

Miners' traditions still thriving today

UNESCO World Heritage Erzgebirge/Krušnohoří mining region: varied customs and unique folk art

For over 850 years, mining in the Erzgebirge shaped a society with its own customs and practices. It's a culture that survives to this day and a great deal of care goes into keeping it alive. Miners' parades, "Mettenschicht" celebrations, songs and folk art are just some of the unique traditions found in the mining region.

Everything comes from the mine: traditions that grew out of mining communities

As far back as the Middle Ages, miners began to organise themselves into miners' guilds. In this way, they were able to represent their interests to the mine owners and local territorial lords. Their aim was to secure the welfare of the miners and their families in the event of illness, accident or death. The two oldest associations still in existence today are the "Berggrabebrüderschaft Ehrenfriedersdorf" (1338) and the "Historische Freiburger Berg- und Hüttenknappschaft e. V." (1426).

Miners' associations created their own rituals and traditions, which were strongly influenced by the Lutheran Church and state centralisation of mining from the 16th century onwards. A diverse array of church and school music as well as miners' music developed over this time as well. The "Steigerlied" originated in Schneeberg and is the anthem of miners worldwide. Every mining town plays its own mining march for the procession on festival days.

In 1546, the Elector of Saxony even became the first member of the miners' associations. The associations participated in the court festivities of the Wettin dynasty until well into the 19th century. A historical highlight was the "Saturnfest" (1719), which took place during the reign of August the Strong. High-ranking mining officials as well as 1,500 miners and smelters took part, dressed in specially designed uniforms. A dress code was introduced in 1768 to establish the military style of the miners' uniforms and processions.

Miners' parades and processions: cultural heritage unlike any other in the world

Locals and visitors can witness this at the miners' parades that take place at Christmas and at annual festivals, for example the "Bergstadtfest" in Freiberg (last weekend in June) and the "Bergstreittag" (Miners' Dispute Day) in Schneeberg (21 July). Saxony's regional federation of miner, pitman and smelters societies consists of 65 associations from Saxony and the Czech Republic with over 3,500 members. These include the miners' music bands. The music corps of the mining town of Schneeberg serves as the regional music corps for Saxony and is involved in all the official celebrations of the state. In 2016, Saxony's miners' parades and processions were included in Germany's Nationwide Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Folk art and Christmas tradition: the light of the miners

One of the best-known traditions of the Erzgebirge is the wood art inspired by mining motifs. As the mining industry began to decline in some places in the 17th/18th centuries, families were forced to come up with alternative sources of income. Typical examples included wood-carving and wood-turning, and textile work such as bobbin lace-making and passementerie (dress trimmings).

The typical ensemble of Christmas decorations found in the Erzgebirge is still manufactured and distributed across the world by many businesses, usually family-run: miner and angel figurines, nutcrackers and "Räuchermännchen" (incense burning figurines), "Weihnachtskrippen" (nativity scenes) and mine models, illuminated pyramids and "Schwibbögen" (candle arches) to decorate windows. Candle arches symbolise the old mining custom of placing candles over the mouth of

the mine or on the colliery house so that they formed an arc of light during the last shift before Christmas, the "Mettenschicht". "Mettenschicht" ceremonies are held at the "Zinngrube Ehrenfriedersorf" tin mine, the "Markus-Röhlings-Stolln" adit near Annaberg-Buchholz, the "Pferdegöpel Lauta" horse whin in Marienberg and at the "Zinnwald" visitors' mine.

Museums for folk art: preserving for the next generations

Evidence of the historical roots of the mining tradition is preserved in the prestigious folk art collections of Freiberg's City and Mining Museum and the Factory of Dreams in Annaberg-Buchholz. The Museum for Mining Folk Art in Schneeberg exhibits the carving and bobbin lace traditions that are so deeply rooted in the lives of the mining community. Those interested in folk culture and what everyday life was like for the miners will enjoy a visit to the Museum of Saxon/Bohemian Erzgebirge at the "Bergmagazin" (mining store house) in Marienberg.