

The Doll's House Museum in Basel presents:

Reliable Christmas Tree Holders

Christmas Tree Stands from the Past – a Special Exhibition

The Doll's House Museum in Basel will be presenting from the 6th November 2004 until the 6th February 2005 a remarkable collection of Christmas tree stands from the past. The models from the period around 1880-1950 create a special highlight in this exhibition. They are artistically decorated, in some cases multi-functional and demanded great skills to produce. Simple wooden stands, as well as cast-iron creations, integrated mechanical music-boxes and various other fascinating Christmas tree supports will be on display.

Wooden Pegs, Gardens of Paradise, Buckets of Sand – the First Christmas Tree Stands

The oldest-known reference to a decorated Christmas tree, which was fixed to a stand, was mentioned in a hand-written document dated 1604. Unfortunately nothing more is known about the form and appearance of the tree support mentioned, as the part of the document referring to it, was lost during the Second World War. However, we know that the early Christmas tree stands were generally made of wood. They were not very attractive and therefore were often covered with moss and stones, in order to give the impression of the Christmas tree standing in natural surroundings. The simplest and easiest tree support was a log of wood with a hole drilled into it so that the Christmas tree could be wedged into it. Alternatively, there was the possibility of fixing a wooden cross to the base of the tree – a method which is still used to this day.

A more attractive alternative, which was very popular towards the end of the 18th century until well into the 20th century, was the so-called Garden of Paradise or Garden of Christ. It consisted of a wooden board with a hole in the centre, which was surrounded by a miniature fence. These stands or platforms were often covered with straw or moss upon which was placed a crib or figurines and animals.

Another alternative, which was somewhat spartan but as efficient, were buckets or pots filled with sand. The advantage of this form of stand was that, due to the damp sand, the tree kept its needles far longer. There was a plethora of easy ways to fix the Christmas tree, e.g. pierced wooden planks, stools with holes in the middle or pierced turnips, which had been halved. The last-mentioned form was a method which was used after the Second World War in Lower Austria and Northern Germany. These improvised stands were often decorated or covered with material imprinted with Christmas designs. By 1800 the custom of having Christmas trees in towns had finally become so popular, that it became worthwhile selling the trees on the Christmas markets complete with small wooden boards.

The Birth of the Solid Cast-Iron Christmas Tree Stand

The industrial manufacture of solid cast-iron Christmas tree stands first began in the middle of the 19th century. The first patent was issued in 1866, the same year in which the Rödinghausen foundry cast its first model. It is almost impossible, in most cases, for collectors to establish the exact year in which individual pieces were cast. Many of the foundries used the same molds for their creations over years and sometimes even decades. The new and more solid form of tree stand, however, did not replace the well-known and beloved home-made wooden constructions. Many people still preferred to install their Garden of Christ with its crib. Also the new metal supports were simply too expensive. A cast-iron Christmas tree stand cost almost as much as a whole box of Christmas decorations for a middle-sized tree.

Most of the iron stands at this time consisted of two components: a base cast in openwork style with an integrated metal grommet into which the tree trunk fitted. A socket in the base and a matching plug on the grommet were often included to secure the arrangement. In some old and particularly small specimens these two components were cast together in one piece. On the top rim of the grommet there were between two and four screws – usually three – to centre and hold the tree in a vertical position.

In those days, both fixed and rotating models were on offer. For example, in the 1908 Carlshütte Rendsburg foundry catalogue the following specifications were described: «rotating on ball-bearings». An 1866 advertisement by Eckardt announced «Thanks to the Conus patent the upper part rotates, which facilitates lighting. This model can also be placed in corners». In addition, the basic model was often on offer in two

different sizes: one with a 7–10 cm shorter grommet and one with a grommet twice the size of the basic model. Both of these models, the taller one as well as the smaller squat variety, could be filled with water. They cost about 20% more than the other models.

The Patent Tree Holder

The casting techniques enabled base plates to be made lighter through decorative openwork and yet still remain stable. It also led to the production of different «patent tree holders» with multiple parts to be assembled by the buyer himself, which likewise proved to be stable. Some of the oldest folding models in this category are stands which resemble the foot of a tree. Three legs screwed onto the grommet represent the roots. The grommet itself is cast in the shape of a tree trunk and is modelled accordingly. In old catalogues these stands, which were produced until the 1920s, were listed as «Astform» or «branch models».

There were numerous other types of Christmas tree stands and many were patented at the Munich Patent Office. Among them there were some very strange and sometimes even impractical objects. Some stands had 10 component parts and required a great deal of patience and skill to assemble. Some manufacturers had even considered how certain stands could be practically used all year round. There existed one cast-iron stand which, thanks to various insertions and attachments, could serve as a spittoon holder, a piano stool and a child's table. Another stand could be used during summer outings as a folding field chair. Interestingly, the only patent applied for by a woman in 1910, took into consideration how to supply a tree with sufficient water over a longer period of time.

Musical Christmas Tree Stands

Certain examples of patent tree holders are a real rarity these days and are desirable collectors' items. Rotating Christmas tree stands with integrated musical-boxes are amongst these desirable items. They are equipped with a cylinder, which can play up to eight Christmas carols, or with metal records which play well-known folk songs.

