Little Door to the Fourteenth of December

The Invention of the Christmas Tree Ball

Christmas trees have been around for 500 years, but until the 18th century they were only erected and displayed in public spaces. In the 19th century the Christmas tree at home was popularized and even back then the Christmas tree was decorated.

Before Christmas tree balls were a thing, our ancestors decorated it primarily with things you can eat. First apples and nuts; then, at some point, people started to gild the nuts. Pastries, such as cookies, were stringed up too. The children would then eat the cookies. Home-made Christmas decoration, like stars made out of paper, were hung as well.

This changed when in the 19th century in Lauscha, Thuringia, the technological progress made it possible for glassblowers to create Christmas tree balls. Back then they were not as big as the spheres we have on our Christmas trees nowadays. The oldest Christmas tree ball, which was exhibited in the exhibition "Eine runde Sache? Wie Lauscha die Weihnachtskugel erfand" (= A spherical thing? How Lauscha invented the Christmas tree ball) in the Historisches Museum Bamberg (Upper Franconia, Bavaria), dates back to the year 1850.

At the beginning of the 20th century, these Christmas tree balls got particularly popular in the United States thus becoming an export hit! They were produced between May and December by glassblowers. The women and children helped too by adorning and wrapping the Christmas tree balls up. However, the production where the glassblowers were involved in wasn't hazard-free: since they worked with gas, they had a wild bird in a cage to signal when the concentrations were too high (the bird didn't sing anymore). Similar to mineworkers.

As they were essential for survival, they'd later be immortalized as birds made out of glass. The glassblowers didn't limit themselves to Christian symbols: one cabinet in the exhibition shows sparkling Bretzels, beer cans and unicorns as Christmas tree decoration.