

Nutcracker collector's trip to German town feeds her need for more

Susan R. Pollack / Detroit News Design Writer

Seiffen, Germany -- Mona Mesereau is nuts about nutcrackers.

This time of year, her Colorado home is filled with them.

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The colorful wooden figures, nearly 70 in all, greet front door guests, guard fireplaces, line a stairway and adorn her baker's rack, entertainment center and buffet.

"They're all over the house — on every horizontal surface," Mesereau says of her collection, which ranges from traditional wooden soldiers and kings to fanciful elves, animals, Santas and assorted characters such as a bagpiper, baker, firefighter and fisherman.

And, after 15 years of collecting — she has given nutcrackers to her two children every Christmas since kindergarten — her display also includes the "Wizard of Oz" scarecrow, tin man and Dorothy, as well as Uncle Sam, a Hawaiian-shirted surfer and a girl in a pink poodle-skirt.

So, it's no surprise that Mesereau was like the proverbial kid in a candy store — and her credit card got a workout — when she stepped off a tour bus recently in the little town of Seiffen in the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains) of eastern Germany.

Home of the nutcracker

The wooded region, near the Czech Republic border, is known as the birthplace of nutcrackers (1870), and has been dubbed the "land of Christmas" by tourism officials in the German state of Saxony.

Reminiscent of Michigan's Frankenmuth on steroids — and I mean that in a positive way — Seiffen is a charming "toy story" kind of town where street lanterns glow with colorful Christmas motifs, giant nutcrackers stand sentinel in shop doorways and the aroma of hot mulled wine wafts through the air.

To Mesereau's delight, Seiffen's tidy streets are lined with dozens of shops showcasing the region's signature folk art: high-quality, handcrafted nutcrackers, ornaments and other decorative wooden Christmas items made for generations by skilled local artisans.

Clustered in modest workshops, cooperatives or small, family-owned companies, many are descendants of the original miners who worked for

centuries tapping the region's rich deposits of silver, iron ore, nickel and tin. By the 1800s, when the minerals were tapped out, they sought new ways to feed their families and turned to their hobby, wood-crafting. Their products caught on in Dresden, Leipzig and elsewhere in Germany's famed Christmas markets and a new industry was born.

Today, some 2,000 woodworkers and about 150 manufacturers are involved in the local toy-making industry, according to Dieter Uhlmann, chairman of Seiffen's Woodworkers' Association. Their handicrafts, not surprisingly, are rooted in the 500-year-old mining tradition and the miners' craving for light.

The wooden nutcrackers, with their fierce expressions, were the working man's subversive nudge at soul-crushing authority figures such as supervisors, gendarmes and kings. Quirky incense burners, shaped like small men with pipes that puff scented smoke, represent the average guy on the street.

In addition to Santa and other "smoking men" and nutcrackers in every size, shape and price range imaginable (including a \$30,000 Gerhard Feldevert limited edition adorned with 24 karat gold leaf and a gold buckle, a one-carat diamond and real fur trim), traditional Ore Mountain wooden specialties include spinning Christmas pyramids, Schwibbogen candle arches and candle-carrying angels that symbolize the miners' wives waiting at home.



Rooted in centuries-old mining tradition, nutcrackers were born — and are made today — by skilled craftsmen in the Ore Mountains of eastern Germany. (Susan R. Pollack / The Detroit News)



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Moving toward modern

While traditional designs are perennial favorites, some Ore Mountain artisans are creating modern styles aimed at a younger market. Following in their father's wood-crafting footsteps, Sylva-Michele Sternkopf and her sister, for example, formed Sternkopf Design four years ago in Seiffen and created a new line of contemporary angel candle-holders with detachable wings to extend their appeal beyond Christmas. "Our angels are not symmetrical and that is what makes them sexy," Sternkopf says, explaining that they're lathe-turned in two pieces, then glued, polished, shaped and hand-painted. "It takes quite a long time and they're even more expensive (at least \$100 each in the U.S.) than the other (nutcracker) figures. It's a piece of luxury and people who buy it want to spend," she says. Last Christmas, Vogue magazine featured an ornate, hand-carved Ringo Mueller spinning pyramid, popular in the U.S., that sold for \$536. Another Muller pyramid, priced at \$673, was designed last year especially for Martha Stewart, said Germany tourism representatives. Mueller's ancestors founded their family-owned business in Seiffen in 1899 and specialized originally in miniatures in matchboxes, toy cars and planes.

