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Bling Verboten in German Handmade Christmas Decorations

By Leon Mangasarian and Alessandro Speciale - Dec 9, 2014

The makers of [Germany](#)'s traditional wooden holiday decorations have stuck with the tried and true, ignoring bling, singing Santas and dancing reindeer in their handmade artisanship.

That strategy is paying off as the more than 300-year-old craft unique to the Ore Mountains in eastern Germany -- a picturesque area dotted with castles and fortresses that forms a natural border between the country and [Czech Republic](#) -- has never been more in demand. The artistry is a staple of Christmas markets and sold around the world.

Kept alive during communism as a source of hard currency, sales of [Erzgebirge](#) Christmas tree ornaments, nutcrackers and candle-lit holiday pyramids have doubled since reunification in 1990 to about 50 million euros (\$62 million) a year. The thriving industry, which dates back to the 17th century, directly employs about 2,000 people and stands in contrast to other traditional crafts, like [Venice](#)'s Murano glass, struggling for survival as cheap knockoffs draw away customers.

"Handcrafted Christmas decorations are a way to hit the brakes in our fast-paced lives," Dieter Uhlmann, head of the Association of [Erzgebirge Artisans](#) and Toy Manufacturers, said of the appeal of the region's goods.

Buyers are drawn to the minute artisanship using methods going back centuries. Wendt & Kuehn, founded in 1915 in the village of Gruenhainichen, follows 40 steps to make the company's signature [wooden angels](#) with wings or smaller angels holding [musical instruments](#).

Winter Wonderland

The manufacturer, which has survived two world wars, hyperinflation and a state takeover under the communists, returned to family ownership in 1990. The entire assembly process is still done in-house, with Christmas figures cut, fit together and painted by hand based on 2,500 designs from the company's founders. The spruce, beech and linden comes from the nearby forests in a landscape that transforms into a snow-covered wonderland in winter.

In tune with its old-fashioned approach, Wendt & Kuehn, which has increased sales 4 percent annually for the past three years to about 8.5 million euros, offers a rare service for a Christmas

decoration maker: Its own repair department can fix angels singed by candles or broken by children or pets.

Chief Executive Officer Claudia Baer, the third generation of the family to run Wendt & Kuehn, compares what her company does to the push that started in the 1980s in [Italy](#) to promote local foods and centuries-old gastronomic traditions.

‘Counter-Movement’

“We’re a counter-movement, just like Slow Food,” Baer said at the company’s 19th century half-timbered factory. “Smartphones are out of date in a flash but we’ll be producing the same things in 10 years.”

Baer said she sees additional sales potential in the U.S. “It’s a market where we could do more,” she said.

The region has also been vigilant in protecting its craft. Uhlmann said the success of the decorations -- popular in the U.S., Germany and even [Asia](#) -- has led to counterfeits being produced abroad by machine and then passed off as handmade.

“We’ve won numerous court cases against people who do this,” the association chief said.

The Ore Mountains have been a center for mining dating back to the 14th century. Wooden toy-making began in the 17th century as a way to earn extra money and was expanded in the 19th century as mining began to decline.

Avoiding Nationalization

The family company founded by Ringo Mueller’s great grandfather in 1899 originally produced small wooden toys such as cars and model furniture. Mueller GmbH, in the heart of the region in the village of Seiffen, avoided nationalization during communist rule by focusing on traditional Christmas decorations, sold chiefly in the West to gain hard currency.

“Where in the world can you find a business with products that have been available for about 350 years that are still produced in the same way?,” Mueller said. “It is a tradition that is worth working for.”

Today, the Erzgebirge also draws travelers from as far away as [Japan](#) looking for ornaments, and many of the castles have been converted into hotels. On a recent Sunday, the streets in Seiffen were teeming with tourists shopping for decorations.

Among the visitors were Niels Kiessling and Susi Weissbach, both 25, who came with their one-month-old daughter to buy a wooden pyramid. The ornaments, which have a propeller on top

that spins the table-top decoration with the heat of candles on the base, are as common in Germany as stockings in the U.S.

Family Tradition

“It’s important to have a pyramid in our new house,” said Weissbach, a resident of the eastern German city of Zwickau. “Our parents had it and we want it too.”

One nod to modernity is the use of the Internet, which the Erzgebirge producers have successfully embraced to widen their customer base. The online price starts in the U.S. for Wendt & Kuehn’s wooden angel figurines at about \$25. For everything else, tradition remains key.

“We love these decorations because we knew them as children and they bring back wonderful memories,” said Jacqueline Lorenz as she painted wooden birds at the [Werkstatt Leichsenring](#) in Seiffen. “That’s why people keep buying them.”

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