

The Doll's House Museum Basel presents:

“Holly Berries” – Hope and Love

The bright red symbol of Christmas
Special exhibition from 27.11.2010–13.02.2011

This year's Christmas exhibition at the Doll's House Museum Basel is devoted to *ilex aquifolium*, better known to collectors of Christmas memorabilia as the holly berry. Once revered by the Germanic tribes and the Celts, the holly has been one of the most popular Christmas motifs for hundreds of years, especially in Great Britain and North America. The exhibition dedicated to this evergreen plant shows everything there is to know on the topic of “Holly Berries”: from two golden Christmas trees decorated with old postcards to valuable Limoges porcelain.

The holly tree

The holly, or *ilex aquifolium* in Latin, belongs to the Aquifoliaceae family. This family is made up of about 450 species, some of which are deciduous, distributed all over the world. The holly is native to Central and Northern Europe, South-eastern Europe, the Near East, Asia Minor, the Balkans and the Mediterranean region. The plant is remarkably decorative thanks to its hard, evergreen spiny-edged leaves. The berries, a greatly prized Christmas decoration, gradually turn red starting in September. The leaves and red berries of *ilex aquifolium* are extremely poisonous. 20 to 30 red berries are a fatal dose for humans.

The holly is frequently planted in hedgerows or coppices and offers welcome protection for birds. They do not appear to be harmed by the toxic substances in the fruits, which only become soft and edible for the birds after they have been subjected to a number of frosts. The berries, which are an extremely important source of food for birds in winter, can hang on the plant all through the winter without spoiling.

Uses for the holly

In days gone by, the holly was also used in naturopathic medicine. Although poisonous, the fruits were used as a laxative and the leaves to lower fever and as a diuretic in the treatment of flu, bronchitis and rheumatism. In addition, the roasted seeds were much valued as a coffee substitute. The leafy branches were bundled together and tied to a rope for cleaning the chimney; such a bunch of holly functioned like a wire brush. The dense, heavy yet easily

polished green wood was formerly worked to produce inlays or printing blocks for woodcuts, sometimes also for sliced veneers or walking sticks. It served as a replacement for ebony in cabinet-making, on account of its capacity to take dark paint very well.

Its reputation as a “forest weed” is attributable to its rampant growth, which is also reflected in the German saying: *“Ilse bilse, keiner willse, die böse Hülse!”* [Nobody wants it, that bad holly!]

One well-known piece of holly wood is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s walking stick. The stick can still be admired in the Goethe House in Weimar.

Another well-known piece of such wood is Harry Potter’s magic wand.

The author J.R.R. Tolkien had a penchant for the holly; in the novel “The Lord of the Rings” Hollin is the country from which the elf rings come.

History of the holly among the Greeks, Romans, Germanic tribes and Celts up to the Christians

With its evergreen, spiny leaves and bright red, spherical berries, the *illex* was a symbol of eternal life among the Greeks and Romans. The Romans regarded it as epitomising goodwill and the spirit of friendship. During Saturnalia, a Roman festival celebrated around the same time as modern Christmas, people gave each other presents of *illex* branches.

As trees with evergreen foliage are rather unusual in Northern Europe, they were revered accordingly by the Germanic tribes, Anglo-Saxons and Celts. The branches and berries were gathered and used to decorate their dwellings. They were intended to provide a home for ghosts, fairies and good forest demons in cold times and to safeguard against lightning, black magic and curses. In some regions of Switzerland, holly branches are still hung on houses and stables to ward off evil.

To celebrate the winter solstice, green branches were cut for protection and as a magic charm as well as to summon up the summer. The evergreen tree used to be the residence of the gods and thus a sign of life in numerous cultures and religions.

Palm Sunday recalls the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. Owing to the lack of palms in temperate climate zones, branches of evergreen trees or of plants that were already green at this time of year (willow, box or holly) were consecrated as palms on this Christian holiday. This tradition explains the “palm” component in the German name “Stechpalme” [spiny palm].

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote the following lines for use at Christian festivals:

They celebrate with palms;
With reverence bows each holy man,
And chaunts the ancient psalms.
Those very psalms are also sung
With olive boughs in hand,
While holly, mountain wilds among,
In place of palms must stand (...)

