

**ORNAMENTS by Gloria Duchin made in R.I.  
Manufacturer of Christmas favorites has been thriving since 1979**

**By LAURA MEADE KIRK Journal Staff Writer**

What do the \$1.37 gold-plated angel and tree ornaments sold at Wal-Mart, the champagne-finished bells and stars on the Christmas trees at the Breakers and the solid pewter millennium keepsake ornaments sold at Disney World for \$25 have in common? They're all made right here in Rhode Island.

Gloria Duchin Inc., based in East Providence, is one of the nation's leading manufacturers of the metal ornaments that are sold at retail chains and gift shops, as well as through mail-order companies nationwide.

The company, named for its founder, Gloria Duchin, prides itself on producing more than 400 types of ornaments designed for retail outlets, whether it's a line of traditional holiday favorites for Target department stores or miniature Craftsmen tools (recreated in pewter) that sell for \$9.99 at Sears, Walt Disney figures sold at Disneyland and Disney World for about \$25 each, or engravable silver-plated ornaments with Austrian crystals, such as a detailed snowman that sells for about \$30 at Things Remembered stores.

It also produces a wide range of other items, ranging from business accessories such as engraved bookmarks and key chains to jewelry items, family keepsakes, photo frames and other novelties cast in champagne gold, silver plate and pewter. Each item is designed and crafted in Rhode Island and stamped with the Gloria Duchin copyright.

Unlike with other ornament companies, everything is made right here in Rhode Island, and that's important, because we're able to really direct the quality and design effort, says Robyn Smalletz, Duchin's daughter, who's now president of the company.

**Started with five employees**

Gloria Duchin Inc. was founded in 1979 by Duchin, who was previously an executive specializing in Christmas novelties for the Lillian Vernon catalog company. She decided to start her own business, specializing in seasonal goods and business accessories. She was living in New York at the time, but chose to start her company in Rhode Island because of the state's reputation in the jewelry and accessory industry.

Duchin started with five employees and a handful of clients, including Wal-Mart, which at the time had 270 stores none in this region. Their number-one selling design 20 years ago is still a top seller today, Smalletz said, referring to a traditional Christmas bell that retails for \$1.37.

About 10 years ago, Duchin recruited Smalletz, who was working in marketing in New York, to market the Gloria Duchin line.

Smalletz said her job was to reorganize the sales department and improve product packaging, displays and sales. She also helped tailor product lines to specific retailers, which proved to be a huge hit. Wal-Mart still has its own designs, including many inexpensive gold-plated ornaments that can be engraved at the store. Target stores offer their own selections. And there are more generic lines, which are sold at chains such as Benny's, Ann & Hope and Ames, and specialty lines offered through gift shops.

They've also come up with products geared to the business world, through their corporate sales division.

Over the years, sales have soared and the staff has swelled to 125 employees.

Smalletz, who's now president of the company (her mother is still chief executive officer) declined to discuss sales data.

But she notes that it has become a leader in the ornament world, and that its products are of such quality that a member of the Preservation Society of Newport County decided that Gloria Duchin ornaments would be the perfect adornments to the trees at the Breakers mansion, especially since they were made right here in Rhode Island.

The society ordered several hundred hearts, sleighs and stars, hand-cast with champagne gold matte finishes, to decorate the trees and wreaths at the Breakers, Smalletz said. These ornaments, which retail from \$6 to \$9, are also now sold in the museums gift shop.

This year, similar ornaments also will be used to decorate two other mansions: Marble House and the Elms, Smalletz added.

They'll also be found at many homes throughout the region, adorning Christmas trees, wreaths, garland and even gifts.

That's the beauty of these ornaments, Smalletz said. They're affordable enough to use in creative ways and beautiful enough to become family keepsakes.

### **This year's fashion**

Smalletz tries to stay on top of what's hot, and this year, snowmen, snowflakes and stars appear to be the big thing. The company is offering a variety of styles and patterns, in various finishes and designs and price ranges.

The champagne gold matte remains a favorite finish, but gold-tone classics and combinations of silver and gold are also hot, as are ornamental jewels. Traditional ornaments stars, angels, bells and sleighs remain big sellers as do engravable ornaments, commemorating a baby's first Christmas, a couples first Christmas or even a pets special holiday (cat patterns out-sell those of dogs, Smalletz notes).

Smalletz said it's difficult for her to decide what her favorite ornament is, but she particularly likes the angels and inspirational designs.

Gloria Duchin also prides itself in coming up with specialty designs, from Walt Disney Worlds commemorative millennium ornaments to unique designs for the annual Make a Wish campaigns.

They also work with individuals and companies to come up with accessories and incentive items. Smalletz proudly notes that her company produces a line of candy cane ornaments to accompany Jay Leno's Christmas cards, saying Seasons Greetings from the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. They also developed Christmas designs for Willie Nelson and Amy Grant.

The company's headquarters, at 201 Narragansett Park Drive in East Providence, features impressive displays of the vast array of ornaments on display stands as well as decorated Christmas trees and wreaths that stay up all year.

Smalletz admits that the year-round presence of Christmas decorations in the office makes it a little tough for her to get into the holiday spirit at home, and after spending most of the year on the road, hawking Christmas ornaments, she's less than enthused by the prospect of decorating a tree.

But while most of us are just beginning to think about holiday decorating, Smalletz is already looking beyond Christmas 2000 to come up with new designs, materials and colors for Christmas of 2001.

After all, she said, I'm very proud of the company my mother founded. My challenge is to drive this business to the next level and maintain the standard of excellence needed to carry it through many holiday seasons yet to come.

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