

The Doll's House Museum Basle is presenting:

**„Ancient and ultra-modern“; a special exhibition of the famous Anker stone building sets**

(Long text/about 7500 characters)

**The Doll's House Museum Basle will be presenting from 2nd November 2002 to 25th May 2003 an extraordinary exhibition of „Anker stone building blocks“. Invented at the end of the nineteenth century, they were the first toys suitable also for adults and have enjoyed ever increasing popularity since their invention. They created a real boom in sales worldwide.**

**An Elementary Toy**

Building blocks like dolls are considered to be elementary toys. Therefore the history of building blocks stretches right back in time. They have always been greatly appreciated as important educational tools. Friedrich Fröbel, the founder of the first kindergarten, believed that a child acquires two abilities by playing with building blocks: to re-create a three-dimensional model from a two-dimensional design and to arrange irregularly-formed three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional base. Even in today's computerized age this concept is best explained with building blocks.

By about 1850 wooden building sets, which were almost perfect, had been developed from the original rudimentary blocks. However the dimensions of any possible building were limited by the light weight, smooth surface and natural imperfection of the wood.

**Ingenious Invention**

Gustav Lilienthal had the idea of producing synthetic stone blocks as an alternative to wooden building blocks. As these blocks have a rougher surface and a heavier specific weight, it is possible to make buildings which are more stable. He developed the stone blocks together with his brother, the aviation pioneer Otto Lilienthal, by mixing sand, pulverised chalk and colouring agent and using linseed oil varnish as a binding agent.

Although they were inventive engineers, their methods of marketing their stone building sets were not successful. Due to their large debts they had to sell their invention in 1880 to Friedrich Adolf Richter, who in the same year patented the process of producing the stone blocks in Germany and America. Richter, a qualified chemist, had received permission in 1876 from the local prince to build a chemical and pharmaceutical factory in Rudolstadt in the area of Thüringen. He also worked in the printing industry and produced school books, a newspaper and several brochures for advertising. This was to prove very useful for marketing the stone building sets.

## **Success Story**

Friedrich Ad. Richter quickly obtained capital returns from his investment. He enlarged his factory with a new production building and marketed the building sets, which were to become known worldwide, under his firm's logo of an anchor. Richter was a marketing expert. He was convinced that a sales success depended on a massive advertising campaign, a broad production line and a good reputation. Success proved him right.

In 1884 he offered a new series of stone building sets for sale, the largest of which consisted of 881 stone blocks and weighed 20 kilos. In the spring of 1886 there already existed a catalogue, published in 13 languages, offering 238 different kits. In order to prepare the building plans he hired famous artists, illustrators and architects. The designs and display models in the catalogue were produced as buildings for hobby architects. Richter had recognised the importance of the adult hobby market. He was also the first toy manufacturer, who offered his products exclusively to this market segment. In the end there were 400 different kits available with 1200 different forms of stone blocks. The colour of the Anker stone blocks were warm tones of red, yellow and blue-green.

Richter was the first manufacturer in the toy industry to set the retail price for his products and to insist that the price be maintained. A glance at the prices shows that the toys were not cheap. The large-sized kit number 19, for example, cost 35 Marks, whereas a day's wages for a worker at that time would have been on average between 2 and 2.50 Marks.

As the large kits were relatively expensive, Richter introduced supplementary sets. A small kit could be enlarged by the purchase of a supplementary set. This system allowed the kit to be updated according to the age of the child, so that it never became uninteresting or superfluous. There were also kits fitted in artistic wooden boxes, with carefully worked, elegant oak exteriors and a hinged lid with a good solid lock.

Printed cut-out figures were supplied together with the model books for the buildings. However these flat cut-out figures did not suit the quality of the buildings. Therefore Richter quickly brought out a new set of accessory figures, which can seldom be found nowadays.

According to the records in the model books, one can assume that up to 5 billion stone blocks were sold. At the time of Richter's death in 1910 his firm's headquarters were in Rudolstadt with branch offices in Berlin, Konstein (Bavaria) Leipzig, New York, Nürnberg, Olten, Prague, Rotterdam, St. Petersburg, Vienna and in Japan. His factory employed 649 workers which was 5% of the population of Rudolstadt.

## **Abrupt End**

Innovation was very limited after the First World War. However 4 new series were introduced: the new series, the American country house series, the country house series and the fortress series. In 1953, a few years after the end of the Second World War, the Anker Steinbaukasten firm in former East Germany was turned into a state-owned company. In 1963 the government decided to close it down.

The stone blocks were given away free of charge and the surplus was thrown on a hillside outside the factory, where they lay today on a heap 6 metres long and 1 metre high.

Although these stone blocks were important and interesting toys, they are little known as collection pieces. The main reason is probably due to the weight of the individual kits. The basic kit with 105 stone blocks weighs alone 3.5 kilos. A more interesting set with 499 stone blocks weighs already 14 kilos and a kit with 3'848 stone blocks amounts to a total weight of 80 kilos.

### **Well-earned Revival**

The basic sets made by the Modellbausteinspiele GmbH firm in Rudolstadt are on sale since 1995, which are true to Richter's manufacturing guidelines and marketed under the old trade mark. The stone blocks are also produced according to the original process. Quarz sand is mixed with chalk, linseed oil varnish and colour pigments. This mixture is then pressed into stone forms under extremely high pressure. The stones are laid out on large „cake trays“ to cure at around 120 ° C. Following the curing process the stone blocks are thoroughly checked for precise measurements and hair-cracks. The quality control is very important, as each millimetre counts in guaranteeing the stability of the model building. Finally the stone blocks are sorted into the appropriate sets.

Today there are two types of collectors of Anker stone building sets. There are those who are interested solely in the old kits; whereby it is very important that the kit is complete and undamaged, and that all the building model books are available, which belong to the kit. The others are interested in the most complicated and expensive buildings to be made with Anker stone building blocks. The International Club of Anker Friends exists in Holland since 1979. It has associate members in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the USA.

### **The Exhibition**

The special exhibition in the Doll's House Museum Basle has been made possible through collaboration with two collectors:

- Mr. Tobias Mey from Baden-Baden, who has made a part of his collection of Anker stone building sets available to the museum and has set up some of the large and small display items in our exhibition.
- Mr. Ernst Born from Basle is one of the Anker hobby building experts. He built a model of the Basle town hall in our museum using 2840 stone blocks in 105 different forms. He builds all his Anker stone building projects with a specifically-developed computer program. Based on the floor plans of the object, the program calculates which stones blocks and how many will be needed. Interactive stations are available in the exhibition so that visitors can see a short film explaining the various processes.

Inspired by the games which Friedrich Ad. Richter brought onto the market at the end of the nineteenth century to test one's patience and skills, we have set up some puzzles to test the skills of our visitors. These puzzles can also be bought in the museum shop.

### **Opening Hours**

Museum/Shop: Daily from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays until 8 p.m.  
Café: Daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursdays until 9 p.m.

Entry: Fr. 7.-/Fr. 5.-, Children up to 16 years are admitted free of charge, and only if accompanied by an adult.

The whole building is accessible to wheelchairs.

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