

Christmas Gift Guide

HANDMADE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

These gifts are
guaranteed to
be one-of-a-kind

Story Loyd McIntosh
Photos by Wallace Bromberg Jr.

Christmas is almost here, which, of course, means frantic, panicked and frustrating trips to crowded shopping centers searching for the “perfect” gift for that special friend or family member. Despite our best efforts, it seems like a hamster wheel you can’t stop.

Why do that to yourself, spending hours behind the wheel only to spend way too much of your hard-earned dough on something mass-produced in a factory halfway around the world? Fortunately, you don’t have to stress yourself out like that. St. Clair County is blessed with an abundance of artists and craftsmen – and women – creating amazing, functional and beautiful pieces of art, all available at shops close to home.

Jewelry Made From Recycled Wine Bottles

ARTISTS: STEVE AND SALLY SMITH

Making use of a practically endless supply of material, Steve Smith, along with his wife and business partner, Sally, has been creating unique and colorful pieces of jewelry out of empty wine bottles.

“Not many artists use recycled glass. It just behaves differently than typical art glass does,” says Smith. “That’s one of the things that’s frustrating but unique about it. It doesn’t merge together. You can’t meld wine bottles together because they’re all a little bit different.”

To create each item of jewelry, Steve cuts bottles into pieces and melts them flat, forming them into shape. He then applies designs to the glass using frits and glass enamel. He then kiln-fires the jewelry, which polishes the edges and fuses the glass.

Steve also creates wall mosaics, mosaics with mirrors, and wind chimes, however, the jewelry is, by far, the most popular.

Smith’s work is available locally at Artscapes in Pell City.





**Handmade
cutting
boards**



Jewelry by Steve and Sally Smith

An Iron Chef Award Winning Plate

POTTER: TENA PAYNE

When chef and Birmingham native Chris Hastings defeated Bobby Flay on Food Network's Iron Chef in 2012, his presentation was a major factor in his victory. Artist and owner of Leeds' Earthborn Pottery, Tena Payne, created the one-of-kind dish set for Hastings, driving them and a batch of southern vegetables to New York for the competition.

From her studio and retail shop in downtown Leeds, Payne and her team of artists create beautiful and functional pieces of art that can be found in top restaurants all over the world.

As for her technique, Payne makes it simple: "We take the earth, we rearrange it, we put it in the heat, and beautiful things happen," she explains.

"It's one of the neatest processes in the world and one of the most ancient," she adds. "I like to say this was the first profession, not that other thing."

Find her products at Earthborn Pottery, Leeds.

A Painting of a Tornado

ARTIST: SUNDI HAWKINS

Like many Alabamians, the tornadoes of April 2011 left a lasting impression on many St. Clair Countians, including artist and Pell City native Sundi Hawkins. An inventive painter creating scenes in bold, vivid colors and detail, Hawkins has created dozens of paintings with funnel clouds taking center stage.

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Using wood as a medium, Hawkins uses acrylic paints then covers the artwork in a two-part epoxy resin, a similar process used to cover bar tops and restaurant tables. She then paints on top of the resin bringing out the colors and adding a sense of depth to the painting. "I just do layers and layers until I get it right," Hawkins says. "It's expressive painting where it's more about movement, feeling and color rather than about realism."

Hawkins paints other subjects in the same technique – pastoral settings, abstracts, etc. – and has developed an interest in painting dandelions recently as well. However, it's her funnel clouds that are her true statement.

Her works of art are available at Artscapes and at the Blue Light Special Art Show in Leeds, December 9-10.

A Street Scene of the Philippines

ARTIST: VERNA SETTLE

Pell City-based artists Verna Settle has quickly become a well-respected artist despite only taking up painting three years ago at the age of 49. A native of the Philippines, Settle's paintings depict scenes from her home country in a distinct style that can best be described as abstract realism.

One of her most striking paintings is a scene depicting a pair of women with what look to be clay pots resting on their heads. As Settle explains, this is a common sight among women looking to sell their wares in open-area commercial districts in major cities such as Quezon City and Manila.

"When you travel to the Philippines you get to know how strong the women are. The women work hard to provide additional support for their family financially," explains Settle. "That's the way they sell on the streets."

See her paintings at Lily Designs, Pell City.

A Chet Atkins Prototype Gretsch Guitar

KEEPER OF THE ART: RON PARTAIN

Okay, we know, this wasn't crafted in St. Clair County, but it's cool as heck just the same. This honey blond, hollow-body Gretsch Chet Atkins Country Gentlemen model prototype found its way to the display floor of Ron Partain's World of Music through a local guitar enthusiast who is looking to sell the guitar on consignment.

The instrument features a double-cutaway body design, a Bigsby® tremolo arm, and a green pick guard inscribed with the Atkins signature. A perfect gift for a musician or collector with a penchant for the Countryopolitan sounds of yesterday. The \$3,200 price tag might be a bit hefty, but a unique ax like this doesn't end up in our neck of the woods too often.

