over 20 years. They can help you find a gift even for the most finicky Scrooge,” said Allison Berkeley, marketing manager at Worcester Art Museum.

Some gift ideas just squeaked under our \$50 cutoff while others, such as Preservation Worcester’s new “Worcester’s Best” playing cards, came in way under at \$10 per deck. The cards are a standard deck, with each card featuring a photograph and historical information on one of 54 important Worcester structures. The back of the card has an abstracted photograph of City Hall and the Common by local photographer Dick Taylor. The project took nearly two years to complete. All of the proceeds benefit the education and advocacy programs of Preservation Worcester.

“The playing cards are a great gift because they are new in the city, they are educational, they promote our city and beautiful architecture, they are easy to wrap or mail, they are great for people for all ages and almost everyone plays cards, and they support a great organization,” Deborah Packard, Preservation Worcester executive director, said.

The cards are available at Preservation Worcester, 10 Cedar St., and Lucky’s Café, 102 Grove St., Worcester. PW is open from 9 to 5 weekdays. “If that doesn’t work, call us and we’ll see what we can do,” Packard said.

Call (508) 754-8760 or see www.preservationworchester.org.

Here are some other suggestions:

- Woosta, Whistah, Whateversta. You can show your pride in your city any way you say its name with a 100 percent cotton T-shirt made exclusively for the Worcester Historical Museum by Worcester-based Guertin Graphics. Available in adult sizes small, medium, large, and X-large, the shirts costs \$15.

“Whenever we wear them out, to a street fair or whatever, people go crazy. They say ‘I’ve got to get one of those,’ ” William Wallace, historical museum executive director, said. Gift Shop hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday at the museum, 30 Elm St., www.worcesterhistory.org.

- You can share the magnificence of Imperial Russia with a Faberge-inspired egg box from the Museum of Russian Icons. The enameled pieces would add color and style to any desktop and come with a coordinating pendant and stand. Measures, 2-1/4 x 1-1/4 inches. Price, \$49.99. Shop hours this week are 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursday. Closed Dec. 24. The museum is at 203 Union St., Clinton, www.museumofrussianicons.org

- A full suit of armor would cost astronomically more than our \$50 limit and it’s hot and stuffy walking around in one anyway. You can still get a Medieval effect with cute, nicely detailed little knight figures from Higgins Armory Museum, 100 Barber Ave. They are crafted from pewter and stand about 4 inches high; \$22.95 each. Call for shop hours, (508) 853-6015 or see www.higgins.org.

- Gayle Farley, gift shop manager at Tower Hill Botanic Garden, has added American-made artisan products in the shop this year, including 100 percent silk screen-printed scarves from Boise, Idaho, artist Arin Arthur. The nature designs in pods and fronds would make “a lovely accent for your winter coat or to dress up your little black evening dress,” Farley says. \$42 each. Gift shop hours this week are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and Wednesday evenings until 8 p.m. Closed Dec. 24. Tower Hill is at 11 French Drive, Boylston. More info at www.towerhillbg.org.

- Children delight in creatures real and imagined and seldom see the need to differentiate between the two. At the EcoTarium, 222 Harrington Way, a play set made of wood called Topozoo lets kids create incredible creatures limited only by imagination. Each set has over 1,200 possible combinations and the more sets you collect, the more possibilities, as they all work together (and all are made in the U.S.A.). Dinosaurs and safari animals are among sets offered by the EcoTarium. \$37.95 each. Call for shop hours, (508) 929-2700 or see www.ecotarium.org.

- At Worcester Art Museum, gift shop merchandising manager Susan Giordano tries to stock items that are inspired by art — either in WAM’s collection or collections at other museums throughout the world. Her advice for last-minute holiday shoppers: “Don’t panic! Take a deep breath, and remember that the holidays are really about spending time with friends and family, regardless of gifts. First, make your list and budget, then stick to it. Don’t forget to add yourself to your list! You deserve a treat too after all that holiday shopping.” Her gift suggestion, a geometric interlocking oval necklace of silver-toned metal for \$35. The museum is at 55 Salisbury St. Call (508) 799-4406 for hours or see www.worcesterart.org.

- Old Sturbridge Village offers several gift items made right in Sturbridge by OSV crafters. Among the most popular are handmade tinware items, including tin measures in graduated sizes from \$13.95; a pair of tin sconces with Bayberry candles, \$27.89 or \$30.85; a tin coffee pot,

\$39.95; and tin ornaments from \$3.99. OSV is at 1 Old Sturbridge Village Road (just off Route 20), Sturbridge. Call (800) 733-1830 for hours or see www.osv.org.

- The annual cup show in the Krikorian Gallery at the Worcester Center for Crafts offers a way to start an art collection without breaking the bank — or having to bid against all those billionaires.

“A handmade cup is a gift that promises to be enjoyed and cherished. It’s the beginning of a collection that will grow throughout the years, each with its own distinct memory,” gallery manager Candace Casey says. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. today, 10 to 5 Monday through Friday, closing at 3 p.m. Christmas Eve. The craft center is at 25 Sagamore Road. See www.worcester.edu/wcc for more info.