

Gifts You'll Love (To Buy and Receive)

by Amy Traverso (Yankee Magazine, Nov 2011)

The sidewalks of Harvard Square are bustling on this overcast early-December day. Frigid temperatures have everyone moving at a fast clip, but the looming deadline of Christmas Day has ramped up the activity. A few strains of “Silver Bells” trickle weakly out of a dress shop, but they’re lost amid the sounds of car engines gunning to outrace pedestrians at the crosswalks.

From across the street comes a warmer rhythm: the looping chorus of the popular Afro-Cuban song “Candela.” It beckons shoppers over to First Parish Cambridge, the Unitarian Universalist flagship where Ralph Waldo Emerson once lectured, and where today a handful of tents in the courtyard, a “Holiday Fair” sign, and an open door to the basement now promise shelter and a hope of festive spirit.

Inside: an underground bazaar, a riot of Indian textiles, painted silk, fused glass, and pottery, among some 40 stalls. There are stunning Japanese-inspired woodblock prints by Matt Brown, Arts & Crafts-style tiles by Lynne and Richie Bittner, fiesta-colored ceramics by James Guggina, and delicate tin lanterns by Lennie Kaumzha.

Shoppers mill around, stopping to contemplate a vase or a necklace, asking “Where are the beads from?” or “Can you wash wooden bowls with soap?” The artisans are as patient and watchful as their days are long: first, the early-morning set-up and then eight or nine hours of selling on each of the 13 festival days through Christmas Eve. But they’re glad to be here: 2011 marks this juried fair’s 26th year, an established market with a returning cast.

“I look forward to this show,” says Gianna Bird, whose Silver Moon Designs booth displays jewelry inspired by flowers, beach stones, and trees. “We see the same people every year and catch up. In five or ten minutes we have the whole year recapped.” Now in her seventh year with the fair, Bird is a relative newbie; co-founders Leslie Gray, Michael Jordan, and Connie Barbour have been here since the start and hold prime real estate by the entrance. The energy here is good, the customers steady.

True to its Unitarian digs, the fair doesn’t play favorites with Christmas, opting instead for a menu of world music, twinkling lights, and

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nondenominational cheer. But it certainly feels more festive than the street scene above. Friends meet, a cup of mulled cider is an inexpensive treat, and in this gentler hub of holiday commerce, here's proof that Harvard Square's hippie heart still beats strongly.

The 2012 Harvard Square Holiday Craft Fair is set for December 1-2, 7-9, 14-16, and 18-23. First Parish Cambridge, 3 Church St., Cambridge, MA.

harvardsquareholidayfair.com