It's a rare find at Ron Partain's World of Music, Pell City

A Cutting Board Made From Reclaimed Wood

ARTIST: DAVE GUNKEL

When is a simple cutting board for the kitchen a piece of art? When it's created by local craftsmen, Dave Gunkel. From his shop located in the garage of his lakeside home in Pell City, Gunkel creates intricate, durable and visually striking cutting boards as well as Lazy Susans and vases. Remarkable, considering all of the works are crafted from reclaimed or discarded wood, allowing Gunkel to create final products that highlight the imperfections and unique characteristics of each piece of wood. "If you want a perfect cutting board without cracks," says Gunkel, "I'm not the man for you."



A hollow-body
Gretsch Chet
Atkins Country
Gentlemen
model prototype
guitar



Santa
portrait



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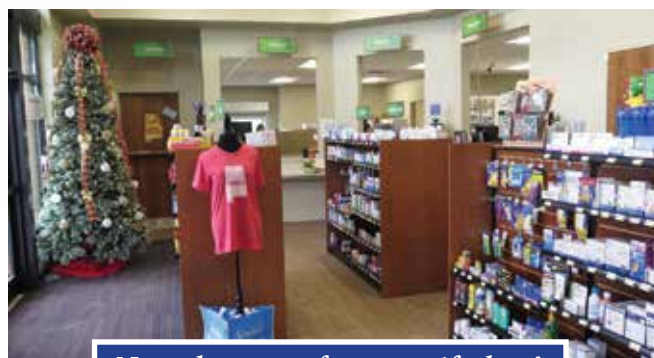
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Before Gunkel can begin work on a cutting board, each piece of wood must be allowed to dry, a process that can take several years to complete. Once work begins, Gunkel combines several types of wood, such as oak, cherry, and osage orange, into a final product that will withstand the wear and tear of daily use for generations. "This will last 200 years," Gunkel says. "You can leave this to your children."

Check them out at Artscapes, Pell City

A One-of-a-Kind Nativity

ARTIST: NADA BONER

Christmas wouldn't be the same without a nativity scene as a constant reminder of the reason for the season. While mass-produced ceramic nativities are a dime a dozen, Pell City is blessed to be home to one of the premier sculptors of handmade nativity scenes in Alabama.

Working from her home studio in Pine Harbor, Nada Boner begins work creating her Christmas nativities in May. Working with Raku clay, Boner produces about 80 pieces total, split between a handful of outlets – Artscapes and Lily Design Resource in Pell City, White Flowers Gallery in Homewood, and the Fine Arts Craft Show at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Because she doesn't work from a template, each nativity is unique.

"Nothing looks alike. I don't use patterns. Some have Joseph, some have a lamb, sometimes I may make an actual manger, sometimes I don't. It's whatever I feel like doing," Boner says.

"This year, I'm really liking the star off to the side. I don't know why," she adds. "It's just what I wanted to do at the time."

A Painting of Jolly Ol' St. Nick

ARTIST: DIRK WALKER

For more than 20 years, noted artist Dirk Walker has created small paintings of Santa Claus for sale in galleries throughout the Southeast during the Christmas season. This year will be an interesting one for fans of Walker's work, as all of Santa Claus portraits will be created in his new studio in downtown Pell City.

Best described as an abstract realist painter, Walker first painted Santa in time for the Holiday Counting Treasures Show. "I just did one just to see if anyone would be interested, and it just exploded," Walker says.

Walker's Santa Clauses often have a light-hearted, nostalgic feel to them, inspired by the image of Santa Claus in classic Coca-Cola advertising of the mid-20th Century. Over the years, he's painted Santa in a variety of light-hearted settings, such as snow skiing or fishing. Recently, however, he has focused on painting close ups of St. Nick's jolly face.

"To me, it is Santa Claus, that old Coca-Cola image," Walker says. "I just try to put a lot of character in the faces. There's a lot of loose brush work and things like that. It's been a fun thing that I've developed a good reputation for over the years."

Visit Walker's studio in historic downtown Pell City in the former Artscapes location on Cogswell Avenue.



**Pottery
Nativity
scene**



**Tena Payne
dinnerware**

A Tote Bag Supporting A Good Cause

ARTIST: BETHANY SMITH

Ashville-based Bethany Smith is a young pen-and-ink artist with a bright future. At only 19-years-old, the graphic designer also has a heart for the community. Having recently launched her business, Chocolate Ink Designs, Smith has created a special tote, available around her hometown with a portion of each sale going to support a worthy cause.

"I have a couple of sisters who sing with the Alabama Civic Choral, and they do a performance of the Messiah every year," she explains. "Right now, I'm doing a fundraiser with these tote bags."

While Smith's work can be best classified as graphic design with words and phrases forming the basis of each piece, each design originates from Smith's talented hand.

She only uses a computer at the very end of the process. "I sketch them out in pencil, then go over them in pen and scan them in and clean them up and have them printed up," Smith says.

Smith's designs can also be found on t-shirts and note cards around town as well.

Her tote is available at Canoe Creek Coffee in Ashville.