

The Doll's House Museum Basel presents:

Winter magic in porcelain

A special exhibition featuring snowbabies

From 29 November 2008–15 February 2009

In its annual Christmas exhibition, the Doll's House Museum Basel is displaying over 140 snowbabies made of porcelain. The exquisite figures date from the early years around 1905 up to the 1970s; the majority comes from the period between 1910 and 1930. The exhibits constitute a representative cross-section from the production of these snowbabies, some of which are more than 100 years old.

The name and origin of the snowbabies

Experts in the field are unable to agree on their name and origin. There are two theories about this. One claims that the origin of snowbabies is related to the production of candy containers or bonbonnières in Germany. 200 years ago, candy containers were already being made in the shape of polar bears and sugar dolls. The dolls were rolled in white sugar to create the impression of snow. It is said that a confectioner had dolls made from porcelain in order to stimulate sales. This could account for the porcelain snowbabies.

The second theory takes us back to the polar explorer Robert Edwin Peary, who undertook several expeditions to Greenland and the Arctic ice in the years between 1891 and 1909. His daughter Marie was the first white child to be born north of the Arctic Circle. The native people were fascinated by this fair-skinned baby; they called her "Ah-poo-mick-a-ninny", which roughly translated means snowbaby. In order to finance his expeditions, Robert E. Peary and his wife Josephine wrote books. One of the books penned by Josephine Peary bears the title "The Snow Baby". Later, the "snowbaby", daughter Marie Peary, wrote children's books in her own right. Whether the book entitled the "The Snowbaby's Own Story" provided the idea for the production of the porcelain figures or the origin really lies with the candy containers in Germany, remains uncertain to this day.

The popularity of the snowbabies

It seems reasonable to assume that the snowbabies achieved their popularity because, with their colours of white and silver, they fitted in perfectly with the fashion of the time from

around 1900 to 1920. Not for nothing was this era also known as the “silver age” (white also formed part of it).

Classic snowbabies

The classic snowbaby is made of unglazed porcelain and portrays a child in winter clothing. The dress is coated with a shimmering finish of ground porcelain. This gives the impression of freshly fallen snowflakes. The first snowbabies were made in Germany in 1905. The faces were painted to give them a perfectly natural appearance; all of the details were devised by artists. Production ceased during the First World War. There are also snowbabies without a trace of glittering snow as well as countless other figures and representations all of which are counted among the snowbabies, however: Santas, elves and dwarfs, Christmas carollers, penguins and polar bears, adults on skis or toboggans, snowmen in the shape of houses or in Disney style, etc.

Snowbabies were often used to create elaborate winter scenes at Christmas. In England around 1910, the approx. 5 cm high snowbabies were also popular as a decoration on white buttercream cakes. Visitors to the Doll's House Museum can admire this type of presentation as well and see for themselves that the little figures cut quite a dash on those cakes.

Later production phase of snowbabies

Around 1920, after the end of the First World War, the production of snowbabies started up again. This time, however, the figures were made with much less care; it was more a case of mass production. No longer was great importance attached to carefully devised details and the level of care left something to be desired with the painting, too. Likewise, the figures were no longer fired after painting. The colours were more intense and, as a general rule, the figures were smaller than those from the early days. What was notable about this “new” generation of snowbabies, however, was that the figures were more imaginative and portrayed in more active poses: a child giving a penguin a baby's bottle, Santa throwing toys from an aircraft, etc. The diversity is simply endless. It is estimated that there are more than 2000 different designs.

Early production from Japan:

Just before the Second World War, the manufacture of snowbabies also began in Japan. In general, however, the figures were of lower quality than those made in Germany.

Manufacturers

Among the largest manufacturers of snowbabies were the German porcelain manufacturers “Galluba & Hoffmann”, “Gebr. Heubach AG”, “Porzellan- und Steingutfabrik Hertwig & Co.”,

“Porzellanfabrik Limbach” and “A.W. Fr. Kister Porzellanmanufaktur”. “Galluba & Hoffmann” produced figures and dolls from 1890 until 1926. Their snowbabies are without doubt among the most attractive and stand out for their high quality. They also produced snowbabies with blue or ivory snow. The blue snow has a quite unusual characteristic: the blue colour was applied to the porcelain before it was fired and cracked. Only the blue snow from “Galluba & Hoffmann” has this unusual feature. The early blue snowbabies were often marked “G&H” and appeared around 1905.

Collectors’ objects

The early German snowbabies are today extremely popular collectors’ items. In particular, the figures by “Galluba & Hoffmann”, “Gebr. Heubach AG” and “Hertwig & Co.” are much sought-after. The exhibition features quite a few snowbabies by these three manufacturers. Owing to the increasing popularity of snowbabies among collectors, a growing number of copies are appearing on the market. For this reason, it is advisable to take your time and check the figure carefully before making a purchase.

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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