

The Doll's House Museum in Basel will be presenting:

Felt used in doll-making

A special exhibition about Steiff felt dolls

The Doll's House Museum in Basel will be presenting over 70 original old Steiff felt dolls from 16th May until 10th October 2004. The exhibition, which covers 15 m², gives a unique and authentic view of the art of doll-making in the 1920s, as well as of the cooperation between the family firm of Margarete Steiff GmbH and the doll designer, Albert Schlopsnies.

The beginning of Steiff's doll production

Under the leadership of Margarete Steiff (1847–1909) the young Steiff family firm in Giengen an der Brenz developed the first dolls around 1890. A few years later, in about 1894, a comprehensive range of 17 types of dolls came onto the market. According to the firm's own description, the dolls had „felt bodies and clothing and their heads were indestructible“. Initially these indestructible heads were not made by Steiff, but were supplied by the German doll industry. More details could not be found about the provenance of these heads in the various archives.

Dolls with character

At the time when American doll-makers turned towards new and different materials and started to produce so-called art dolls, Richard Steiff developed in 1903 his first dolls made from felt and velvet. These initial Richard Steiff dolls seem to have been lost. However, we know exactly what they looked like as there are still some examples in the Steiff archives.

The crudely formed flesh-coloured faces were made from velvet with a vertical seam running down the centre of the face. They had round black shoe-button eyes, painted facial expressions and painted hair, which was later replaced by long-haired plush wigs. Instead of the usually uniform faces of porcelain dolls, these creations had real human faces with individual characteristic expressions, and therefore the name given to them was „character dolls“. The body was made from felt or velvet and the arms and legs were attached with movable disc joints. The proportions corresponded to a child of about 1 or 2 years. Clothes and underwear could be removed.

In contrast to the usual rigid expressions and fragility of the porcelain dolls, the supple felt material now enabled soft forms to be produced. In addition, the whole body including the head was stuffed with kapok (cotton fibers). This new doll was marketed as indestructible and hard-wearing and would withstand any amount of child's play. Clothes and underwear could be removed. Interestingly, they were initially advertised as being more suitable for adults.

The lifelike and delightful manner of this innovative creation spread fear throughout the traditional doll industry. Exhibitions in department stores and toy shops added to the success. At the 1908 spring fair in Leipzig the character dolls with mohair plush hair and soft, stuffed felt bodies attracted much attention. One year before this, in 1907, Franz Steiff received from the American authorities a patent for felt doll's heads. It can therefore be assumed, that Steiff was the first firm to produce soft, stuffed character dolls.

Caricatural dolls

In 1910 Steiff decided to imitate the humorous figures around him in a caricatural way in his dolls. Thus dolls developed, which brought joy and fun into the children's playrooms; e.g. the village musicians and the schoolmaster with his boys (to be seen in the exhibition) and many other typical town and country characters. These jolly character dolls were a breath of fresh air to the toy industry and they attracted new buyers and increased the volume of turnover. The advertising claimed:

„These Steiff dolls are indestructible and jointed. The joints take on natural positions and do not creak when moved. They are not hard nor heavy. Nobody can hurt himself. The paint does not rub off. They are stuffed with wood wool and maintain their malleable form. Elegantly clothed in every detail. Each article carries the famous trademark of „a button in the ear“.

The era of Schlopsnies and the first mechanical showpieces

On the day when the Munich doll designer Albert Schlopsnies went to the factory in Giengen to show his puppet figures, a new vista of possibilities opened up for him as well as for the Steiff company. Richard Steiff immediately recognized the masterly talent of Schlopsnies and wanted to make use of him in the further development of new dolls.

In 1910 Albert Schlopsnies became an adviser to the company but was never directly employed by Steiff. He was to be responsible for the artistic production of showpieces, catalogues, advertising and similar items. Although categorically repudiated by the other brothers, it was thanks to the strength of Richard Steiff's position in the company that the cooperation with the Munich-based Schlopsnies was able to last so long.

Schlopsnies' inventiveness and talent started a new chapter in Steiff's creative production. The range of character and caricatural dolls increased greatly. The 1910 collection included mobile puppet-like pantomime animals on strings as well as immobile groups of dolls for show-windows. These were the forerunners of the famous mechanical showpieces, one of which was shown in the autumn of the same year in the Wertheim department store in Berlin: the large Steiff circus. Based on the Sarrasani circus troupe, it had several circus arenas and consisted of many mechanical dolls, whose lifelike movements imitated those of circus acrobats.

Diversity and further development of the character doll

A dispute between Steiff and the doll manufacturers Kämmer and Reinhardt over the ownership of the term „character doll“ highlights just how popular and successful the character doll really was. Kämmer and Reinhardt won the case due to the rather quick success of a legal patent registration. Steiff however continued to use the term in their catalogues in the 1920s without any further legal disputes with Kämmer and Reinhardt.

In the 1911/1912 Steiff catalogue 270 types of dolls are listed. A very detailed description of the character doll is given. It states that the costumes are true to the originals, that the clothes can be removed and that the shiny frizzy hair can be combed and brushed when wet. In the varied range there are the well-known figures „Struwwelpeter“ and the Steiff soldiers in national and international uniforms (German, Dutch, American, English, French, etc.). Whether officers, sergeants or simple infantrymen – the corresponding equipment such as rifles, swords and knapsacks have been copied exactly.