The J.C. Eckardt company was the largest manufacturer of musical stands. It successfully applied for a patent in the United States as early as 1877. Of these musical models 12'000 were sold in 1888, 40'000 in 1896 and as many as 120'000 were sold shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. This style of musical

Christmas tree stand was very expensive. Whereas the average cast-iron model cost about 4.50 German marks, a musical stand with nickel casing and 2 songs cost 31 German marks. For the more noble «Gloria» model, offered in a walnut casing, one had to pay 37 German marks. Just as a comparison: a worker in the metal-processing industry earned about 65 German marks a month. Therefore such a costly pleasure was almost exclusively for the upper classes.

Metal Models, Past and Present

Metal Christmas tree stands were of course not only made out of cast iron. During the same period, stands made from strip-steel and round bar steel also came onto the market in an unbelievable variety of forms. Companies were also offering stands made out of sheet metal. Even today there are small manufacturers producing metal Christmas tree stands in the best ironmongers' tradition. In the period following the Second World War, however, the largest share of the market was taken over by stands made from glass, ceramics or plastic, which could be filled with water.

Pictures and Themes for the Decoration of Christmas Tree Stands

Most of the information about the form, pictures and decorative themes for early Christmas tree stands comes from old illustrations or Christmas postcards.

The favourite adornment was of course the Christmas tree itself with its branches, cones and candles. These designs were often combined in all sorts of different ways with stars and bells. Further traditional Christmas decorations were the holly and ivy. In the art nouveau styles the non-traditional plants like the day-lily, clover leaves and alder branches were the preferred designs instead of the traditional fir tree branches. As far as figures were concerned, angels were more popular than Father Christmases. The three holy kings, the stable in Bethlehem, winter scenes with deer, hares and other animals as well as fairytale figures like dwarfs, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella were also popular themes. Banners were sometimes placed among the figurines and ornaments, which read «Happy Festivities», «Happy Christmas», «Silent Night, Holy Night» etc.

In the 1920s and 1930s simpler geometric forms took over more and more from the former ornaments and decorations. This trend was initially influenced by new art forms such as art deco and the desire for modern design. The fact that less

manufacturing complexity was involved and that the cost of casting such models was reduced, later reinforced this trend.

The Art and Technique of Casting Iron

It only becomes apparent that a cast-iron Christmas tree stand is a piece of art when the various manufacturing steps are looked at from start to finish. It becomes obvious that a great deal of skill and dexterity were involved, especially in the old manufacturing methods.

As a rule, a sketch is made first—probably inspired by other ornamental patterns from cast-iron stoves—which is then transferred to a technical drawing with exact specifications. On the basis of this drawing, the model cutter carves a wooden prototype for the production of the cast. Cast iron is poured into a sand mold and each foundry has its secret recipe for the composition of the sand used for its mold. This should be humid and made up of homogenous fine quartz sand, which is mixed with clay and other binding agents so that it creates a compound, which will faithfully reproduce every detail of the model. In addition, the sand mold has to stay intact, be fireproof and allow gas to pass through. It needs to withstand the liquid metal temperature of about 1400 °C (2552 °F).

It was the molder's job to spread the mix in the mold. The wooden model was laid in a mold box frame and the mold sand was sieved over it layer by layer. When the model in the lower box was well covered with sand, the box was turned over and a second box of the same size was placed on top. Sand again was layered over the model. The funnel for the liquid cast iron and a windpipe for air to escape were kept free by means of wooden cotters. Small thin canals were pierced in the sand to enable hot air to escape more easily during the casting process. The two halves of the mold were taken apart and the wooden model was carefully removed. Any possible weak spots in the mold were repaired and the two halves were put together again and bound fast as one cast, which was identical to the model. The caster could then pour the liquid iron evenly into the cast from a small hand-held pan. The mold broke on removing the cast object after cooling. Therefore, a new mold had to be made for each new Christmas tree stand. The cast object was cleaned, rough parts and sharp edges were ground and chiselled away (e.g. casting seams and casting remnants) and any leftover sand was brushed off with a steel brush.

As a final step the Christmas tree stands were painted, which not only made them look attractive, but also protected the surface from rust. Most models were offered for sale with various finishes. They were covered either in dark or middle green varnish or bronzed. This meant that they were finished with a metallic glittering varnish in pale, middle or dark green. Furthermore, any individual patterns like stars or fir cones were often highlighted in gold, silver or copper bronze. Some models were even partially decorated in bright colours.

Christmas Tree Stands from the Past in the Doll's House Museum in Basel

The Doll's House Museum in Basel will be presenting a special exhibition to its visitors from the 6th November 2004 until the 6th February 2005, which consists of a remarkable collection of Christmas tree stands from the past. The models from the period around 1880-1950 create a special highlight in the exhibition. They are artistically decorated, in some cases multi-functional, and demanded great skills to produce. In this varied special exhibition there are Gardens of Paradise and Gardens of Christ on display, as well as cast-iron stands formed like tree branches. Rotating musical Christmas tree stands, complete with their original metal records, will play Christmas carols during the exhibition.

Opening times:

Museum/Shop: daily from 11 am to 5 pm, Thursdays until 8 pm
Café: daily from 10 am to 6 pm, Thursdays until 9 pm

Admission:

CHF 7.– / 5.–

Children up to 16 years are admitted free of charge, and only if accompanied by an adult.

The museum does not charge supplementary fees for special exhibitions.
The museum is wheelchair accessible.

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