



WHERE *Christmas* COMES TO LIFE:

The Hand-Carved Wonders of Erzgebirge Folk Art

By Linda Barnard

From the Middle Ages, people living in the low ranges of Germany's Ore Mountains—called the Erzgebirge in German—went deep underground to mine silver. By the 16th century, the precious metal had run out, and they needed a new way to feed their families.

With forests full of free materials around them, miners swapped pickaxes for chisels to make toys, candleholders, and figures in a Christmas craft tradition that still delights kids and collectors today.

This area of Saxony became known as the German Christmas heartland, where Yuletide is considered the unofficial fifth season.

I spent an April afternoon exploring the cobblestone streets of the charming medieval town of Annaberg, the regional capital. Even in spring, the Yule spirit was on display in independent shop windows filled with masterfully carved Christmas delights, from comical and whimsical to the religious.

Smoking Santas & Nutcracker Princes

There were brightly painted nutcrackers in a range of sizes and themes, hanging pyramids covered with Christmas figures and animals, and “smoking” Santas and grandpas that puffed incense from pipes. Gracefully arched Schwibbogen candleholders frame elaborate forest scenes and religious tableaux, the shape designed to mimic the entrance to the mines, with the candles representing miners' torches.

These fanciful wooden pieces are pricey and prized due to the time and skill required to make them. All are hand-carved and individually painted, although some of the wood is left natural. Expect to pay as much as \$500 for a nutcracker, depending on size and style. Proof of authenticity is in the stamp “Echt Erzgebirge Holzkunst mit Herz” (True Erzgebirge Woodcraft with Heart).

The grimacing nutcracker has become a regional ambassador for this part of Germany. Invented as a practical tool to crack nuts in the Erzgebirge in the 17th century, the soldier figures were thought to bring good luck into a home. By the 19th century, nutcrackers became popular across Europe and in North America. Around the same time, Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker*, about a young girl who dreams her Christmas gift is transformed into a valiant prince, made its debut.

As in most German towns and cities, Annaberg's main square is the site of a lively annual Christmas market. There's a massive fir tree covered in festive lights and more than 80 booths selling food, crafts, and steaming mugs of mulled wine.



YULETIDE IS CONSIDERED THE UNOFFICIAL FIFTH SEASON.

The largest miners' parade in Germany takes place there each December. Marching bands in black, braid-covered uniforms and tall hats marked with a crossed hammer and pickaxe logo wear sashes with the traditional miners' good-luck greeting: Glück Auf!

See the Carvers at Work

To get an idea of the work that goes into these wooden carvings, drop by the Haus des Gastes Erzhammer, just off the main square. The renovated 500-year-old building houses a second-floor cultural centre where local carvers work on personal projects in a large open studio. It was fascinating to see how a piece of spruce becomes a figure, and I'll never figure out how someone manages to carve a length of interconnecting chain from a single block of wood.

One motorcycle enthusiast showed off his modern version of a Schwibbogen, where the wooden arch was replaced with a curved tire. Beneath it, he'd carved roadside rock formations, fir trees, and an authentic-looking miniature motorcycle.

The town is famous for two churches that honour the miners in fascinating ways. Late-Gothic St. Anne's Church, finished in 1525, has a detailed painting on the 16th-century Annaberg Mountain Altar that depicts miners at work.

Nativity & Dreams

Even more impressive is the masterfully carved miners' nativity on display in St. Marien Mountain Church, the only remaining miners' church in Germany. St. Marien was built by local miners from their pay packets as a pre-dawn place to pray each morning before going down into the dangerous mines.

That community spirit lives in a project begun in 2000, with 33 hand-carved figures that interpret the biblical nativity story as if it took place in 19th-century Annaberg. Joseph is a mine carpenter. His wife, Mary, is a pit worker with chapped hands. The hand-painted, 1.2-metre figures that tell the story have remarkably life-like qualities. Their expressive faces are based on local people.



ANNABERG'S MAIN SQUARE IS THE SITE OF A LIVELY ANNUAL *Christmas market*



Opened in 2010, the Manufaktur der Träume—The Dream Factory in English—is a modern museum that pays homage to the timeless joys of carved toys and woodcrafts. The collection of Erzgebirge-born arts patron Erika Pohl-Ströher goes back centuries, with fantastic displays from dollhouses to dynamic Christmas scenes. Most mesmerizing is the top-floor display area, where the lights dim and gentle music plays as a host of carved angels on invisible wires slowly descend from the rafters.

When You Go

Annaberg is twinned with the neighbouring town of Buchholz, so the town is often referred to as Annaberg-Buchholz.

Chemnitz, about 40 km to the north, makes a good base for a day trip to Annaberg, as well as visits to nearby castles and Saxon Switzerland. The city of 250,000 is the European Capital of Culture for 2025. Plan your trip: visitsaxony.com.

For more storybook feels, Germany marks the 240th birthday of Jacob Ludwig Karl Grimm of the Brothers Grimm in 2025 with a 600-kilometre German Fairytale Route. Stops are tied to folktales like Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella.

Linda Barnard was a guest of the German National Tourist Office, which did not preview this story.