

TRADITION WITH ADDED VALUE

Ringo Müller has also been awarded the "Tradition und Form" design prize, as has Gerhard Feldevert. When he was a child, Müller spent hours playing in the attic with his model railway. Today, the 39-year-old manages Kleinkunst aus dem Erzgebirge Müller GmbH, a company in its fourth generation, and draws on his childhood hobby for new business ideas. It is less the designs that set his work apart from that of more traditional craftsmen than their ingenious technology. Back in 1996, his father incorporated his son's first fully illuminated candle arch in his range of products. In 2004, "Alt-Dresden", the only candle arch in the world with electronic sounds, hit the shops. The first electronics module was taken from a model railway set. And last year, to celebrate the company's 110th anniversary, Müller presented his latest highlight: a battery-driven electronic music box with a Bluetooth sound module developed in cooperation with the Technical University of Chemnitz. Up to 15 music files can be wirelessly downloaded from a cell phone or computer to five playlists. But it also plays own recordings, such as spoken love poems, and can even be programmed as an alarm clock. Furthermore, the scenes on the music box are magnetic and can be changed. "We are driven by our customers' wishes and the search for new challenges," says Ringo Müller of his team of 35 employees. "We bridge the gap between tradition and the modern world. Our aim is to inspire new clients with our innovations." The products are marketed abroad by distributors in the USA, Japan, and Great Britain. Before Gerhard Feldevert and his wife, Uta, moved to the Ore Mountains following German Reunification, he worked in the car business in the Münsterland region. For the last 18 years, the couple has run the Arts and Crafts Workshop in Olbernhau

(Kunstgewerbe-Werkstätten Olbernhau, KWO), which was originally established in 1949 as a small woodturning business. Today, KWO has a staff of 85 and is one of the largest producers of woodcrafts in the Ore Mountains. But Gerhard Feldevert finds the growth opportunities in traditional wood art to be limited and has started looking for new products. "I'm never satisfied with what I have. I always have to do something new," says the 63-year-old businessman. Back in the days when he worked in the car industry, he was one of the first to incorporate a catalytic converter, he tells us: "Most people didn't even know what that was." His latest creation is a desktop set designed in leather with a burl wood or cherry wood finish. The mouse, keyboard and monitor frame match perfectly, and are rounded off with an Ayurvedic incense cone to create an atmosphere of well-being at the workplace. This is just one of Feldevert's attempts at entering the life-style market. Another is closer to traditional folk art in terms of form and material, but it takes just one look at the price tag to realize that this figure is not intended for everyday collectors of woodcrafts from the Ore Mountains: The Gold Edition Nutcracker is adorned with 24-carat gold leaf applied by hand and a solid gold belt buckle with a one-carat diamond and is priced at 20,000 euros. It takes six weeks to make just one figure. The Gold Edition Nutcracker is particularly popular in the USA, Russia, and the Emirates, Feldevert says, as he shows us around the production facilities, shaking his employees' hands as he goes. He still has plenty of ideas, even though he is soon due for well-earned retirement.

"Whenever something stops functioning, something new turns up," says Björn Köhler. That's how it was when mining came to an end, that's how it was after Reunification. Today, the time seems to be rife for reviving old traditions and taking them a step further. Much like the wind in spring blows the fog out of the valleys in the Ore Mountains after a long winter, a wind of change is blowing through the artisans' workshops. Both the younger generation and established craftsmen are doing what they can to preserve the century-old tradition of wood art from the Ore Mountains.