

Crafts

for

Christmas

Website showcases unique gifts

The elves at Santa's workshop are not the only ones making presents this Christmas. At etsy.com, there are artisans hard at work, all around the world, creating unique items you can buy for those on your gift list.

The website is a virtual marketplace where people can buy and sell a wide variety of handmade goods, vintage items and craft-making supplies. The site's mission is "to enable people to make a living making things, and to reconnect makers with buyers." Etsy's founder, Robert Kalin, claims he was inspired by marketplaces he visited while living in Europe. He pitches the site as an alternative to the large, impersonal retailers, stocked with row after row of mass-produced merchandise.

Etsy claims to have hundreds of thousands of sellers from more than 150 countries showing their wares on the site. Each seller has his or her own virtual shop. Each shop has a profile, contact information and a photo catalog of its products. Clicking on a photo takes you to the product's page. The page contains a photo gallery of the product, a description, the price and order and shipping information.

Several ways to shop

There are many ways to browse through the seemingly endless array of goods on the site. The home page has a frequently changing photo gallery of featured products. Clicking on an image takes you to the product's page, where you can link to the shop's page if you want to see more of its items.

Down the left side of the home page is a list of categories, ranging from Accessories to Woodworking. Clicking on a category will take you to a page with a gallery of related items. The category page also has a clickable list that features subcategories with photo galleries. Clicking on a subcategory reveals a clickable, drop-down list that takes you to still more galleries. For example, I clicked on the Art category. That took me to a general art page with a list of 12 subcategories, such as Drawing, Painting and Sculpture. I then clicked on Illustration, which produced a drop-down list of 16 different genres and media, such as Abstract, Digital and Pencil. Each of these categories and subcategories has multiple pages of products. There's a lot of stuff on this site.

Custom crafts

Also on the home page is a Buy button that takes you to a page with many more ways to browse the site. There are galleries suggested by Etsy members, sections where you can browse by location, editors' picks and more. The Alchemy section lets you request a custom item, and sellers can bid on the opportunity to create it. The Colors section lets you select a color from an interactive grid, and the site will display random items that match the color.

Some of the browsing methods from the Buy page are also displayed on the home page under the category list. A traditional browsing field. You can type in your query and select from several broad categories to search.

Setting up shop

If you're a creator of crafts and want to sell your merchandise on Etsy, the Sell button on

the home page takes you to all the information you need to get set up. The types of merchandise you can and can't sell are described, as well as the do's and don'ts of doing business on the site. There are instructions for registering and setting up your virtual shop, and information on the fees the site collects for acting as a middleman.

The Community button on the home page takes you to an area where sellers can interact online. There are forums, chat rooms, virtual labs, teams, resources and more. Etsy is linked to all the major social sites, such as, Twitter and Facebook. There's even an app section with several pages of Etsy-related apps.

The site has a clean, simple design that allows you to easily navigate through its massive amounts of merchandise. For buyers, it's a user-friendly environment where you can find unique items in any price range. For sellers, I suspect it's a mixed bag, with some doing very well and others struggling. The variety of merchandise is great, and judging from the pictures, the quality ranges from crap to exquisite. With so much to choose from it would be easy for a seller to get lost in the crowd. Of course, with a virtual store your customer base is limitless, so somewhere, someone may be looking for what you have to sell. If malls and box stores aren't your bag, give the elves at Etsy a try.

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