Find nutcrackers

Here's where to get nutcrackers from Germany's Ore Mountains:

- www.mueller.com

- www. erzgebirge-palace.com (Mona Mesereau's favorite retail website)

The pyramids, based on the horse-powered rotating gin used to hoist ore to the surface, are windmill-topped carousels typically carved in tiers with Nativity or mining figures. Called Schwibbogen, carved wooden arches adorned with candles or lights represent the arched entrance to mining pits that traditionally were decorated with miners' lamps on the last shift before Christmas.

Whether painstakingly crafted by lathes, ring-turned or carved by hand, the items typically carry fairly high price tags and a stamp of authenticity: "echt Erzgebirge" ("made in the Ore Mountains").

Between eight and 10 percent of the local products, mostly nutcrackers, are exported to the United States, Uhlmann says, and are especially popular in German communities in the Midwest, Texas and elsewhere. In Michigan, Bronner's in Frankenmuth carries a small selection of high-end nutcrackers, spinning pyramids and hand-carved wooden ornaments by Christian Ulbricht, one of Seiffen's best-known manufacturers in the U.S.

Collector appeal

Because even the small Ulbricht ornaments are relatively pricey (\$18-\$25), they appeal to discerning shoppers and collectors, according to Kerri Kritzmann, a buyer for Bronner's. Collectors like them, she says, because they're high quality and handcrafted in Germany.

"They're nicely done and hand-painted," she says of the Christian Ulbricht collection. "We carry only a small amount of these ornaments but attempt to rotate the styles from year to year so the collectors have a chance to add a new design to their collection."

It's no wonder that Mesereau was beside herself with excitement when she arrived in the German town that inspired her treasured collection of nutcrackers, though most of hers, she says, were not produced in Seiffen.

Before succumbing to what a fellow traveler called "nutcracker fever" and adding to her collection, she visited a local co-op workshop to see German woodcrafting in action.

Amid piles of wood shavings and the scent of fresh-carved wood, Mesereau learned that 135 steps are involved in building a typical Seiffen nutcracker, primarily because each figure is composed of 15 to 20 different parts. The wood typically is hand-turned on a lathe, polished, primed, glued, assembled, painted and decorated, and finished figures are packed.

Mesereau also was intrigued to learn the history behind the Christmas figures popularized in America by Tchaikovsky's 1892 "Nutcracker" ballet.

"The double entendre surrounding the story of the nutcracker is absolutely hilarious," she says of the German miners' subtle way of poking fun at their bosses and other authority figures.

"And I like the fact that nutcrackers are not super-elegant. We're used to going to Christmas parties all done up in gold and coordinated decorations. This is a little more whimsical and I'm attracted to that."

Shopping frenzy

In the space of a few quick hours in Seiffen, Mesereau bought three 12-inch nutcrackers — a soldier, a king and a Santa (about \$70 each) — and three "smoking men" for her children and her collection. And once back home in Denver, where she co-owns a public relations firm, she went online to order more wooden Christmas gifts from Seiffen: seven nutcrackers, three smoking men and a pyramid.

"I love the quality — what a difference from what you'd buy in a department store or (most) anywhere in the U.S.!" she declares. "So much of what we have is 'Made in China' and certainly not hand-carved. They don't have nearly the quality or the charm of the ones made in Seiffen."

Al and Shirley Sandner of Lansing, who were on the Seiffen tour with Mesereau, were as charmed as she was by the little German town and its wooden handicrafts.

They bought a small, spinning carousel pyramid that now hangs on the fresh, Michigan-grown Christmas tree in their living room.

"The workmanship is lovely," says Al Sander, a retired state of Michigan employee. "We liked it because it's so pretty and unusual. The heat from the lights of the tree — actually any air movement in the room — makes it spin, sort of like the blades on a helicopter. We'd never seen one that moved like that."

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