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Christmas light:

peace, faith, love, hope

Special exhibition of Christmas objects that feature candlelight

1 December 2012 – 10 February 2013

This year's Christmas exhibition is dedicated to the Christmas candle. You will be enchanted by the warm glow of our Christmas pyramids, Advent lanterns, angel chimes and illuminated houses. Admire carved pairs of angels and miners and many other illuminated objects. Colourful and remarkable products of the glassmaker's and carver's art await you. Stroll down our replica street and cast an eye into its "windows". See if you can spot the illuminated Christmas and Advent objects.

A burning candle is a sign of hope, of joy and of life. Christ is described as the "light of the world". According to the Christian definition, a burning candle that consumes its wax is a reminder of God's self-giving love. Candles help create a festive atmosphere, and are therefore a must at Christmas. The Christmas candle has also inspired many poems.

The 19th century saw the birth of many religiously inspired candle-based customs, especially in Germany. Alongside the Advent wreath, initially with twenty small red and four large white candles, the Christmas tree also became a fixture in people's living rooms. During the Advent season, one can often see a "Schwibbogen", a candle arch, in people's windows after dark. It is a relic from the mining traditions of the Erzgebirge region of Saxony. A candle arch with its full complement of candles affixed to the house meant that all the workers from this house had safely returned from the mines. In medieval times, it was the custom on Christmas Eve to put a burning candle in the window in order to light the way for the Christ Child. No stranger was turned away on this night.

The candle and its history

It cannot be established with certainty when candles were first burned, as no records survive and the kind of lighting shown in ancient illustrations is often hard to make out. The word "candle" derives from the Latin *cereus* (Christmas light). In the first and second centuries AD, the "candle" is described as a short-lasting light containing a strip of material (the wick) and requiring constant trimming.

Around 200 years after the birth of Christ, the ancient Romans were already familiar with short beeswax candles with wicks, which could be left to burn in enclosed spaces without generating inconvenient soot and unpleasant smells.

Candles spread quickly in Christianity and were used for liturgical purposes by the second half of the fourth century. But there were significant differences between candles. Valuable beeswax was

available in limited quantities and this tended to be reserved for the Church and for wealthy princely families. Ordinary folk had to content themselves with tallow candles and tapers. Evil-smelling, they emitted thick smoke and were made from the less valuable fat, obtained from beef kidneys and rendered mutton. Beeswax candles only appeared in the homes of prosperous citizens towards the end of the 15th century.

Candles at the time were not unproblematic. They had to be "trimmed" every 5 to 10 minutes; this meant shortening the wick to prevent sooting and dripping. In the 18th century, the wealthy were particularly lavish in their use of candles. A party at the court of the elector in Dresden reportedly consumed 14,000 wax lights.

The first paraffin candles did not appear until 1830 to 1840. Paraffin consists of saturated hydrocarbons and is now obtained primarily from mineral oil.

In 1825, M. E. Chevreul and J. L. Gay-Lussac were granted a patent for the stearin candle. Stearin is a composite made from animal and vegetable oils and fats. Pure stearin candles have excellent combustion properties, because of the stearin wax's higher melting point. They are rare nowadays, however, due to their expense. Present-day candles mostly consist of a mixture of paraffin and stearin. They are cheap to manufacture and do not drip.

Wicks, too, were improved during the 19th century; hence present-day candles require less attention than their predecessors. By the 19th century, the candle had ceased to be a luxury item and had developed literally into a slow-combustion light. Candles today are manufactured in every colour and shape. There are hardly any limits to the imagination and technical possibilities. Heart-shaped candles instil a romantic atmosphere, while tealights keep dishes and drinks warm for longer than would otherwise be possible. Candles with additional functions are increasingly popular, for example aromatic candles which perfume the home according to the mood of the moment.

The Christmas candle

Christ is called the "light of the world" because, by his resurrection, he has overcome the darkness of death. When a candle burns, it encourages us to become such lights ourselves and to illuminate the lives of other people. A burning candle is a symbol of hope, joy and life.

An ancient Christian custom was to light a big candle in the window on Christmas Eve, to symbolise Christ, the light of the world. It would burn through the night, and was supposed to light the path of Mary and Joseph. This custom survives to this day in the form of a "Schwibbogen" or illuminated stars in the windows.

