**The Swabian Nativity Museum in Mindelheim**

At the old location, in the former Jesuit College in Mindelheim, a completely new nativity museum was created after several years of construction, furnished with a great wealth of unique objects. The starting point is the second oldest collection of nativity scenes in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, founded in 1903, which was conceived as a separate museum in 1989, the Swabian Nativity Museum. The highlights of the redesigned museum include the world’s oldest figure of the infant Jesus, the nativity crib of the Mindelheim Jesuits – which can be deemed Swabia’s “original” nativity crib, a crib which once belonged to the Bavarian royal family and many more. Visitors’ curiosity is aroused in the light of the charm and splendour of the exhibits set in scene on large or small “stages”. To complete the setting for each theme, each room of the new museum has been specially fitted and equipped with its own lighting effects.

In the new Swabian Nativity Museum, visitors follow the history of the Christmas nativity scene from the origins to the present day. They will encounter a multitude of themes:

How it all began – the birth and childhood of Jesus as told in the Bible

The world’s oldest figure if the infant Jesus and the “invention" of the “Jesulein” figures in Swabia

In keeping with the times – the themes of the nativity crib are relevant in every day and age

Lavishly decorated cribs – gold and silver, palaces

The Star of Bethlehem and the Three Kings

Baroque cribs

The nativity crib of the Mindelheim Jesuits, the “prototype” of the Swabian crib

The “Swabian nativity crib paradise” – Josef Wiegel and other master craftsmen

Everybody wants to own a nativity crib – enthusiasm in the period from 1850 to 1960, nativity cribs for kings, emperors and the Pope: Sebastian Osterrieder and other atists

The amazing nativity cribs from Munich

Bethlehem in Mindelheim – the crib of the Holy Cross Monastery

Nativity scenes for modern times

A wealth of information on the history, meaning and symbolism of the nativity scenes is conveyed via **media and hands-on stations** and in **films**. In this way, visitors can enter into a dialogue with the exhibits. Special **exhibits for children** pass on the contents in a playful way.

No other museum in Bavaria or Swabia deals with the subject of the nativity scene as comprehensively as the new, redesigned Swabian Nativity Museum, which is open all year round.

Leader:

Many nativity cribs complete with a multitude of figures, two absolute treasures, alongside contemporary works – true fans, families and culture enthusiasts will be thrilled at the sight of the lovingly-staged displays.

Text:

“This is how it all began,“ says Christian Schedler. The head of Mindelheim’s Cultural Office is carefully holding his greatest treasure in his white-gloved hands: a wooden figure, 8.5 centimetres high. Inconspicuous, but of inestimable value, as it is the oldest “Jesulein” (figure of the infant Jesus) in the world, dating from around 1300. This unique piece is the highlight of the Swabian Nativity Museum in Mindelheim.

The collection was closed to the public for four whole years; the building was renovated and rebuilt. Since October, guests have been able to visit a completely new museum with an area of 400 square metres on the first floor of the former Jesuit College. Visitors are greeted by a long grey-carpeted corridor, interrupted by two red portals. The various rooms are open to the right, interspersed with circular features and lighting elements. The collection is ordered by theme, for example the “staff” of the nativity scene is introduced in room 2. In central position, behind bullet-proof glass, is the oldest “Jesulein” figure, which found its way to Mindelheim from a monastery in Leutkirch. Loosely seated, cross-legged, one hand on the sole of its foot, one finger in its mouth – a dynamic, childlike depiction, quite untypical of its day. As Christian Schedler explains, “it was not until the year 1500 that the tradition of worshipping the Christ Child spread across the world and even to Latin America. Incidentally, the idea of removing the infant Jesus from the manger and worshipping this figure on its own originated in Swabian nunneries”.

From clay and paper to wood, from old classic to modern abstract, from folk art to fine art: 40 very different nativity cribs have been set in scene in professionally illuminated miniature landscapes for the admiration of our visitors. One example is the Munich nativity crib, a Baroque-style crib dating from 1910, originally from the small local village of Apfeltrach, or another crib, which originally belonged to the Wittelsbachs. Members of this noble family made the figures with their own hands while in exile. At the push of a button, visitors can listen to a description of how this was done, taken from personal notes by Princess Eleanore. In many of the surrounding showcases, individual figures have been selected and staged in a manner to make them come alive. In one of the rooms guests can watch a cartoon film by a Russian artist, dedicated to the theme of the Nativity, while in another, there is a cartoon drawing by a contemporary artist from Cologne. In addition, there are various listening and hands-on stations as well as peephole-boxes which draw the viewer into the scene by means of deep spatial effects.

There are no run-of-the-mill showcases. As the Head of the Nativity Museum, Friederike Haber, explains, “The museum was built up around its exhibits. Together with Christian Schedler, she has invested this museum with heart and soul, coupled wit a great deal of energy and long hours of research. It was Friederike herself who crawled around in church attics to discover long-forgotten, dust-covered figures, which she then displayed in the museum. The curators’ enthusiasm is infectious, for example when they rhapsodise on the second highlight: a standing “Jesulein” figure by Michel Erhart of Ulm, a woodcarver of the Late Gothic period, made in around 1500. Again, this valuable piece is closely guarded.

The Swabian Nativity Museum has found a perfect home in Mindelheim. 400 years ago, Jesuits came to this town, built the College and discovered the nativity crib as a medium for spreading the word about the birth of Jesus. From this point, the enthusiasm for nativity cribs travelled in all directions. Even today, the oldest and largest of Swabia’s nativity cribs is set up every year in the choir of the adjacent Jesuit church – from the first Sunday in Advent until “Lichtmess” (Candlemass, February 2). The Jesuit College is only a stone’s throw away: As Christian Schedler says, “Our museum is confusing in an exciting sense. It’s fun to get lost in it. Once you get into the spirit, it’s easy to spend a couple of hours here. Or even the whole day – like many a nativity crib enthusiast or amateur woodcarver”. We consider it to be a real highlight – certainly at Christmas time, but also all the year round!

Info:

Swabian Nativity Museum

Museums in the College building

Hermelestr. 4

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Tel. 08261/-90976-0

www.mindelheimer-museen.de

Opening hours: Open daily (except Monday) from 10 a.m. to midday and 2.00 pm to 5 p.m. Guided tours on request. Entry fee: 2.50 euros. Good to know: The museum is barrier free.