



THE SWABIAN "NATIVITY CRIB PARADISE"

The region between the rivers Iller, Zusam, Danube and the Allgäu is often referred to as the "Swabian Nativity Crib Paradise". In its centre are the towns of Krumbach and Günzburg.

Since the mid-18th century, people in this region have had an unparalleled enthusiasm for nativity cribs. There is evidence of several talented amateur woodcarvers in every community of the region since at least the 19th century. The wooden figures were not only carved for personal use, but were also offered for sale at the local "Kripplesmärkten" (nativity crib markets). The art of woodcarving practised by the particularly talented craftsman Josef Wiegel served as an example in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and defined a new style.



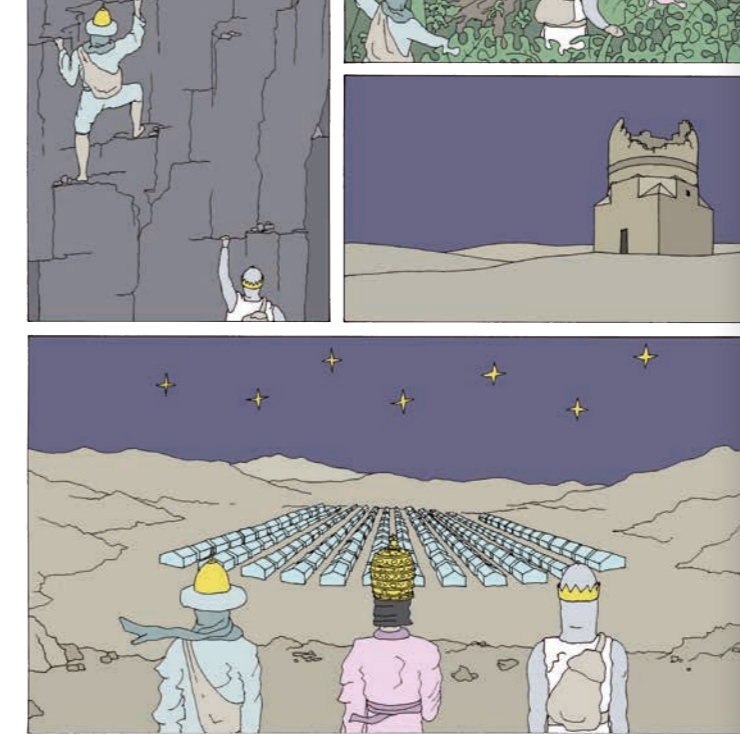
DIVERSITY AND REPRODUCTION

The enthusiasm for nativity cribs, which was evidenced from the 19th century until the first half of the 20th century, made it necessary to develop new methods for the production of nativity crib figures in large numbers. Paper cut-out sheets had been in existence since the 18th century. These were complemented by figures made of wax or clay, which could be produced in series and at a reasonable price. After 1850, nativity cribs were also made of plaster and various mixtures, which formed what is known as "Masse", which attained immense popularity and ensured high sales figures. The Academy sculptor Sebastian Osterrieder went his own special way and developed a new technique in around 1900, which enabled the production of highly elaborate artistic figures, which were expensive and very popular.



INFLUENCE FROM MUNICH

Right from the start, Swabian nativity scenes transferred the birth of Jesus into their own time and landscape. The figures were either dressed in costumes typical of the period, or in fantasy costumes from the Baroque era. Around 1800, the Oriental nativity crib emerged in Munich. Its aim was to produce an exact image of the Holy Land and its people. These masterful, very expressive nativity scenes gained more and more influence until, in the 1920s at the latest, the Oriental style became the epitome of the artistic nativity crib. Well into the post-war period, the local Swabian crib makers committed themselves to the artistic ideal cultivated in Munich. It was practically obligatory to own figures made in Munich or Oberammergau.



