

In 1808, master lathe-turner Christian Fischer began carving egg-cups, needle boxes, serviette rings and various similar items. Very soon, he started to instruct and employ others in his craft; this marked the advent of the woodcarving industry in Brienz.

Today, many artisans both young and old still carry on the traditional craft of woodcarving.

### **The history of woodcarving in and around Brienz**

Situated in the Bernese Oberland, close to the geographical centre of Switzerland, Brienz has been a cradle of carved artefacts for a long time.

The beginnings of woodcarving in Switzerland are lost in the mists of time, but we know that as far back as medieval times, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, churches, houses and articles of daily use were embellished with carvings: The rugged mountains, deep lakes and lush forests have always inspired farmers and craftsmen alike to try to express in various forms the beauty surrounding them. The ample supply of suitable wood and the long, dark winter evenings provided the basics for a popular handicraft.

It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that this art began to become a means of income for the local populace.

The beginning of this process is associated with a man called Christian Fischer (1790 – 1848), who is said to have started selling carved bowls and other articles of daily use about 200 years ago. In 1816, he began to carve figures and animals. His ever increasing range of products sold well, mostly to (British) tourists. With the growth of tourism, the sales of woodcarvings increased, too. Christian Fischer encouraged young people to become woodcarvers and taught them in his workshop. Other people took up the profession as well, and after the international fairs of 1851 and 1859 in London, Brienz woodcarvings became world famous. In 1862, a modelling and drawing school was established in Brienz, and today this institution, the Cantonal Woodcarving School, is the only one of its kind in Switzerland to teach carving in a four year course. The help of this institution, as well as the determined efforts of many artists –famous and forgotten – were required to get the trade through the two world wars and the crisis-ridden times in between.

In the context of our company, we certainly must mention Johann Huggler (1834 – 1912), who was known of as the “King of Carvers” of Brienz. The few statues and groups of his which survive until this day pay homage to the mastery with which he carved animal and human figures.

He recognised the talent of his son Hans Huggler (1877 – 1947), to whom he provided the best education available at the time (Academy of Art in Munich). Hans Huggler returned to Brienz to become a teacher at the Woodcarving School, but teaching alone was too limiting for this innovative artist and soon his workshop grew into the leading enterprise in the industry.

With both an eye for good proportions and correct anatomy and a good sense of humour, Hans Huggler created almost archetypal figures of the people around him; farmers, tourists, artisans etc., which are sold to this day. In 1915, he also designed the first nativity scenes, using “real” people around him as his inspiration for the holy family, kings, shepherds etc.

His philosophy of artistic harmony in design and highest quality in craftsmanship is upheld into the present by our company. Fritz Fuchs-Stähli, born 1943, is the current artistic director of our firm, with which he has been associated since 1959. He is acknowledged as being one of Switzerland's best “figurists” (carvers specialising in human figures). Thanks to him and other master-craftsmen, we are still in a position not only to maintain our standard of quality,

but to further strengthen our position as Switzerland's leading company producing hand-carved figures of original design.

Article by Huggler Woodcarvings Ltd.