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An Exceptional Eight

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The One-of-a-Kind Gift Show is a pre-Christmas shopping Lollapalooza that, each year, takes over the 7th Floor of the Merchandise Mart for a long weekend. This year, 600 vendors from across America and parts of Canada are taking part in the 15th edition of this super successful show.

One can easily lose one's bearings as well as one's budget walking the aisles. There are countless purveyors of jewelry, artisanal clothing, gourmet food, commercial art, and designers of handmade creations. You won't see these more artistic, high-end creations in the shops of Michigan Avenue or Chicago boutiques.

I walked the aisles on Thursday and found eight merchants worth your attention for must-visits. My plan was to seek out merchandise that displayed a larger artistic element, befitting the focus of this arts blog. I eliminated jewelry from my list since there are so many vendors in that category, making judgments near-impossible. My apologies to those quality exhibits I missed in my tour.

My list, in the order I found them on my walk, is as follows:

Artbags–Booth 4016–Debbie Crichton brings a real design sense to her bags. She has all styles on display—wrist bags, cross-body bags, large purses—in a range of colors and prices. Her designs are eye-catching and be sure to check out her flat bags.

Steel Petal Press–Booth 1022–Shayna Norwood calls her business an "urban letterpress boutique". Her cards are small jewels that will demonstrate your good taste and make a great impression, be it for Christmas or Valentine's Day. I am a sucker for distinctive stationery so my bias is showing here. Shayna plans to open a store in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood in 2016.

Foundry Woodprints–Booth 2041–Jim Lanza travels all over the U.S.A. capturing nostalgic images of each city's landmarks. He then mounts the photos on wood and they make a great present for someone on your list. He puts the images on wooden coasters and large boards. How about having the Green Mill's iconic hanging on your wall or above your home bar?

C Joseph, ny–Booth 2099–Catherine Joseph brings a wealth of designer smarts to her business, the result of many years working with **Halston** and other fashion designers. Just one look at her collection of Super 100 gabardine shirts and cashmere jackets will make you a buyer. The price range is \$185-225 for shirts and \$225-350 for jackets. C Joseph is the only men's boutique I came across at the show which is geared mainly to women.

Alan Daigre Designs–Booth 4132—The priciest find on my list but so worth it in my opinion. **Daigre** designs handmade chairs and rockers with the most beautiful woods. His rockers' wooden tiles are joined together with one long piece of rope that allows the back of each chair to conform to your body's shape. You should go look and sit for yourself.

Mirabelle Studio–Booth 7054–Judy Lynn uses inventive patterns and her own block print images in the design of her books, boxes and prints. She likes instilling beauty in everyday objects. I must confess that, besides unique stationery, my other bias is handmade boxes. Give Ms. Lynn's creations a look. Quite affordable (under \$50) and make a fine Christmas present.

Kuketa–Booth 7081–Maria Cicarelli has a full line of handbags and accessories on display, all of which show her artist's eye. I believe she's a graduate of the School of the Art Institute. Her attractive messenger bags in Super Suede are only \$95 and her Portland bags are \$130. However, she has other distinctive designs ranging from \$25 to \$45.

Mary Lynn O'Shea–Booth 7095—I saved the best until last. Ms. O'Shea brings a half-century of experience as a weaver to her beautiful artistic clothing designs that are truly worthy of that overused term. Her upholstery jackets/coats featuring antique prints are simply stunning. Equally appealing is her selection of pleated silk blouses. If money were no object, I would have walked home with one and solved my Christmas shopping for a loved one.

Hurry because you only have today and tomorrow to catch these special offerings. Show hours today are from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$12 for adults.