



HANDMADE TREASURES

The magic of making Christmas decorations



The decorations are completely handmade, so every piece is an original.

There are many things you can decorate your Christmas tree with, but perhaps the most popular ones are glass balls of various sizes. They were first produced in Germany in the 19th century, and making them has a long tradition in the Czech lands as well. Bridge visited Ozdoba CZ, a family-run business in Dvůr Králové nad Labem, which has produced handmade glass Christmas decorations for several generations.

How it all started

At the beginning of the 20th century, Václav Berger, the great-grandfather of the current owners of the business, travelled around neighbouring villages selling coal. He noticed that many local farmers were making glass beads¹ imitating real pearls to earn extra money. He helped them sell the glass pearls and soon started his own business. Even when he was far from home during the First World War he didn't stop – he sent letters to his wife, with instructions such as “you can pay two **halers**² more to those who work hard”. In the 1930s, he started making glass Christmas decorations.

The company grew and after some years it was exporting the decorations all over

the world. It is hardly surprising that such a prosperous business **was put under state ownership**³ after the communists took over in 1948. It was returned, devastated, to the Berger family after the Velvet Revolution, with almost nothing to build on except respect for traditions.

It takes at least one day to make a glass ball.

Nowadays, despite the competition from cheap, low-quality Christmas decorations from China, the company is here to remind us of our homeland traditions, to keep them alive and spread them abroad.

Working with glass

Glass decorations produced by Ozdoba CZ are made in the traditional way. A **glassblower**⁴ takes a glass tube, heats it over a **gas burner**⁵ and blows a glass bubble of the required size. The job requires talent and great skill.



A MOLE OR A PENGUIN?

Martin Jukl and his wife Romana Juklová now run the company that was established by Martin's ancestors¹³.

Are you sometimes surprised by which decorations are the most successful?

M. Jukl: All the time! Customers are so **unpredictable**¹⁴. And tastes also differ from country to country. Czechs would say, “You must have gone crazy to paint a beach and **starfish**¹⁵ on a Christmas ball!” But Californians love it because such things are part of their everyday reality.

Which colours have become popular recently?

R. Juklová: Apart from the traditional ones, people often ask for champagne (light **beige**¹⁶) as it looks elegant. When home decorators in popular TV programmes say that black and white is trendy, people ask for grey balls, decorated with white.

Are people abroad interested in any typically Czech figurines?

RJ: For example, I've just received an order for the Little Mole in yellow trousers plus balls with British flags. But you know what? They called the Little Mole a penguin! We explained to them that it was a mole, but still they insisted on a penguin. A cultural difference? By the way, we have produced penguins, too.

Do you have any special wish for Christmas?

RJ: **Skilful**¹⁷ people to add to our team, even students – especially glassblowers! Do you know of anyone who'd be willing to try?



Believe it or not, one of the most popular shapes for export to Italy is that of a **cucumber**¹⁸. Italians supposedly associate it with good luck.

If you want to spend Christmas with your favourite childhood heroes, you can hang the Little Mole or Spejbl and Hurvínek on your tree.

Decorations shaped as the traditional red phone booths will surely make your tree look totally British.

Surprisingly, the **jellyfish**¹⁹ design was successful not only in countries with the sea but also in the Czech Republic.

A hippo on a Christmas tree? If you think that it would make sense only somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, remember the funny song "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas".

If you want a decoration of a different shape, you keep the soft glass in a special **clay mould**⁶ while blowing it. The **descendants**⁷ of Václav Berger still use the old moulds from the first half of the 20th century (for example, the traditional nut shape) as well as modern ones (for example, the figure of the popular Little Mole – Krteček).

The clear glass balls still have a long way to go before they are packed for the customer. First you need to silver the glass to make it shiny and **opaque**⁸. Surprisingly, you do it from the inside. **Silver nitrate**⁹ is poured into the balls. Watching this process is like watching a magician in action. However, the strong chemical smell makes it quite demanding work. Still it is not as dangerous as it was in the past when chemicals might even explode.

The next step is colouring, when the balls are **dipped in**¹⁰ paint of various colours.

Red, white and gold are all-time favourites in the Czech Republic.

Finishing touches

Then it is time to 'dress' the ball – by decorating it with painted designs, **glitter**¹¹ or other materials, such as feathers used for birds' tails. Finally, you put on a tiny metal cap with a **loop**¹² to hang the ball on a tree. As we were told, the loop we still use today was actually designed by one of Václav Berger's descendants. It takes at least one day to make the ball and 'dress it up' for the Christmas celebration, perhaps in your living room.

Zuzana Pernicová, Jana Pernicová (CR)

Thanks to Martin Jukl, Romana Juklová and other people at Ozdoba CZ for showing us around their workshop and all the interesting stories they shared.

➔ **Read more and see more pictures on the Bridge website ('Studenti – Extra články' section).**

EXHIBITION



BRINGING CHRISTMAS TO LIFE

Christmas without nativity scenes would be like a hot summer day without ice cream. If you like them at least a bit you should go to the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. There's an exhibition of nativity scenes and some of them are truly unusual! Some are painted, others are carved (= cut into wood) and some are even baked! The creators are the famous Czech artists Mikoláš Aleš, Josef Lada, Krteček's creator Zdeněk Miler and many more. The exhibition will last until January 2, 2012.



This is a Mexican Nativity scene in the form of the tree of life.

MEXICAN CHRISTMAS

Mexicans like to have nativity scenes during Christmas as well! Nativity scenes or *nacimientos* as they call them are the most important Christmas decorations. You can learn more about them and other Mexican traditions at the current exhibition in Náprstkovo Museum, just opposite the Bethlehem Chapel. The exhibition is called 'Veselí kostlivci' and shows Czech and Mexican autumn and winter traditions. The exhibition will last until March 4, 2012.

VOCABULARY

¹ **bead** [bi:d] – korálek

² **haler** – haléř (0,01 Kč)

³ **to put under state ownership** – znárodnit

⁴ **glassblower** [glɑ:s'bləʊə] – foukač skla

⁵ **gas burner** [gæs 'bɜ:nə] – plynový hořák

⁶ **clay mould** [kleɪ məʊld] – keramická forma

⁷ **descendant** [di'send(ə)nt] – potomek, následovník

⁸ **opaque** [ə(w)'peɪk] – neprůhledný

⁹ **silver nitrate** ['sɪlvə 'naɪtreɪt] – dusičnan stříbrný

¹⁰ **to dip in** – namočit do

¹¹ **glitter** ['glɪtə] – třpytivý prach

¹² **loop** [lu:p] – očko

¹³ **ancestor** ['ænsəstə] – předek, předchůdce

¹⁴ **unpredictable** [ʌnpri'dɪktəb(ə)] – nepředvídatelný

¹⁵ **starfish** ['stɑ:ʃɪ] – (mořská) hvězdice

¹⁶ **beige** [beɪʒ, beɪdʒ] – béžový

¹⁷ **skilful** ['skɪlfʊl, -f(ə)] – šikovný

¹⁸ **cucumber** ['kju:kəmbə] – okurka

¹⁹ **jellyfish** ['dʒelɪʃɪ] – medúza

AME X BRE

Christmas ball (AmE) – Christmas bauble (BrE)