There is also a legend as to why the holly bears bright red berries in winter:

As the shepherds were making their way to the Baby Jesus, they were followed by a small, weak and sick lamb. It ran behind the shepherd boy who had cared for it. The lamb bleated, but so quietly that no-one heard. Again and again, it stumbled on the stones that lay on the path, and the holly trees scratched it. At last, it reached the stable and pushed its way to the shepherd boy. Mary saw that the boy picked up the lamb, stroked it and warmed it on his chest. “One day, my son will also be kind to helpless creatures”, said Mary to the boy. “This is why people should always be reminded that you helped the lamb in its hour of need.”

Since that time, the ilex has borne bright red berries in winter – so that we think of the poor little lamb and the good shepherd boy.

How the holly became a Christmas symbol

In Europe, holly has been associated with Christmas for much longer than the Christmas tree so popular nowadays. As long ago as the Middle Ages, people would bring evergreen holly branches with their long-lasting bright red fruits into their homes as a symbol of eternal life. The symbolic Christian colours for Advent and Christmas are green and red. These colours are fundamental to both the Advent wreath and the Christmas tree decoration.

Green symbolises not only the hope of surviving the dark winter, but also loyalty. The vitality contained in evergreen plants was often interpreted as healing power. It was therefore thought that decorating the house with green would fill it with good health. Special powers were attributed to spruce, fir, pine, boxwood, holly, gorse, juniper, ivy and rosemary.

Red recalls the blood that Christ shed to save the world. For Christians, the colour combination of green and red therefore epitomises supernatural hope. Christianity transformed the spine-protected leaves of the *ilex* into a symbol of the crown of thorns worn by the Redeemer, and the red berries into the blood which, according to the Bible, he shed out of love for humankind. In this way, the two most important meanings of Christmas, love and hope, are combined in the holly.

The custom of putting green pine branches in the house is documented as long ago as 1491 in Sebastian Brant's book "Ship of Fools". Evidence from 1535 shows that people in Strasbourg (Alsace) sold small yews, hollies and box trees that were then hung up in living rooms, albeit yet without candles. Holly branches have been a popular indoor Christmas decoration since time immemorial. Its colours characterise the Christmas tree, the table decoration with the poinsettia, Christmas cards and gift wrappings.

In English-speaking countries, holly is the quintessential Christmas symbol. In Great Britain, holly branches are used as a token of friendship and to decorate the traditional Christmas pudding. During Advent, a wreath of holly and ivy is tied with four candles: the familiar Advent wreath.

In Scandinavia, the common name for holly is "Christ's Thorn", intended as a reminder of the crown of thorns and, with its red berries, of the blood shed by Christ. The holly also symbolises Christmas on the East Coast of the USA.

The holly and the film industry

The holly undoubtedly lent its name to the location of the world's largest film industry: "Hollywood" near Los Angeles. The hamlet of Hollywood was founded in 1888 by the Wilcox family. The name derived from the holly trees which were apparently the most striking feature of the local landscape.

Exhibition objects and passion for collecting

The exhibition shows just how widespread the use of the "holly berry" motif was. From the Victorian era (1837–1901) until the 1930s, every imaginable item of daily use was adorned with this pretty motif, including sewing sets, caskets, photo albums, hairstyling sets, letter openers and much more besides. Especially popular with modern-day collectors are the porcelain objects made in the Limoges factory that bear the "holly berry" motif. Limoges is a town in France that enjoys worldwide renown for its porcelain factory, established in 1768.

Limoges is an exceptionally white (ultra-white kaolin), fine and superior porcelain. Most of the holly berry porcelain is marked "T & V Limoges France", because the factory was acquired in the 19th century by Gustave Vogt and Emilien Tressemanes, who had this motif painted onto their products destined for export to the USA.

There is a wealth of postcards featuring holly berries. Among the subjects are dogs, cats, children, ladies, angels and also Father Christmas. The "holly berry" motif also turns up time and time again on colourful vintage die-cut scraps.

Opening hours

Museum, shop and café: daily from 10.00–18.00

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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