

Decorating Your Tree With History

By Martine M. White ASA, AAA



In the late 19th century, James Clements, a Southern Pacific Railroad brakeman decorated his evergreen Christmas tree with seventy thousand dollars worth of gold nuggets he had found in the Klondike gold rush. And, though most of us probably won't be able to enjoy such extravagance this holiday season, a beautifully decorated Christmas tree sets the tone for a joyous holiday spent with close friends and family.

Most Christmas trees are decorated with cherished ornaments passed down through recent generations and, though many have stories attached to them, their history remains clouded. This holds true for the history of the Christmas tree itself, and the story is fascinating in its own right.

Unlike James Clements' tree, the earliest known ornaments did not have the glitter of gold, but they did have an epicurean appeal. These earliest trees, decorated with apples, were often thought of as an edible treat; however, the apple ornament had deeper significance. This ornament, used to decorate fir trees, also decorated the "Paradise Tree." This tree, hung with apples and round wafers, was

a prop for The Paradise Play - a Medieval European mystery play performed around Christmastime. This seasonal connection has led historians to believe that the Paradise Tree was the forerunner of the Christmas tree we love and enjoy today.

The Paradise Play was an entertainment that enacted the story of Adam and Eve, and the Paradise Tree, central to the story, represented the two important trees from the Garden of Eden: the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. While only apples first adorned the Paradise Tree, later in the 15th century, white communion wafers were added and symbolized the promise of reconciliation with God. Although Church authorities soon banned the miracle plays, the Paradise Tree tradition continued to thrive in France and the Rhine River region of Germany, where a new name was adopted, the "Christbaum" or "Christ tree".

The first detailed description of a decorated Christmas tree comes from early 15th century Strasbourg, Germany. However, replacing the communion wafers were hearts, angels, and stars made from white pastry dough - and ornaments representing humans and animals made out of brown dough. In the early 17th century, Germans began festooning their Christmas trees with roses made out of colored paper, apples and decorations made of shiny bits of gold foil. Fruits and vegetables molded out of marzipan and colored with vegetable dyes soon began appearing together with eggshells transformed into baskets. In fact, so many delicacies adorned the German Christmas tree, it soon became nicknamed the "sugar

tree". Children actually looked forward to dismantling the tree on the evening of January 6th, known as Twelfth Night or Epiphany, because only then were they allowed to enjoy the treats.

Together, with many of the other customs we inherited from our ancestors, the immigrants of Germany brought with them to America their tree-decorating tradition. Like their forefathers, the Pennsylvania Dutch decorated their trees with apples, nuts, and cookies. And, as this German tradition continued in the 19th century, Americans soon adopted the Christmas tree decorating custom. Innovative women began fashioning ornaments of strings of beads, ribbons, popcorn and paper, while others continued the German custom of hanging gifts on the branches of the tree for their children. Rather than the heavy, boxed gifts that we place under our trees today, the nineteenth century gifts tended to be lightweight, unwrapped trinkets that also served the purpose of adorning the tree.

In the 1870s commercially made Christmas ornaments began to replace hanging gifts and edible ornaments. These early crafted ornaments were primarily made in Germany where artisans specialized in novel ornaments. Often designed in tin, wax and embossed paper, the early designs were as numerous as they were unusual, ranging from exotic animals to mundane daily artifacts.

Around this time, when the Industrial Revolution resulted in a growing middle class, our culture became fascinated with Christmas ornaments, particularly the hand-blown glass ornaments from Lauscha,



