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Moving World – Steiff surprises and fascinates Special exhibition from 27 April 2021

True gems produced by the renowned and world-famous family-owned company Margarete Steiff GmbH, Giengen (Germany), are now on display at the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel. Who does not remember the moving shop window scenes during the Christmas season? They were the highlight of Christmas strolls for many people.

Such mechanical showpieces, produced for advertising purposes, can now be admired in motion. The *Wochen-Ende im Tier-Reich (Weekend in the Animal Kingdom)* is one of the show's main attractions. It was originally produced in 1928 with 47 Steiff animals. Some of these animals have special mechanical devices to enable them to move. The theme of this showpiece works equally well today.

The animals are enjoying a weekend in the wellness area. This includes a sauna visit, group gymnastics exercises, and a small boxing match. The building complex was built in a very modern style for that period, based on the Bauhaus style. The original showpiece had impressive dimensions of over five meters in length and two meters in depth.

Although best known for the invention of the teddy bear (1902), the Steiff family-owned company is one of the largest and most important doll manufacturers in the world, not least because of their diverse and artistically very valuable doll creations. From the beginnings of Steiff's doll art around 1890 until modern times, the toy manufacturer has always managed to inspire young and old with spectacular innovations and developments. A wonderful example of this extraordinary skill is the felt dolls of the showpiece *Die Mühle im Grund (The Mill in the Valley)*. You will see a good 70 old original Steiff felt dolls in idyllic rural surroundings covering about 15 square meters. This is a unique and authentic piece of European doll history, made in 1926 by the Munich doll artist and Steiff consultant Albert Schlopsnies. The miniature people consist of humorous as well as characteristically reproduced realistic village and peasant characters going about their everyday work. These two showpieces were exhibited at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago.

Furthermore, there are 13 smaller moving mechanical showpieces from Steiff on display and, in addition, some imposing showpieces such as the Teddy baby with an impressive body size of 1.5 meters and the dinosaur and the giraffe peeking out of the showcase. Don't miss it!

The charm of Steiff's mechanical showpieces

The moving worlds of the showpieces—scenes with mechanical figures—already enjoyed great popularity at the end of the 17th century. Later, the renowned company Margarete Steiff GmbH in Giengen an der Brenz in Wuerttemberg, Germany, used these moving, crowd-pleasing scenes time and again as advertising to promote itself.

One day, when the Munich-based artist Albert Schlopsnies came to the factory in Giengen to show his marionette figures, completely new opportunities opened up for both him and the Steiff

company. Richard Steiff immediately recognized Schlopsnies' masterful talent and wanted to utilize it in the development of new dolls.

In 1910, Albert Schlopsnies began working as a consultant, but was never directly employed by Steiff. He was tasked with taking care of the artistic design of showpieces, catalogues, advertising, and similar things. Although categorically rejected by his brothers, it was thanks to Richard Steiff's strong position in the company that the collaboration with Schlopsnies lasted so long.

Schlopsnies's inventiveness and skill opened a new chapter in Steiff's art of design. The assortment of character and caricature dolls was considerably expanded. The range from 1910 includes marionette-like pantomime animals that can be moved with strings, as well as immobile groups of puppets for window displays. These were the forerunners of the famous mechanical showpieces, the first of which was exhibited by the Wertheim department store in Berlin in the autumn of the same year: the great Steiff Circus. Modeled after the Sarrasani Circus, it had several rings and featured many mechanically driven dolls that imitated the movements of the circus acrobats in a nearly lifelike way.

This showpiece caused a sensation. Other large installations followed, such as *Das Grossfeuer in Dingharting (The Large Fire of Dingharting)* in 1912 and one of the most successful showpieces, *Arche Noah (Noah's Ark)*, at the Bavarian Trade Fair in Munich in 1913/14.

The show dolls used are 43 to 50 centimeters tall and are always imaginatively dressed, for example with brass helmets and a variety of accessories. The mechanical elements used are robust and durable. There are really only two types of movement, up and down or left to right. Since these two movements are used effectively in the scenes, the viewer does not notice this.

