



Christmas lights blaze brightly during Wakefield-Scearce Galleries' annual Christmas extravaganza in Shelbyville, Kentucky.

Visions of Christmas Past

It is recognized as one of the finest antiques shops in America. Thousands upon thousands come here each year to gaze on an unsurpassed collection of silver, a gallery of fine oil paintings, and nearly 80 rooms filled with some of the most elegant furniture in the world. C. V. Whitney shopped here, and so did President Lyndon Johnson. Joan Rivers is a customer, as is Kenny Rogers.

You might expect to find this "Eden of Extravagance" in New York or London. But in a burg of 5,000 souls in the heart of rural Kentucky? Yes, it's here—on a quiet, tree-shaded street in Shelbyville—that you'll find Wakefield-Scearce Galleries.

The business calls this little town home because it's where Mark Scearce lives, and it's his store. Scearce, 76, opened the store back in 1947 with the backing of fellow Shelbyville native and Louisville real estate baron Mark Wakefield.

"It was never meant to be a *going business*," says Scearce with a chuckle as he remembers the early years. "We just wanted to do this thing and have some fun."

The fun began right after World War II, when Scearce went to England to buy antiques, then placed them in the vacant auditorium of the

Science Hill girls' boarding school, which had closed in 1939. The antiques sold, so he went back to England the next year, and the next. A business was born.

Today the gallery has three full-time, London-based buyers scouring the English countryside for antiques to stock the showrooms of the store. "If they don't find anything, they don't eat," Scearce says, describing the ramblings of his keen-eyed English scouts.

They must eat very well, because the galleries are absolutely chock-full of antiques. The downstairs silver vaults alone stun the senses. Silver-plated tea services dangle from strings, just like they do in the old silver vaults of London. Here's a nice little silver-plated number, circa 1890, for \$1,985. And just there a pure silver 1845 tea set, for \$12,500.

"We are a gallery of finer and more unusual things," explains Vice



Katie and Brenda Webster browse in the silver vaults.

President and General Manager Pat Burnett, as he guides a timid shopper through the wealthy rooms. "We honestly have something for everyone. If you want a unique item, you can find it here."

You can even find some very affordable items—hunt scene place mats for \$5, a little wooden horse for \$14. And it doesn't cost a penny to window-shop and dream.

Starting November 4 and running through Christmas, the gallery is ablaze with Christmas lights, trees, and individually decorated rooms. Last year, one Christmas room had a nautical look with whimsical parrots perched on Christmas trees, antique maps and oil paintings of ships lining the walls, and a rugged old wooden captain standing watch. In the next room, fabric ladybugs crawled up a Christmas tree loaded with birds, and a pretty garden bench sat in a corner. And just across the hall, a children's room was loaded with bunnies, lambs, Santas, and a slew of handmade wooden toys.

About a dozen Christmas rooms are set up for the store each year



Flowers, crystal, and china cast their timeless spell.

and—with the exception of the towering tree in the entrance room—no decorations are repeated the next holiday season. Planning each room begins 12 months in advance.

"People don't come to see the same thing year after year," says Designer Patti Wilson. "They are looking for ideas, and they'd be angry if we showed them the same room settings each year."

There is more to attract you to the restored red brick school building than the Christmas-bright galleries. The Children's Gallery, The Linen

Press, The Potting Shed, W. Cromwell's Men's Shop, and Country Lady also attract attention—and your money. And the building's Science Hill Inn restaurant is counted among Kentucky's best.

The Wakefield-Scarce Galleries has also spawned a cottage industry of small boutiques, antiques shops, and restaurants in this quiet town.

"If shoppers don't spend any money with us, fine," says Scarce. "But I hope they spend it somewhere in Shelbyville. It's a pretty good place to live."

And a heck of a good place to shop.

Michael Carlton

Wakefield-Scarce Galleries is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Sunday, at 525 Washington Street; call (502) 633-4382 for more information. The Science Hill Inn restaurant serves lunch Tuesday through Saturday, dinner Friday through Saturday, and a buffet lunch on Sunday. Be sure to call (502) 633-2825 for reservations. Shelbyville is located just off I-64, about 45 minutes east of Louisville. ◇



A sleigh loaded with presents welcomes visitors to the Wakefield-Scarce Galleries.