

Traditional German Wooden Decorations

HISTORY & TRADITIONAL FIGURINES:

The founders and trustees of German Christmas Market of NJ pride ourselves in only selling authentic traditional German Christmas decorations. We import directly from the companies in Germany whose artisans have been making these items for generations...which is why you will only find these items for sale in our Cookie Hut in the Conservatory building, along with our imported cookies, chocolates, etc. You will not find mass-produced cheap knock-offs at our market. As a 501.c.3 non-profit, our profits go back to local charities.

The Erzgebirge (“Ore Mountains”) region of Germany lies within the state of Saxony, along the German-Czech border. Historically, the region was known for its rich deposits of silver and other precious metals, thus mining was the predominant occupation. With the large dense forests all around them, many miners began making wooden toys and especially Christmas ornaments and decorations to subsidize their meager wages. Most of these traditional decorations utilized candles, the soft warm glow in the windows meant to lead the miners back to their cozy homes on dark winter nights. In the 1700s, as the mines became depleted, the villagers had to find new professions and turned to woodworking full-time. These skills have been handed down through the generations and today’s craftsmen/women still use the many of the same methods and tools. The themes in the scenes and the figurines honor the region’s mining heritage as well as the farmers, hunters and wood-gatherers that supported them. The city of Seiffen and Dresden their famous churches are often featured.

SMOKER MAN (*RÄUCHERMANN*):

These figurines originated in the Erzgebirge, dating back to the 1830s. They feature a hollow top half that when removed, reveals a holder for an incense cone. The smoke from the lit cone then comes out the figure’s mouth or pipe. The cozy scent (usually pine, frankincense or myrrh) is a much-loved holiday tradition in German homes. They were traditionally fashioned to look like miners or other townspeople (hunter, forester, wood-gatherer) and of course St Nikolaus, but today they come in many, many characters, professions and even smoking ski chalets.

PYRAMIDS (*PYRAMIDEN*):

These multi-tiered pyramid-shaped creations were originally designed in the 1700s to be a low-cost substitute for a real Christmas tree. The heat from burning candles around the edges rises to turn impeller blades at the top that then make the platforms of each tier turn. Each tier tells a different story with hand-carved figurines, such as the Nativity, carolers around a local church, or a winter woodland scene. Today, pyramids are available in various sizes and price points, from simple single-tiered versions to very ornate five or

more tiers. Some are also designed to use tea lights instead of the traditional 3-inch tall pyramid candles. However, we recommend using the specialized tea lights intended for pyramids, as they burn hotter than cheap mass-produced tea lights, to ensure enough heat rises to turn the impeller blades. We sell both the traditional candles as well as the proper tea lights.

LIGHT ARCHES (*SCHWIBBÖGEN*):

This beautiful tradition was inspired by the arched bricked entrances to the mines, where the miners would hang their lanterns and torches after their shift on Christmas Eve. The first Schwibbögen were actually made out of iron by the mines' blacksmiths and adorned with candles. The wood carvers then began making them out of wood as well. Over the years, they have become more intricate and are even available wired for traditional bulbs or LED lights.

NUTCRACKERS (*NUßKNACKER*):

Nutcrackers were common around Europe well before the Erzgebirge lathe-turners added them to their inventory around 1850 and painted them to look like miners, soldiers and kings. While originally designed to actually crack open walnuts and other nuts, most nutcrackers today are purely decorative.

ADVENT CALENDARS & CANDLE WREATHS:

Advent calendars count down the days from December 1st until Christmas Eve, when Germans traditionally open gifts. (Christkind, the Christ Child, brings gifts on Christmas Eve, whereas St Nikolaus deposits gifts in boots left outside the door on the night of Dec 5th.) Children usually find a small gift or sweet treat behind a door for each of the 24 days. Advent wreaths, on the other hand, hold four candles to celebrate the four weeks leading up to Christmas. One candle is lit on the first of these four Sundays, and then an additional candle is lit each subsequent Sunday leading up to Christmas Eve.

LANTERNS:

Decorative lanterns that typically hold a real or LED tealight are symbolic of the lanterns the miners of the Erzgebirge region used to carry into the mines.

ORNAMENTS, CANDLES, ETC.

The Erzgebirge woodworkers are also famous for their intricate and hand-painted Christmas tree ornaments, decorative figurines and candle holders. It is very common to have an angel paired with a miner (in ornaments, a pair of candle holders, etc.), as the angels were meant to watch over the miners. The delicate hand-shaved trees with their curled branches are a beautiful element of many candle arches, pyramids or as a stand-alone item. Each tree is crafted from a single piece of wood. We also import beautiful decorative (unscented) candles from the region.

GLASS PICKLE ORNAMENT:

While widely considered a popular German tradition by many Americans, its authenticity is unclear. (None of the Germans & German-Americans on our committee had ever heard of

this tradition.) We will, however, continue to sell the glass pickle ornaments as there is always substantial demand for them.

Link to article about glass pickle tradition: <https://www.german-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/christmas/the-christmas-pickle-ornament/>