The showpieces depict everyday scenes in an original way, with the varied Steiff dolls and stuffed animals playing leading roles. These showpieces are a milestone in the success story of the Steiff company. Large department stores used them as window attractions and fascinated a wide audience. They were also attractions at retail fairs and even at world exhibitions.

To this day, countless mechanical showpieces have been created at Steiff in Giengen using traditional craftsmanship. Even today they are admired in many places by young and old.

Steiff's mechanical showpieces in the windows of large department stores still enchant passersby in city centers today. After their use, mainly during the Christmas season, they are stored at the company headquarters in Giengen an der Brenz, Germany. There, the showpieces are thoroughly checked and repaired if necessary. Animals and dolls that are showing signs of age are replaced with new ones.

For the special exhibition at the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel, all the selected mechanical showpieces were painstakingly restored by the museum team. This applies to the mechanical elements as well as the buildings, animals, and dolls. The ravages of time have, of course left their mark on the objects.

How a showpiece is created

First, the theme is chosen. Implementation is the responsibility of the design department. It defines the motif and its size, as well as adequate variants. The model carpenters first make preliminary models and the mechanics determine the movements required for the theme. The animals and dolls to be assembled are specified only after that point. The carpenters take care of all the larger structures, such as houses, fountains, and bridges. For fine decorative work and smaller components, plaster molds are filled with rubber milk (latex), a material that is more stable than polystyrene. Each individual part is painted to match. The metal elements for the mechanical elements are installed in the figures. There are basically two movements: up and down or sideways. The motors underneath the base plate drive the complex linkages to perform the movements.

It takes around five skilled workers several weeks to produce a mechanical showpiece of this kind.

Mechanical Showpiece *Die Mühle im Grund (The Mill in the Valley)*

This showpiece from 1926 is one of the most impressive works by Albert Schlopsnies. The felt dolls captivate viewers with their characteristic facial features. All aspects of village life from that time are faithfully recreated. These include the village priest talking to a parishioner, the washerwomen at the village well, the blacksmith shoeing a horse, and the unloading of flour sacks. It is assumed that some residents of Giengen served as models in the creation of the individual characters for doll designer Schlopsnies. This large mechanical showpiece was even exhibited at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Such imposing and amusing scenes were always a crowd-pleaser and were shown time and again on the widest variety of occasions.

The complete showpiece with the buildings, engines, and felt dolls was found in a garage in the USA in the late 1990s. Although the engines had certainly not run for decades, they were all still functional. The dolls also still performed the desired movements.

The original description of this showpiece was preserved in Steiff's advertising archive. It read as follows:

1926

Die Mühle im Grund (The Mill in the Valley)

A piece that in its peaceful bustle has a very unique charm. The old mill with the pond, the smithy with barn, and in the foreground the old draw well are animated by characteristically and humorously reproduced peasant characters. The whole miniature population, together with its surroundings, is so lifelike in structure and color that every viewer is immediately drawn into the spell of the events taking place with delicious humor. The illusion becomes complete when the mill wheel begins to rattle, a heavy sack is pulled into the mill, the fisherman gets to work, and the washerwomen labor tirelessly at the well trough. The scene is entirely vibrant and lively. The old blacksmith is shoeing a horse that wants to strike out with his foot and the barn echoes with the beat of the flails. But the funniest thing is the stubborn donkey on the bridge and his master with the whip. The shimmering green water in the mill pond, which receives waves from a propeller, and the splashing of the fountain give the whole scene a cozy atmosphere. A solid mechanism moves the figures so true to life that the piece has an unusually strong advertising effect.

The piece stands on a podium of 530 x 240 x 60 cm and has a maximum height of 250 cm including the podium.

The product is shipped completely ready to plug into a power outlet and operate after a long period of testing. The bearings must be oiled frequently and the engine must be switched off from time to time. Specify the type of current and voltage when ordering.

