

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE 2011



The Gimme Guide



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IT may be better to give than to receive, but it sure is getting harder.



A selection of gift ideas from The New York Times.

As social scientists and etiquette experts report — and aggrieved lovers, irritable spouses and harried parents can confirm — those who receive are an increasingly difficult cohort, picky and imperious to boot. They are treating loved ones like

catalogs or department stores, brandishing lengthy wish lists, demanding gift cards or boldly asking for cash.

In fact, for the last five years, gift cards have been the most requested gift, according to surveys by the National Retail Foundation.

“It’s no longer about this special delightful something from me to you,” said Kit Yarrow, a consumer research psychologist and a co-author of “Generation Buy: How Tweens, Teens and Twentysomethings Are Revolutionizing Retail.” “More and more people have gotten mercenary about the whole thing.”

This phenomenon has lately been documented in academic studies like “Give Them What They Want: The Benefits of Explicitness in Gift-Exchange,” by Francis J. Flynn, a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and Francesca Gino, at the Harvard Business School, published in March in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

In five experiments, this study demonstrated that people accrued more pleasure from a gift (and were more appreciative of it) if it was something they had requested. What’s more, the study’s subjects rated givers as more thoughtful if they gave from a wish list.

Yet the givers (poor saps) wrongly imagined that their giftees would be equally appreciative of gifts that hadn’t been solicited. They were also mistaken in believing a gift of cash would be less welcome.

How did we become so entitled? Or to put it a nicer way, so discerning?

“It’s not just the recession,” Dr. Yarrow said. Pointing to the rafts of stuff in our homes, she suggested that we are hoping not just to dam the flow but also to make sure that whatever objects we do acquire or receive match our taste, style and identity.

“We are pickier because we have become more ‘surface,’” she said. “And by that I don’t mean shallow. I mean the objects we display, the objects we use to communicate with each other, have become more and more important because there is just so much choice. When we started getting cheap clothes and other stuff from China, quality declined, and people had to be more discriminating.”

And because we are living in a Facebook world, in a fast-paced, highly visual society, Dr. Yarrow added, people “increasingly rely on visual cues to bond — and judge — other people.”

Time spent online, she reasoned, has only amplified these tendencies. “Phones, shoes, appliances have always been lifestyle cues, but never more so than now.”

What she meant is this: If you assume people will be judging you, or “knowing you,” as she put it, by what you wear and what your furniture wears, you can’t just drape over the sofa any old afghan knitted by Mom.

Heaven forbid it should misrepresent your story.

Judith Martin, otherwise known as Miss Manners, is less forgiving, and much testier, than her sisters and brothers in the social sciences.

“Blatant greed,” she’ll tell you fiercely, “is the No. 1 etiquette problem today.” Ms. Martin blames bad etiquette training and the widespread idea that being honest means expressing your every wish.

“Most of my mail boils down to that,” she said, meaning greed. “It’s either from people who think there is a polite way to go begging, or victims who feel they have to comply.”

“They are getting other people to do their shopping for them,” she continued. “They are exchanging shopping lists and paying for the milestones of life.” And that is not, she added emphatically, “what the ancient and noble practice of gift giving is supposed to be about, where you notice a person’s interests and think about what they might like and you try to please them. Remember when people used to say, ‘It’s the thought that counts’? Now the thought is dreaded. Now it’s, ‘Let me tell you what I want,’ or better yet, ‘Give me the money and I’ll get it myself.’ And don’t get Ms. Martin started on the gift card, which she sees as just another way to exchange money.

Her advice for the hapless gift giver? “You don’t have to do as they ask.”

It is true that we are living in particularly venal times, but gift giving has always been something of a fraught endeavor, the gift (good or bad) a figure entered on the balance sheet of a relationship.

Between nations, of course, the exchange of gifts has long been a sign of allegiance and a measure of the strength of an alliance. Remember the trouble President Obama got into his first year in office when he gave Gordon Brown a boxed set of DVDs of classic American movies? (The DVDs turned out to be incompatible with the British system.) His gift to the queen of an iPod was similarly derided as being both tone deaf, and not quite up to snuff (her Majesty already had an iPod, it was reported).

Last May, on his second visit to Buckingham Palace, the president seemed to have worked harder on his choices. For the queen, there was a collection of memorabilia and photographs of her parents’ visit to the United States in 1939; for Prince Philip, Fell Pony bits and shanks (we’re not sure what those are, but we intuit the prince is an equestrian), along with a horseshoe worn by a famous horse. Prince Charles received a selection of plants, seedlings and seeds from Monticello, Mount Vernon and the White House. Someone had done his homework.

While acknowledging the difficulty of the president’s assignment, as well as your own struggles in this arena, it is soothing and clarifying to use history, particularly ancient history, as a reality check. If you think our consumer culture and selfish habits have perverted the gift exchange, consider the ancients, whose giving habits make ours seem positively Amish. In Cleopatra’s day, for example, her subjects regaled their queen with extravagant offerings that were part bribery, part tax, as Stacy Schiff, her biographer, noted.

“You tried to outdo your fellow courtiers,” Ms. Schiff said. “To prove yourself as first friend.”

The bar was sky high, since Cleopatra, no slouch in the gift department, was likely to send you home with a horse if you came to dinner. She lavished the Romans in particular with sumptuous swag, gifts of “shimmering fabrics, cinnamon, gold beakers, mosaics, wild animals,” Ms. Schiff said. “She had an image to uphold and every reason to advertise her wealth.”

For most of history, she pointed out, people gifted up, to the crown. “Now we tend to give down, to the hair cutter or the baby sitter, none of whom is giving me a gift.”

Last year, with her family at least, Ms. Schiff circumvented the holiday quandary with a novel approach: fantasy gifts, described on slips of paper and tucked under each person's plate one night at dinner. The givers were anonymous, and the recipients had to guess who had given what. One child received a hockey team; another, an invisibility cloak. There were also two admissions letters to Hogwarts. And for Ms. Schiff, a Pulitzer-winning author of four books?

"I got the ability to write a decent sentence," she said. "Someone is a comedian." This season, you might try her family's tactic. Or you could choose from the objects assembled here by Rima Suqi and Tim McKeough. Their suggestions are stylish enough for the Cleopatras in your life, and personal enough to satisfy Miss Manners. Good luck, in any case. This year, you'll need it.