There is a beautiful legend of an old cobbler and his wife who lived in a small village in Austria many years ago. Though very poor, they shared their worldly possessions with others. Every night they set up a lighted candle in their window as a sign that travellers were welcome if they needed a place for the night. Their village had suffered from war and hunger for many years. Miraculously, though, this suffering had affected the cobbler and his wife less than their neighbours. One evening – it was Christmas Eve – the villagers gathered to discuss this circumstance. They decided to emulate them: to light candles in their windows, in the hope that this would help them too. That night, a candle burned at every window in the village. Before dawn, a messenger came with the good news that the war was over. The villagers thanked God for peace and vowed to set up lighted candles in their windows every Christmas Eve. This fine custom spread all over the world.

The 19th century saw the birth of many religiously inspired candle-based customs, especially in Germany, including Advent wreaths and Christmas trees.

Candles as Christmas decorations or gifts will never go out of fashion. Handcrafted, brightly coloured and scented wax candles are among the most popular Christmas gifts.

The origin of the Advent season

"Advent, Advent, a little light is burning. One, two, three, four, then the Christ Child is at your door."

Advent (from the Latin *adventus*) means arrival. The Advent season is the solemnly observed time of preparation and expectation before the arrival of Christ. The light is a symbol of hope and warding off evil. It banishes darkness.

The celebration of Advent originated in the area around Ravenna, Italy, in the fifth century.

However, the season of Advent in its present form dates back to the seventh century. In the Roman Church of the West, there were initially four to six Sundays in Advent. Then Pope Gregory the Great fixed the number at four. These four Sundays symbolically represent the 4000 years of humanity's wait for its Redeemer following the fall from Paradise. The Council of Trent upheld the precept against varying regional traditions which had taken hold, and Pope Pius V made it legally binding in 1570.

The Advent wreath

We know the wreath as a symbol of victory from the ancient world. The Advent wreath, embellished with four candles, is a symbol of life's struggle against darkness. The four candles denote the light that Christ has brought into the world.

This beautiful custom is of very recent origin in the run-up to Christmas. The Lutheran theologian and teacher Johann Wichern (1808–1881) from Hamburg introduced the Advent wreath in 1839. The story goes that Wichern adopted some children who were living in dire poverty and moved with them into the Rauhe Haus, an old farmhouse, where he cared for them. Through Advent, the children kept asking when it would finally be Christmas. So, in 1839, he used an old wagon wheel to make a wooden wreath with 20 small red candles representing the weekdays and four big white ones for the Sundays. The Advent wreath with four candles eventually developed from the traditional Wichern-type wreath.

Originally a Protestant custom, the use of the Advent wreath found its way into the Catholic Church. Gradually the Advent wreath custom spread further from northern Germany. The German Youth Movement after the First World War also helped to make the Advent wreath as widespread as it is today. Around 1935, the first domestic Advent wreaths were blessed in church, as is now the custom.

Four candles in Advent

Four candles were burning on the Advent wreath. It was very quiet: so quiet that the candles were heard to start talking.

The first candle sighed and said, "My name is *Peace*. My light shines, but people are not at peace. They don't want me."

Its light grew smaller and finally went out completely.

The second candle flickered and said, "My name is *Faith*. But I am superfluous. People are not interested in God. My burning is now pointless."

A draught blew through the room and extinguished the second candle.

Gently and very sadly, the third candle now spoke up: "My name is *Love*. I have no strength left to burn. People put me aside. They only care for themselves, and not the other people they should love."

This light guttered one last time and went out, too.

At that point, a child entered the room. He looked at the candles and said, "But you should burn and not go out!" And he began to cry.

Then the fourth candle spoke and said, "Don't worry, for my name is *Hope*. As long as I am burning, we can relight the other candles!"

Joyfully the child picked up the candle "Hope" and lit the other candles again.

The wooden Advent candle holder

To this day, the classic wooden designs of Advent wreath from the Erzgebirge region depict mining folk and small angels. The tradition of Advent wreaths in Saxony began when householders placed one small angel in their window for each girl in the family and one small miner for each boy, as Christmas decorations. Now it was possible to walk through the towns and villages and see, from each window, how richly a family had been blessed with children. The custom of lighting one light for each Sunday of Advent only originates from the early 19th century. After the Second World War, this bright idea of the German Youth Movement spread far beyond the Erzgebirge. The traditional Advent candle holder of the Erzgebirge is red. Angel musicians sit or stand in the middle under a golden Advent star.

There are also highly imaginative wreaths of lights with a love of detail: snow-clad pine trees and cheerful little winter children.

