

Katharina's Passion

After surviving World War Two in Germany, Katharina Engles achieved her lifelong dream to open her very own toy and doll museum. Today it is the largest privately owned collection in Germany and its surrounds.

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Dolls in traditional dress

On a recent trip to the mystical and romantic medieval city of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Bavaria, I stumbled across the largest privately owned doll and toy collection in Germany and surrounding Europe. Housed in a terracotta coloured fifteenth century building on a cobbled stone street, The Puppen and Spielzeugmuseum (Doll and Toy Museum) is the pride and passion of owner Katharina Engles. Founded in 1984, the museum displays more than 200 years of history, which Katharina has spent 50 years collecting. She is now 75 years of age. I discovered that the real story behind Katharina's doll infatuation started as a young girl during the devastation of World War Two.

Katharina grew up on a farm in the town of Theringen in Germany's Rhineland. She enjoyed playing with dolls and would sew clothes for them all. Besides going to school, her job was to look after the 100 sheep on her parents' farm. "I took the sheep to the paddock every second day and I had two sheep dogs to help me," she says. "I used to sit between the dogs with my doll's pram and my needlework, and watch the sheep as they grazed."



Doll house showing upper class setting

According to Katharina these were wonderful peaceful times which were filled with dreams and silence. As a reward for her work at the end of each week, her parents let her visit the neighbours who owned a dolls' house. "It was a wonderful dolls' house," she says. "I lost track of time while I played with it."

Then Katharina's peaceful world was shattered. "The war came into our little village and destroyed everything the family owned," she says. "Not just the property but also my childhood." Theringen had been defended throughout the war by German troops, but towards the end was shelled by Allied grenades and phosphorus bombs. "All the animals were burnt and my mother took us children into the woods where we hid until it was over," she says. "The next day, walking back into the village was gruesome; I will never forget what I saw."

The post-war years were fraught with illness and Katharina spent much time in hospital with malnutrition. Her family moved to her grandmother's near Duesseldorf and Katharina explained that the children of the area would sometimes be given toys and dolls from sympathetic people. "These toys became a bartering object in the playground," she says. "You would swap a doll or toy for a piece of bread and butter."

It was not until 1955, after Katharina had married, that doll collecting became something more than just a



Katharina with one of her many displays



fascination. She came across a damaged French porcelain doll, in the coal stack of her parents-in-law's cellar, and saved it from burning. The doll's fate brought back terrible memories of the war and by restoring 'Lissy' she brought her back to life.

"It was at that point I decided I wanted to collect all the dolls I could get my hands on," she says. "It also laid the foundation for my dream to open a toy museum when I was older." It is obvious that Katharina's passion for dolls does come out of growing up during this time. "My fascination definitely started because I grew up in a world that was ruled by guns and tanks," she explains. "The more damaged the toy I found, the more I wanted to restore it, which obviously had to do with what I experienced."

At first Katharina found it very difficult to start her collection because many toys and dolls were burnt during the war; however the ones that survived had often lived for years in people's attics. She was often given these by friends and she would spend hours restoring them. As she got older, Katharina would spend her weekends scouring flea markets and second-hand markets all over Germany. She advertised in newspapers and attended European auctions; practises

that still remain today. "A passionate collector does not collect toys for their value or as an investment," she says. "He or she does it to satisfy a natural romantic inclination."

'Romantic' is definitely a word I would use to describe Katharina's museum. Walking through the front door I was greeted by an eclectic toy collection. Hundreds of cars, bikes, fire engines, jigsaw puzzles and games have been carefully curated behind walled glass display cases. I was immediately transported back in time. Turning left and walking past the museum's library and souvenir shop, you reach the exhibits. The collection of timber, wax, paper, porcelain and celluloid dolls as well as puppets and toys is extensive. Mostly housed in tall glass display cases on various floors, as well as large-scale arrangements out in the open, the intricate detail of Katharina's restoration is mesmerising. Katharina explained that many of the dolls were found with sunken eyes, loose joints, moth eaten wigs; or were scantily clothed.

"Many hours of hard handiwork and needlework were necessary to bring the toys back to their original condition," she says. "I have done everything from cleaning, mounting and stitching the dolls; it has been painstaking."

Katharina says, "The doll world is a microcosm to our world." And she is right. Her sets are diverse and all tell a





Katharina with her dolls

particular story because she has coupled the dolls with miniatures. One of her wooden doll displays, for example, told me the tale of a German family in their house, listening to the gramophone as father read the newspaper, in the early 1900s. Many of the wax doll exhibits transported me to the apothecaries and general stores of eighteenth century Europe. The paper-maché sets from the nineteenth century explained how the French and Germans dressed and lived day to day, with my favourite being a scene from a gentry kitchen. Porcelain dolls depicting art nouveau scenes from Paris transported me to the time in history that I personally find fascinating.

I was truly transfixed on the miniatures that Katharina had collected for these displays such as multi-coloured vases, telephones, golden statues and clocks. They truly represented this particular time. Katharina's collection also includes material dolls with hair made out of mohair, colourful clothes and oil painted faces as well as displays of celluloid. Some of the celluloid dolls come from the United States, Japan and other European countries such as Austria. My favourite however were the puppet exhibits. Depicting ancient religious scenes, royalty and the odd court jester, the puppets were colourful, engaging and somewhat cheeky. All of the displays tell the cultural stories

of our human existence and I learnt a great deal about earlier lifestyles, especially fashion and social mores.

The time, effort and money that Katharina has spent on her collection made my mind boggle. She truly is zealous about what she does and feels that her life-long work is not yet complete. With higher rental costs, Katharina's working days are long and sometimes worrisome, however she refuses to let this extinguish her passion.

With around 18,000 people from all over the world visiting each year, Katharina hopes to start classes where amateurs can study the history of dolls and toys. With her vast experience coupled with the fact that doll making and design has become more popular, it is the obvious next step. "My biggest joy is when the visitors comment on the museum and say it is the most beautiful museum they have ever seen," she says. "I hope to make the museum the world centre for all doll and toy enthusiasts."

Photos: Doris Haddock

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