CONTEMPORARY ART

Until the 1960s, the aim of the artistic Christmas nativity scene was to recreate the biblical story. However, in the last few decades, there has been an opposite trend. Biblical events are either transferred to modern times, or transported out of time and place by abstraction, thus expressing the universal validity of the theme. Various new media have also led to new forms of expression. Matthias Weber, an artist from Cologne, uses cartoon as a medium. Here, the lines between cartoon and caricature dissolve in Weber's critical comments on current events. The Russian video artist Michail Alddashin created an animated film, in which he presents the birth of Christ in a modern, humorous manner.

Translation: Catherine Taylor





BAROQUE SPLENDOUR

In 1618, the Jesuits from the new Mindelheim College set up the first real nativity crib in Swabia. It is the "prototype" of the original Swabian crib. The figures are about one metre tall and opulently dressed, reflecting the pure Baroque delight in just looking at beautiful things. Shepherds, angels, the entourage of the Three Holy Kings and the once expansive backdrops display typical Baroque splendour. From here, nativity cribs spread throughout Swabia. In around 1700, the parish church in Mindelheim received a new nativity crib, which was very similar to that of the Jesuits. In the course of the 19th century it was moved to the nearby village of Apfeltrach. Remnants of this richly appointed nativity crib have been preserved to this day. In around 1740, the Franciscan nuns in Mindelheim commissioned a very special nativity crib. The birth of Christ was staged in a copy of the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, using ornately dressed figures.



THE "INVENTION" OF THE CHRIST CHILD FIGURES IN SWABIA

It took many years of art history for the image of the child Jesus to emerge as a devotional figure in its own right, independent of the Christmas story. In around 1300, Swabian nuns in mendicant monasteries began to specifically venerate the Christ child. The oldest known figure of the Christ child dates from around 1300 and belonged to the Dominican nuns in Leutkirch. It is a small, precious, child figure sitting cross-legged and sucking a finger. It was not until about 200 years later, in around 1500, that figures of the Christ child in reclining and standing postures were again made in Swabia in connection with nunneries. One outstanding example was created by the great Swabian sculptor Michel Erhart and dates from this period. Many more Christ child figures followed, right up to the present day.



"IHR KINDERLEIN KOMMET..."

Christoph von Schmid, a writer and great friend to children, was chaplain from 1791 to 1795 in Nassenbeuren, a village that belongs to Mindelheim. It is said that he wrote the words of the German children's carol "Ihr Kinderlein kommet" here. Schmid tells of numerous nativity cribs that he visited in Mindelheim on one Epiphany day. At this time, the sculptor Anton Schuster created not only altars and other works of art, but also nativity cribs with masterfully carved figures, generally small in size. They depict a wealth of scenes representing the entire Christmas story. The largest surviving nativity crib by Anton Schuster comprises around 250 small figures. Schuster was surrounded by a group of talented students who propagated his style until the end of the 19th century, thus making Mindelheim into a town famous for its nativity cribs.



"NATIVITY CRIB FEVER" IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Many citizens of Mindelheim seem to have been gripped by a veritable "nativity crib fever" in the course of the 19th century. Under the influence of the circle of sculptors and laymen surrounding Anton Schuster, they created nativity scenes for their own use and on order, some of which were quite unmanageable in size. The figures were generally carved from wood and then coloured. Often, gold filigree and sequins were also used. The passion for details knew practically no bounds. In an age when recreational activities were not yet dominated by modern media, the nativity crib with its figures and matching landscapes was a meaningful and fulfilling pastime. The Fackler family crib created by the master baker Lorenz Fackler is quite overwhelming, containing hundreds of figures for the depiction of numerous scenes, as well as opulent structures including palaces, ruins and many more.

Translation: Catherine Taylor



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Museums in the former Jesuit College building
Textile Museum – Sandtner Foundation
Swabian Nativity Museum
Southern Swabian Archaeological Museum
Carl Millner Gallery – Romantic Landscape Painting
Opening hours: Tues. to Sun. 10 a.m. – 12.00, 2 p.m. – 5 p.m.
and by arrangement

The Museum of Local History is temporarily closed
Swabian Tower Clock Museum
in the former St Silvester's Chapel
Opening hours: Wed. 2 p.m. – .5 p.m.
last Sunday in the month, 2 p.m. – .5 p.m.
and for groups by arrangement



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