

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

## **Christmas Tree Toppers**

**A Special Exhibition of Christmas Tree Toppers  
25<sup>th</sup> November 2006 until 4<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

The crowning glory of a Christmas tree is the Christmas tree top, which has always played an important role in Christmas decorations. Every child wants to put the decoration at the top of the Christmas tree. The Doll's House Museum in Basel will be showing over 60 small artistic creations made out of glass, cardboard, wire mesh and various other materials.

### **The Christmas Tree**

Back in history, at the time when the Germanic tribes were alive, life was hard and the people were superstitious. They believed in spirits and devils and they valued trees as symbols of life and fertility. The evergreen conifers were special symbols of the perpetuity of life. During the celebrations for the winter and summer solstices, sacred fir blocks and wheels were burned and the ashes were spread on the fields and in the stables to guarantee fertility and ward off illness. Later in history, the Romans also valued the symbolic power of the evergreen tree. For special celebrations, they gave each other garlands woven with branches to give protection and bring good fortune. The symbol of the tree was absorbed into Christianity and revered as the "Tree of life. The custom of the 'Tree of Life' spread in the 13<sup>th</sup> century from the monasteries to the cities and therefore to all classes of the population. It was believed that green branches in the homes would protect the inhabitants from harm. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the people were allowed to collect for Christmas a limited number of branches from the forests. By celebrating the birth of Christ they were symbolically venerating life and its perpetuity. It was not long before these tree branches were replaced by the whole tree, which at a later stage was decorated. Already in 1419, the guild of bakers' apprentices in Freiburg im Breisgau decorated a tree with fruit, wafers, nuts and gingerbread. This custom spread very quickly along the Upper Rhine region. In the regions of Baden and the Alsace decorated trees at Christmas time, which represented the symbol of the renewal of life, were to be seen more often. This is where the first voices were raised against the pagan custom. Martin Luther (1483–1546) supported the idea of retaining the custom of evergreen trees (firs, spruces, box trees and yew). As Luther's ideas spread, the popularity of decorated trees at Christmas time also grew. Over the centuries the tradition of a Christmas tree spread throughout Germany and Western Europe as far as North and South America. One of the first Christmas trees in England was decorated for Queen Victoria around 1840; in Norway the

first Christmas tree appeared in 1830. German emigrants brought the custom to America around 1700.

## **Christmas Decorations**

In the beginning, Christmas decorations were made out of whatever material was available. In 1597 in Basel it is written that the decorations consisted of apples and cheese. It was customary for the tree to be 'plundered' by children and poor people. Trees in noble households in the middle of the seventeenth century were decorated with sweetmeats, dolls, clothes and silverware. This elaborate decoration was not possible for the poorer households, where the tree was decorated with sweetmeats and self-made ornaments. The production of Christmas decorations was taken over during industrialisation by the newly created factories. A vast and imaginative selection of glass baubles and elaborate decorations were produced from batting and paper maché, crepe paper, lametta tinsel and luxury paper.

## **Christmas Tree Toppers**

Old pictures and descriptions of Christmas trees show that little importance was given to the Christmas tree top. It was often not decorated at all or sometimes only by a candle. In the nineteenth century, Christmas tree tops were often decorated with stars, rosettes and angels. Different regions had their own style of tree toppers: for example, the cock for the Palatinate and for Nuremberg the 'Nürnberger Rauschgoldengel', which was an angel made from gold foil tinsel.

Glass Christmas tree toppers were introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century, the shape of which reminds one of the Prussian spiked helmets. These new, hand-blown tree toppers slowly replaced the angels, rosettes and stars. They had a reinforced opening at the base to fit over the top of the tree. Hand-blown stars were very complex to make, especially if they had a relief design stamped into them. The glass Christmas tree toppers were often decorated with additional Leonian wire, which added a glittering effect.

There were Christmas tree toppers made from Dresdner cardboard and there were angels with porcelain heads, which wore colourful dresses made from metal foil. In a Lauscha catalogue (dated around 1900) there is a description of a praying glass angel with wings made from spun glass and a star. It is painted in pastel colours and stands on a fluffy cloud made out of spun glass (on show in the exhibition).

Decorations were made using all sorts of techniques and materials. Elements in relief were painted and covered in coloured mica; wire mesh was added as an extra embellishment.

In this exhibition, we are showing Christmas tree toppers dating from around 1890 to the 1960s. There are elaborate glass tree toppers, angels made from cardboard, Gablonzer Christmas tree toppers, stars made from various materials and much more. Come and enjoy the surprising variety of Christmas tree toppers in the exhibition, which is well worth a visit.

### **Opening Hours**

Museum, shop and café: daily from 10:00 to 18:00

### **Entrance**

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.

### **Doll's House Museum, Basel**

Steinenvorstadt 1

CH-4051 Basel

Tel. +41 (0)61 225 95 95

Fax +41 (0)61 225 95 96

[www.puppenhausmuseum.ch](http://www.puppenhausmuseum.ch)