Mechanical Showpiece *Wochen-Ende im Tier-Reich (Weekend in the Animal Kingdom)*

This showpiece is a very special piece. The theme is incredibly modern and contemporary. The buildings are also extremely unusual for Steiff. All other known showpieces depicted rather rural scenes and did not involve modern architectural styles.

The original animals from this showpiece were found together with the complete showpiece *Die Mühle im Grund (The Mill in the Valley)* in a garage in the USA. Unfortunately, however, all of the parts of the building were missing.

After extensive research in the advertising archives of Steiff in Giengen, an original photo of the complete showpiece *Wochen-Ende im Tier-Reich* from 1928 was discovered. All the buildings were meticulously recreated by Steiff's experts based on this picture for the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel.

By the way, the German word "Wochenende" first appeared in the early 20th century as a translation of the English word "weekend". The pig enjoys a hot air bath at the Institute of Body Care. There's a lot going on at the sports field. Three elephants train for a slim waistline, the two Bullys (dogs) keep fit by boxing and the three Pip (dogs) strengthen their muscles by doing torso bends.

We stumbled upon the original advertising text for this showpiece in Steiff's advertising archive:

1928

Wochen-Ende im Tier-Reich (Weekend in the Animal Kingdom)

Mechanical showpiece

Weekend ... has been a catchword for a long time, the content of which promises everyone their deserved relaxation and recreation. Weekend is an affair for young and old.

Using new animal figures, brand button in the ear, a Steiff showpiece has been created, which is absolutely effective just with its exterior appearance due to the modern architectural style. But the content itself, this freshly conceived, humorous life, gives, even if partly grotesque, a faithful picture of a joyful weekend. If movement alone commands attention, movement in this original form produces an advertising effect of the grandest style.

The piece contains 37 figures with 27 movements, as well as two animals. It rests on a stable podium of 530 x 220 cm, at a height of 60 cm. The back wall is made of blue fabric. The total height including podium is 290 cm. It is powered by an electric motor of 1/3 hp.

The product is shipped completely ready to plug into a power outlet and operate after a long period of testing. The quality design of the mechanical elements requires almost no maintenance. It merely consists of frequently oiling the bearings and checking the belts for tension.

*To protect the motor, switch it off for rest periods from time to time.
Specify the type of current and voltage when ordering.*

Company history of Margarete Steiff GmbH, Giengen an der Brenz, Germany

Margarete Steiff (1847–1909), who contracted polio as a little girl and remained severely disabled throughout her life, fought against many odds to find her place in life.

When she offered the first softly stuffed, hand-sewn toy animals, such as the *Elefäntle* (*little elephant*), in her felt clothing store in 1880, she simultaneously laid the foundation for a global company whose success continues to this day.

On 24 July 1847, Apollonia Margarete Steiff was born as the third daughter of the master builder Friedrich Steiff and his wife Maria Margarete. For 18 months, little Margarete's life was unremarkable; she was a happy, healthy child. Shortly after the birth of her brother Fritz, however, at the end of 1849, she developed a high fever. She was slow to recover and, to the family's horror, suffered permanent damage. She could practically no longer move her legs, and only barely move her right arm. Neither therapies nor cures or even operations helped; the paralysis remained. The diagnosis was polio, a virtually unexplored disease at the time, and one for which there were no treatments.

Although she could only operate a sewing machine from what is actually the wrong side because of her paralysis, Margarete quickly became very productive. With a lot of ambition and the support of her sisters, she became a perfect seamstress over the years. She also learned to play the zither, so well that she was even able to give lessons.

The Steiff sisters bought a sewing machine together, the first in Giengen, and opened a ladies' tailor shop. The sewing of ladies' and children's dresses was mainly the responsibility of the youngest, Margarete. Although she had trouble powering the sewing machine with her right arm, she didn't give up. Now 17 years old, she had come to terms with her illness. With the moral and financial support of a felt manufacturer she knew, the tailor shop became a felt clothing business in 1877. Business was going well. Margarete Steiff was able to employ several people and invest further. Soon a small factory was established. The girl with the seemingly hopeless future had become a successful businesswoman.