The candle arch

During the Advent season, one can often see a "Schwibbogen", a candle arch, in people's windows after dark. It is a relic from the mining traditions of the Erzgebirge region. In the gloomy season, it expressed the miners' yearning for sunlight as, during the winter months, they would go underground while it was still dark, and only return home at night. A candle arch with its full complement of candles affixed to the house meant that all the workers from this house had safely returned from the mines.

The name "Schwibbogen" derives from flying buttresses in architecture. This is the name given to a supporting arch between two walls. According to tradition, the blacksmith and mine farrier Carl Traugott Teller made the first wrought-iron arched candle stand in 1778 and gave it to the pit deputy David Salomon Friedrich for Christmas. A custom of the mining folk had inspired his design. On the last shift on Christmas night (the *Mettenschicht*), the miners would hold a traditional celebration. They would hang their lamps in a horseshoe shape on the wall. This symbolised the pithead, the entrance to the mine. The *Mettenschicht* was not a worked shift, but a communal celebration with food and drink – and a memorial to companions who had died in accidents, sacrificing their lives to their dangerous work.

The miners' longing for light inspired them to carve their own wooden arches for their downstairs rooms and to place familiar figures from their locality under them.

The angel of the Erzgebirge

Angels enjoy special status among Christian symbols and figures. They are not only considered messengers of God, but also symbols of a protective higher power that wards off dangers. Their connection with the celebration of Christmas derives from the central role they play in the narrative of the birth of Jesus in St Luke's Gospel: a single angel announces the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds; a choir of angels then begins to sing "Gloria in excelsis Deo".

In the Erzgebirge region, with its deeply rooted Christian faith, angels had long been important, especially in the historic mining era. They were supposed to protect the miners in their sweated and dangerous work. After dark, the miners' families would place wooden angels in their windows as candle holders, to light up a safe path home for the miners. The number and design of these wooden angels also symbolised the individual members of the family. The traditional art of depicting Christmas angels originated at this time, and continues to delight lovers of folk art of the Erzgebirge all over the world.

Original Erzgebirge angels are still painstakingly hand-turned, carved and lovingly painted using traditional craftsmanship. This makes every Christmas angel unique. Angels from the Erzgebirge region are not only gems of decorative craftsmanship: richly detailed specimens, especially, and group ensembles are prized collector's items.

In the case of coloured angels, the colouring and embellishment of their wings are indicators of the respective manufacturer, who cultivates the feature as a kind of hallmark. The three best-known manufacturers are the companies Wendt & Kühn and Blank of Grünhainichen, and Uhlig of Seiffen. In the exhibition, angels frolic with wings of the most varied shapes and colours.

The "angel and miner" pair

Among the most authentic motifs of the folk art of the Erzgebirge region are the candle-holder figures "angel" and "miner". The significance of this pair of motifs can be understood as a direct product of the history of the Erzgebirge region. In the early 16th century, large deposits of metal ore were discovered here. Work in the mines was hard, dangerous and extremely demanding. Therefore it was mostly the younger sons of the local inhabitants who worked as miners and thereby assured most of their household income. Accidents were daily routine. Besides, work usually began before dawn, and the young men only returned after nightfall. The lack of light and the danger of the mines were central concerns among the families. They combined their strong Christian belief with dexterous craftsmanship to create figures which served as candle holders for everyday lighting purposes and showed the sons their way home after work. They were also supposed to confer symbolic good fortune and protection.

This was the origin of the "angel" and "miner" motifs. The pair soon found a permanent place on the altars of the churches of the Erzgebirge. The angel figures represented the protective power of heaven, while the wooden miners depicted the sons.

Later, the "angel and miner" pair of candle-holder figures evolved into Advent candle holders. They represented the number of sons and daughters in the family and stood in the windows with candle

lighting in the pre-Christmas period. To this day, it is a tradition in the Erzgebirge to give angel candle holders as gifts to daughters, while sons receive candle holders in the form of a miner. The candle holder "angel" and "miner" figures are traditional precursors of the present-day Advent candle holders. The custom of lighting another light on an Advent candle holder each Sunday of Advent only spread after the First World War.

Impressive "angel and miner" pairs can be viewed in the exhibition. The miners, above all, have very marked visual expressions and are testimony to the exceptional skill of the wood carvers.