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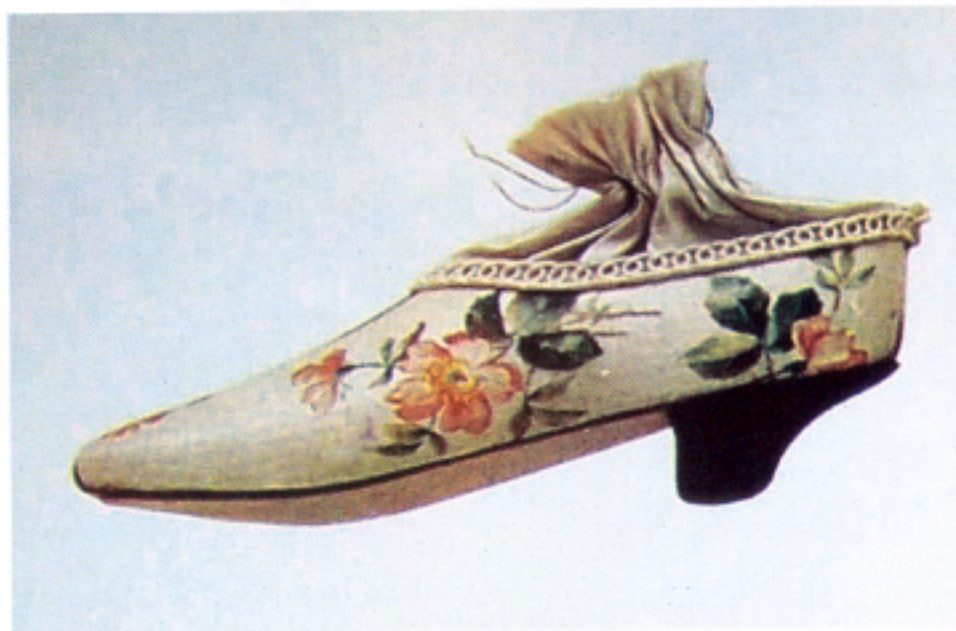
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Germany.

Deep in the mountains of Thuringia, amongst eighty-foot tall Christmas trees, this storybook village quickly established itself as the center of the ornament trade - supplying ninety-five percent of the glass ornaments found on American Christmas trees. By the late 19th century, even F.W. Woolworth began to offer these unique Christmas decorations in a wide variety of shapes and characters including musical cats, imperious dogs, hearts, birds, and Santa Claus figures.

Many of these ornaments can still be found in family collections today - and there is an active collectors market for these delicately blown ornaments, both antique and contemporary (type in "Lauscha" in the search window of eBay).

In 1939, as World War II approached, the glass-blowing town of Lauscha was devastated by war and eventually fell into the territory of the Soviets, eventually becoming part of East Germany. Disappearing as well was the satisfying

lifestyle of the craftsman glassblower, as this trade was frowned upon by the new government.

By 1940, to meet the demand for ornaments, the Corning Glass Company, of Corning, New York, filled the market once dominated by German craftsmen. Corning increased production by replacing glassblowers with glass-blowing machines that churned out uniform round balls - much less intricate (and somewhat less charming) than the dazzling array of shapes produced by the German artisans.

Antique German ornaments are still much sought after by collectors today. And, as with all antiques, art and collectibles, condition and rarity dictate the prices that some ornaments command in the market. Particularly valuable, early blown-glass ornaments are even embellished with reflectors, pictures, and wire tinsel - and some of the most collectible ornaments also have glistening effects produced by applied, shimmering chips of tiny glass.

In 1850, Charles Dickens captured

the allure of the Christmas tree adorned with ornaments in the following abbreviated passage:

"I have been looking, this evening, at a merry company of children assembled round that pretty German toy, a Christmas tree. The tree was planted in the middle of a great round table, and towered high above their heads. It was brilliantly lighted by a multitude of little tapers; and everywhere sparkled and glittered with bright objects perched among the boughs, as if in preparation for some fairy house-keeping...as a pretty child, before me, delightedly whispered to another pretty child...there was everything and more."

Dickens's enchanting description of the nineteenth century Christmas tree leaves little room to wonder why American families became and continue to be fascinated with the tradition of Christmas tree decorating. If you are lucky enough to have some of these early German decorations in your ornament collection, you'll probably agree that their most alluring feature is a whimsical character that brings out the child in even the most somber adult.

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