

## The king of luxury Christmas ornaments has returned

Christopher Radko's designs once earned celebrity fans and a gig decorating the White House for the holidays. Now he's back in business, pitching himself to a new generation.



By [Roxanne Roberts](#)

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Christopher Radko is back in the ornament business — although you probably didn't realize he ever left.

Dubbed the “[Czar of the Christmas Present](#)” by the [New York Times](#), Radko became a household name in the 1990s for his exquisite, handblown glass ornaments — a throwback to the vintage pieces created in Europe a century earlier. His pieces took traditional themes and gave them an elegant twist: Heavy glass, rich colors, detailed characters, glamorous embellishments and modern touches that stood out from mass-produced spheres and kitsch. They were expensive (\$50 and more) and sold at 3,000 upscale department stores and boutiques. Celebrities (Oprah Winfrey, Elton John, Barbra Streisand) raved about them; he [decorated the Red and Green rooms for the White House holidays in 1996](#). In the billion-dollar Christmas industry, Radko was a shimmering, undisputed star.

It was too much, too fast. He sold the business and his brand name in 2005, in a deal that included a noncompete clause that lasted until 2021. Now, at age 63, he's back with a new, small company called [Heartfully Yours](#), adding another a new chapter to the convoluted Radko legacy.

“I was thinking, ‘Well, what am I going to do the rest of my life?’” he said last week. “People tell me all the time, ‘Christopher, you have no idea. Your ornaments mean so much to my family, to my mother, to my grandmother. People tell me what a heartfelt connection they had with the ornaments, and I care a lot about making a difference.’”

The question, then and now, is whether anyone *needs* a \$50 ornament. The rational answer is unequivocally no, but Christmas has never been about common sense or restraint. It's about sentiment and nostalgia, generosity and glitter, a touch of magic in a mundane world. A cherished ornament — from the Popsicle stick frame made in kindergarten to the gold-plated showstopper — becomes part of the ongoing holiday tradition, carefully stored away and then rediscovered every year as it is unpacked and hung on the tree.

Radko's origin story started with all the ornaments collected by his family over the years, including many by his grandmother. “She was born in 1900, so she could point to each ornament: ‘This is when I was 5 years old, this is when your mom was born in 1927.’ The whole tree was like a family diary.”

He bought what turned out to be a faulty tree stand, causing the tree to fall over, breaking the ornaments and his grandmother's heart. During a trip to Poland, the recent college graduate tried to assuage his guilt by bringing back a few handmade replacement pieces.

That quickly ballooned into an improbable success story, with Radko creating the whimsical designs, and craftsmen in Poland, Germany and Italy bringing them to life. The native New Yorker founded his company in 1985 and found an enthusiastic audience among the city's shops and celebrities. Soon Radko ornaments were all the rage; Tipper Gore, as huge fan, asked him to decorate the veep's residence.





By the 2000s, the company was a \$65 million business and Radko was traveling eight months a year. An entrepreneur more than a numbers guy, the exhausted and stressed Radko found himself clashing with his own executives. In 2005, he sold his brand and walked away, eventually settling into the small town of Garrison, N.Y.

He led tours to European holiday markets and then became a lavender farmer, which was the most relaxing profession he could think of. But the Christmas itch was still there. By 2021, when the noncompete clause expired, he decided he wanted back in. For the past two years, Radko and Rauch has been in court battling over whether he can use his name in any capacity when it comes to Christmas decor. A judge temporarily ruled that he can be identified as the artist, but the new ornaments cannot bear the Radko name. (Radko's attorney says both sides are very close to a settlement; Rauch did not respond to requests for comment.)

In an effort to keep life more manageable, Radko's new line is limited editions of 50 to 200 ornaments produced in Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic and Italy. The designs range from \$60 to \$120 each; and he's only selling online and at a few small boutiques. He estimates he will sell a maximum of 100,000 ornaments per year, a tiny fraction of all the ornaments adorning the 50 million American trees erected this season.

Radko would not reveal his sales since Heartfully Yours launched last year, but said he sold more than \$1 million in ornaments at his first trade show in January 2022. And he's already got a new generation of celebrities: Kylie Jenner and Adele are fans of his work, Radko said.

Ann Free has about 600 Radko ornaments — she's lost count, but has been a serious collector for decades, spending hours and hundreds on eBay sourcing rare offerings. This year she's moving from Washington to Nashville and not putting up her tree, but she bought some of Radko's new line to give to friends. In the gift note, she wrote: "Now you can become part of the magnificent obsession."

She loves his colors, his humor, the throwback to old European ornaments, with detailed faces, gold wire and other vintage touches. An otherwise pragmatic and no-frills person, her collection triggers a flood of Christmas memories. "Your childhood comes out," she said.

St. Nick's Christmas and Collectibles in Littleton, Colo., carries a number of vintage and retired Radko designs purchased from a collector (they sell from \$40 to \$200), the current Radko brand ornaments produced by Rauch and the Heartfully Yours line.

"A lot of people buy all of it," said owner Sue Sealy, who has run the family business for 47 years. "I'm happy he's back because he's so creative and talented." What sets Radko apart, she said, is the craftsmanship, the playfulness and a special fine glitter typically found on old European ornaments: "Now, the glitter is awesome," she said.

Her customers range from longtime collectors to younger buyers, and surprisingly none are balking at the prices.

It's all relative, Radko said. "For \$60 or \$70, you can probably get a really good bottle of wine if you're going to someone's house as a gift. But they're just not going to remember who gave it. They'll just have the hangover the next day, and who needs that? But with the ornament, they'll think of you every single year for decades to come."

His Christmas wish? A future where he's long gone but his work is still remembered: "When people are living on Mars or wherever, they'll take out their holiday ornaments and they'll say, 'My great-grandmother back on Earth bought this ornament by this guy named Christopher Radko.'"