



Müller uses centuries-old woodcarving traditions to craft intricate scenes. Oftentimes, different natural woods are used for coloring in lieu of paint.



The "Smoke Crackers" are one of the most notable Müller gifts for Christmas. Müller. +49-[0]37362-87-0. mueller.com
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Carved from Tradition

From wartime to Christmastime, Müller's handcrafted wooden gifts are steeped in tradition and have survived nearly 120 years of turmoil and evolution.

BY LENISE WILLIS

While some manufacturers have to worry about surviving recessions or downturned economies, not many have to worry about surviving a war—much less two! But that's exactly the case with a venerable producer of beautiful wooden holiday products and innovative music boxes. Müller, a German toy and gift manufacturer, has been run by the Müller family for the last four generations—Ringo Müller being the current fourth-generation owner.

The company was founded in 1899 by Ringo's great-grandfather, Edmund Oswald, and his wife Lina—a wooden toymaker. Edmund's ancestors were all woodworkers, too, specializing in sawmills and turners, so the two were quite familiar with the industry and began crafting wooden toys, miniatures and wooden household products for sale.

"In those days, it was normal that the men rented a water-powered (or

later electrical) lathe on a daily basis to turn wood parts," Ringo said. "Later on at home—mostly in the kitchen—they carved, assembled and painted these parts into products. Absolutely everything was handwork, and it was normal that family members and even their kids helped."

Just before WWI, Edmund bought the company's current location in Seiffen, Germany.

"It was a wet-meadow and they started to fill the wet land with big stones to dry this area and started to build the foundation," Ringo said. "This cost them almost all of the money they wanted to use for the whole house. When WWI began, my great-grandfather was called to be a soldier, and my great-grandmother finished the site and construction. In those years, a masterwork for a woman!"

When Edmund returned wounded from WWI, their at-home company hadn't been affected by the war's de-



Ringo Müller, fourth-generation owner of Müller, shows off a pyramid arch, right, and candle arch, left.

struction, thanks to its more isolated location. However, the country was still in shambles and thus there was no market for toys. "They tried to sell things from a wooden-bag pack by walking door-to-door or barter their products against something to eat," Ringo said. They did what they could to survive—twice. This tactic is how the couple's company survived both WWI and WWII, as well as during the world recession in the 1920s.



Each wooden toy, figurine and music box is handmade by master craftsmen.

During those turbulent times, Ringo says the family-owned company survived because of its contacts abroad, as well as exclusive product.

"Another important thing was to go out of the workshop and find markets," Ringo added. "Therefore, our workshop started to exhibit in a permanent showroom in Leipzig and developed the first printed product catalog in 1926."

Designed by History

The key characteristic that sets Müller products apart from other holiday décor and wooden gifts is the rich history behind both the process and the product design. Most notable is its Candle Arches, which for more than 250 years have played an integral part in the Erzgebirge Feast of Light, which is celebrated at Christmas. It is said that the tradition began when miners would come together on Christmas Eve to celebrate their "Mettenschicht" with a special service. Beforehand, the miners would hang their burning lamps at the tunnel's entrance, forming a half-circle, which is known today as the Candle Arch. To this day, many who celebrate Erzgebirge display these festive arches for Christmastime. Müller creates several varieties as a special Christmas décor tradition—its most notable design includes patented inside illumination.

"We have our own and recognizable design language, a result of uninterrupted family history," Ringo said about the traditions of the company's designs and centuries-old techniques. "In addition to that, the designs of our products are inspired and infused by our mining history."

"After the mining period in our region, approximately 350 years ago, the miners began wood carving and turning as a new way to generate income. In those days, many main techniques were invented. These techniques are still the core of our craftsmanship. Even nowadays when you start the training



to become a wooden toy maker, you have to learn these techniques and train and specialize them to become a master craftsman.

"In our workshop, some of these techniques were improved over generations to become one of the quality leaders in our field of business. A very precise work in every step, a focus in the raw material selection and product innovations are requirements."

In order to become a master craftsman and make his mark on the company, Ringo created the Village of Seiffen, the first large and completely illuminated Candle Arch.

Finding the Right Grain

One of the defining characteristics of Müller is its use of natural wood. Nowadays, the company uses 35 different types from all over the world. The rich variety provides a natural way to add pops of color to products, rather than using dye or paint. All wood comes from certified-sustainable resources to ensure a higher-end product.

But sourcing the natural wood is one of the challenges of the company, even if it does help it stand apart from the rest. Some types of wood can only be cut during certain seasons, some varieties need to be dried in a special way and some can only be bought once a year.

"There are two main arguments for natural wood," Ringo said. "It has higher quality, and the products fit into a wider environment...but when you use natural wood you have to watch out from the very beginning for the quality because there is no way to cover any faults later," Ringo said.

Innovating for the Future

After the reunification of Germany and thus the renewed possibility of sourcing and buying products worldwide, Müller launched its first music boxes. "They had mechanical movements from Switzerland," Ringo said. And though this was a big advancement,



The Candle Arch design is derived from when miners would hang their lanterns at the tunnel entrance for a Christmas-eve service. It's been a tradition for hundreds of years. Müller.

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the Müller family continued to look for improvements. The current mechanics only allowed the music boxes to play one song and couldn't be customized for the customer. Ringo left his mark on the company by adding an electronic core.

"I found such partners in the IT department of the Technical University of Chemnitz, which developed the electronic heart of our music box as well as the round barcode for automatic motif platform detection," Ringo said. The first electronic music box came on the market in 2009 after three years of development. Customers could then enjoy the tradition of the wooden carved design, but with a more technologically advanced inclusion that allowed them to switch out songs on a whim.

"Now we have the third further developed version which came on the market in late 2012," Ringo said. "This version has now capacity for more than 25 hours of music."

Altogether, Müller holds 53 patents, registered utility models and registered designs. Most notable are its electronic music boxes, "Smoke Crackers" and Smoking Men, which allow a safe stream of "smoke" to drift from the figurine. •