In 1880, the first *Steiff animal* was created, a small elephant made of felt called the *Elefäntle*, which was intended to serve as a pincushion.

It was received with enormous enthusiasm, especially among children. They would prefer to never let go of these soft animals. Almost all toys back then were made of hard materials such as wood and porcelain, so you couldn't *cuddle* with them. Shortly after Christmas, she sold seven *Elefäntle* and started stockpiling the animals. In 1883, there was an entry on the back of her price list that indicates a new development at the company: *Children's toys made of felt, indestructible and safe. Elephants with colorful saddles.*

In 1886, 5170 such elephants were sold and more animals were added to the range. In the meantime, Margaret's brother now took care of the sales.

Steiff grew and in 1892 the first Steiff dolls were produced. The range included 21 different types of dolls, mainly couples in traditional costumes, but also sailors, gardeners, and shepherds.

The company became more and more famous. In 1894, the annual turnover amounted to 90,000 marks and in 1897, the company was represented for the first time with a booth at the Leipzig Trade Fair. Since 1897/1898, the *elephant* has been used as a trademark, as competitors were always trying to imitate their products.

When Richard Steiff, Fritz's second son, joined the company, the toy factory began to turn into a family business. Even at a young age, Margarete, who would have liked to have had children herself, and her brother's six sons and three daughters were very close.

She treated them with gentleness and humor. All six sons joined the company one after the other. The close family ties gave Margarete strength in the years that followed. Margarete always maintained a warm atmosphere; she was both boss and friend to her employees. The social benefits she provided were also exemplary for those times. Employees received meal vouchers for the surrounding restaurants.

By 1902, a new building had to be considered again. Richard Steiff, Margarete's nephew, envisioned an unconventional building: an inexpensive construction made of iron and glass. The first glass building was built in the spring of 1903. In the vernacular, it soon became known as the *Jungfrauenaquarium (Virgin Aquarium)*. This refers to the predominantly single young women who worked in this light-filled building. The factory building was built to be accessible for disabled people and had an access ramp for the company manager's wheelchair. A second glass building followed a few years later. These two glass buildings were far ahead of their time. They are still used today by the Steiff company and are listed as historical monuments.

In 1903, Richard Steiff presented the bear he had developed at the Leipzig Trade Fair. The buyers were not really enthusiastic about this first bear with a rotating head and movable limbs, fur made of mohair plush, and shoe-button eyes, and besides, it was too expensive for them.

Margarete Steiff was also very skeptical about this new bear, but Richard Steiff was able to persuade her to give this strange bear a try. It is reported that an American showed up at the booth at the last minute and bought the entire bear collection. These 3000 pieces are considered lost to this day. The follow-up model, the slimmer *Bär 35 PB*, became a bestseller.

From November 1904, a metal button with an embossed elephant was attached to every Steiff product. The term *button in the ear* became a trademark, and later the word *Steiff* replaced the elephant motif.

Margarete Steiff often sewed new models herself, but she was becoming visibly more tired. She often just sat at the window of her apartment and watched the goings-on in the company. On May 9, 1909, Margarete Steiff died at the age of 61 as a result of pneumonia.

Throughout her life, Margarete Steiff paid strict attention to impeccable quality. Her motto was *Only the best is good enough for children!* The company is still committed to that slogan today.

Facts & Figures

Opening hours

Museum, Tuesday to Sunday from 10 to 18

Museum, in December, daily from 10 to 18

Ristorante La Sosta and Boutique, daily from 9.30 to 18

The Swiss Museum Pass and the Museum-PASS are valid for the *Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel*.

Admission

CHF 7.00/5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are free when accompanied by an adult.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The building is accessible by wheelchair.

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