In the range there are also policemen of different nationalities, footballers, sailors and even Count Zeppelin. In addition, there are bathing dolls and beach dolls, schoolchildren, dolls doing winter sports, baby dolls and eskimos. A further interesting type of character doll are the so-called „regional costume originals“, which, as their name suggests were dressed in various regional costumes. Steiff dolls all have accessories and it was not unusual, at that time, for a playroom to be turned into a home-made showplace. Either as barracks with a fountain, barriers and assault apparatus or as a circus.

In 1913 Steiff brought different types of dolls onto the market. Alongside new types of boy dolls, there were dolls in uniform as well as figures from various professions, e.g. a butcher, a cobbler and a carpenter. In addition, there was a selection of dwarfs as well as dolls measuring 100 cm., such as an Indian and a Mexican. From 1915 onwards Steiff produced detailed dolls complete with sports equipment – Steiff skis, poles and felt gloves.

In the period between 1916/18, whilst the First World War was still waging, the soldier dolls were very popular. The collection was enlarged with Turkish, Italian, Russian and Austrian soldier dolls as well as a Cossack in parade uniform. The choice of character dolls with childish faces was also increased. Most of the female dolls produced between 1916 and 1926 had typical German names like Berta, Erika, Grete and Lisa.

Schlopsnies' Apricot Technique

Between 1921/22 Albert Schlopsnies designed a new type of doll for Steiff. It was the so-called Schlopsnies doll made using the apricot technique. The celluloid head was supplied by Rheinische Gummi- und Celluloidfabrik Schildkröt, in Mannheim, and was a standard model in their range. The special feature about it was that Steiff opened the head, painted it inside and stuffed it with wood wool. All of these dolls have a round skull plate about 6.5 cm. diameter fitted to the back of their heads.

The Schlopsnies apricot doll was a sensational novelty and was shown in detail in the Steiff/Schlopsnies dolls' catalogue of 1922. It measured 40 cm. and had blond or dark coloured hair and no voice. The soft body of this doll, which was described as „indestructible“, was stuffed and covered with the finest wool felt. The head and legs were attached with movable disc joints. The arms were sewed on and dangled by the side of the body. The proportions were similar to those of a 3-year-old child. The clothing has been artistically designed and perfectly worked in every detail. The doll could be dressed and undressed as desired.

The main feature of this doll is the indestructible head, which has been made using the „apricot technique“. The peach skin is washable and cannot be scratched off by glass paper or a knife. Due to a lack of demand, this doll only remained on the market for just 5 years, until the middle of the 1920s.

The decline, rebirth and modern era of felt dolls

In 1929 only three caricature dolls with felt faces remained in the collection. In 1933 three more soldiers were added to the range. They are jointed and fitted with a swivel head. In addition the sulphur man made out of yellow felt with a green felt hat was introduced as a novelty. In 1935 yet another type of character doll was presented with a celluloid head (again from Schildkröt). This time it was a baby doll, but again it did not last long in the collection.

In 1936 the first caricature doll, a clown, appeared with a pressed felt face, which according to the catalogue was washable. The soft body was stuffed and had dangling arms and legs. It was supplied with a cloth suit and ruff as well as a clown's hat. The doll has a voice and brown glass eyes with black pupils. From year to year new versions of this pressed felt doll were introduced including large models measuring 43 cm. In 1938, for example, pairs wearing regional costume like Seppl und Lisl were produced. Production lasted until the beginning of the 1940s and was then taken up again in the years after the War until 1952.

Twenty years passed by before Steiff produced dolls again in the 1970s. The Steiff dolls on sale were washable, molded dolls made from synthetics. One last highlight, which came out in 1987, was the limited replica series of some of the felt doll models from the period before the First World War. This time, of course, they were for collectors and not for children. Original old Steiff felt dolls are very rarely found in good condition nowadays, as felt is a fragile material.

Steiff felt dolls in the Doll's House Museum in Basel

Although the firm Steiff became world-renowned with the invention of the teddy bear by Richard Steiff in 1902, it can also be counted as one of the best doll producers in the world, because of the varied and artistically very valuable collection of doll creations.

In the Doll's House Museum we are presenting to our visitors a collection of over 70 old Steiff felt dolls which is set in 15 m² of idyllic country scenery. Most of the exhibited dolls come from the Steiff showpiece entitled „Die Mühle im Grund“ or „The Mill in the Valley“. It was

made in 1926 by Albert Schlopsnies. This miniature collection shows humourous characters in a realistic village and farming community. The setting is as follows:

An obstinate donkey is standing on a bridge with his cart and master. At the village fountain there is a group of farmers' wives gossiping together as they wash the clothes. Two men and two women are threshing the corn. A fireman attempts to put out a small fire, whilst a policeman keeps his eye on everything. Nearby at a little river, two fishermen are trying their luck at making a catch and a schoolmaster is giving his class a biology lesson out in the open.

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

CHF 7.-/CHF 5.-

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

There is no additional entrance fee for this special exhibition.

The whole building is accessible to wheelchairs.

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