The angel chimes

"The angel chimes are attached to the Christmas tree or placed on the table. As soon as the candles are lit, the tip with the trumpeting angels rotates, and the little bells chime in a pleasant, festive tune." This note on a package insert describes the use and function of traditional angel chimes. The angel chimes, also known as chiming bells, were invented by a manufacturer in Solingen, Germany, at the beginning of the 20th century. They were popular as Christmas decorations, especially at the top of the Christmas tree. As the columns of the angel chimes were hollow, with the bottom end open, they could be stuck on the Christmas tree like other tree toppers. Alternatively, they could be placed under the tree as a small crib, or set up as Christmas decorations elsewhere in the room. If the top of the tree was first decorated with simple stars, candles or angels, the angel chimes added to the variety of shapes on the tree. It also combined two original symbols: the angel bringing glad tidings, and the crowning star, based on the star of Bethlehem. The quiet chimes, the burning candles and the moving element completed the glory of the Christmas tree.

Angel chimes always followed the same principle. The rising warm air from the burning candles caused the flywheels to rotate. The rotating angels, playing trumpets, carried sticks which struck the bells and made them ring. The models varied widely. Christmas scenes were illustrated on brightly printed metal, including the birth of Christ with the Magi and angels, or Father Christmas accompanied by angels. The numbers of candle holders, bells and angels varied, and these were sometimes embellished with coloured glass or glass angels with fine hair. In the exhibition, we try to show a cross section of angel chimes.

The illuminated house

The Erzgebirge region boasts a wealth of Christmas traditions connected with the miners' homage to light. Light is heat, security and also a necessity. Apart from the crib, the regional winter landscape is also part of the Erzgebirge's Christmas of light. Even before 1900, manufacturers of cardboard toys in Grünhainichen, Olbernhau and Pockau began to make "illumination pyramids", "Christmas mountains with snow" or "illuminated houses with panorama". Individual illuminated houses turned into entire landscapes: facades of houses made of printed and punched cardboard were decorated with braid and highlights, floral elements of heather and luffa (plant family: *Cucurbitaceae*). Finally, the scenery, including the rooftops, was sprinkled with winter glitter. The illuminated churches and house facades in the exhibition are typical of this Christmas tradition from the Erzgebirge.

The Christmas pyramid

Christmas pyramids from the Saxon Erzgebirge have ensured a special pre-Christmas festive atmosphere for more than 200 years. This is not only due to the atmospheric candlelight but, above all, to the calming effect of the rotating platforms and the lovingly handcrafted decorations. Christmas pyramids are especially impressive decorative pieces of folk art from the Erzgebirge region and a permanent feature of Christmas decorations. Craftsmen in the Erzgebirge developed them in the 18th century. Silver ore had been won here since the 16th century. When the silver mines were exhausted and no longer provided financial subsistence for the people of the region, wood turners and carpenters founded the folk art of the Erzgebirge, by laboriously but brilliantly carving everyday items such as candlesticks into miniature works of art.

This traditional handicraft has been handed on from generation to generation ever since, and constantly refined. It has carried the fame of the folk art of the Erzgebirge far beyond the bounds of Europe. Painstaking and detailed original Christmas pyramids from the Erzgebirge are coveted collector's items worldwide, for every single component, every carving and every painting is still executed by hand. High-quality materials and masterly craftsmanship, down to the smallest details, are the hallmarks of these products.

The idea of the Christmas pyramid first derived from a simple structure of thin sticks around a candle holder, to shield the candle flame from draughts. Towards the end of the 17th century, shortly before mining came to an end, artistically talented carpenters developed the design further, on the model of the historic hoisting gear. Loosely known as "capstans", these were important items of equipment at the time. Using horse or water power, they winched the mined ore up from the pit.

Modelled on the hoisting gear, these Christmas pyramids operate on a simple but brilliant principle. A round disc of wood or glass is incorporated in a fixed framework and left to turn freely. This disc is connected to an axle, with blades at a slight angle at the top end. Candles are now arranged in a circle on the frame of the Christmas pyramid, the heat from which drives the blades as it rises. This causes the axle, with the platform at the bottom, to rotate.

Christmas or light pyramids from the Saxon Erzgebirge were offered in various sizes and with a range of decorations, as they still are today. The smaller specimens, about 30 centimetres high, mostly consist of just one, lovingly decorated tier. However, there are also Christmas pyramids with several tiers. Our exhibition shows various models. The biggest pyramid on display comprises four tiers and stands 1.7 metres high.

Traditionally, hand-carved figures from the biblical Christmas stories are used for the decorations. But there are also pyramids which depict historical scenes and figures from mining, the traditional village life of the various regions of the Erzgebirge, or fairy tales.

Facts & figures

Opening hours.

Museum, shop and restaurant
from 10.00–18.00 daily

The Swiss and Upper Rhine Museum Passes are valid for the Toy Worlds Museum Basle.

Admission.

CHF 7.00 / 5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

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