



RAZOR- SHARP ART



Brienz wood carving is a global brand. The artworks created by local craftspeople are in high demand, with some figurines fetching premium prices at auction. We're on our way to visit a man who knows all about making those beautiful crib figures, and who teaches others how to make them: Markus Flück is head of the Brienz School of Wood Carving and himself a sculptor by profession.

It's about ten minutes' walk from Brienz station to the school. Time well spent, as the route through the picturesque chalet village leads past various shop windows. For those who love wood crafts there's plenty to feast their eyes on. Maria, Joseph, the shepherds and their flock, the three kings and countless other biblical figures are all lined up. Brienz is famous for the artfully crafted figurines that feature in cribs around the world; it's a tradition that goes back several generations.

Where there's carved wood there must be wood carvers, that much is clear. But not many know that there is a dedicated training centre for wood crafts right here in Brienz. The school is led by Markus Flück, a young artist who inherited a talent for wood carving along with his great-grandfather's tools. Flück was born here and, given that he specialises in a local traditional craft, you could be forgiven for thinking he hasn't seen much of the world. In fact the opposite is true. Well-educated and open-minded, Flück travelled extensively before coming back to live and work in Brienz. Many of his relatives veered towards working with metal, specifically as plumbers, but Flück was always drawn to wood — so there was finally someone in the family who could inherit great-grandfather Stähli's vast collection of tools. This included no less than 200 chisels in all shapes and sizes. Cooks, surgeons and wood carvers — they all rely on a sharp blade — and as any professional knows, this means taking excellent care of your tools.

Markus Flück was never in doubt as to what career he might pursue. From early on, he had a natural talent for the figurative and for drawing. After his time at school he went straight into a four-year apprenticeship in wood sculpting. And not just anywhere: Flück managed to get a placement at Huggler, Brienz's most acclaimed wood carving workshop. The Huggler family has been producing beautiful figurines for over 100 years and exports them to all corners of the globe. Markus learnt his skills the hard way, working long days for an hourly wage of



18 Swiss francs. When he became more adept at carving, he was able to choose a contract that included payment per piece. "Diligence pays. If you're good and fast, you can carve 30 Josephs all in a row."

Flück was ambitious and still is today. He was determined to keep expanding his skills. As soon as he had some money saved up, he went off, across the pond, to San Diego and to Philadelphia University for advanced studies in art. "I certainly didn't think that this second phase of learning and experience gathering would see me ending up back in Brienz," Flück laughs. The best laid plans of mice and men ... Colleagues at home drew his attention to the job advert — Brienz was seeking a new director for the wood carving school. Founded in 1884, the institution exerts a magical appeal like no other.

And so things took their course. He came, saw and got the job. For four years now, Markus Flück has been head of Brienz Wood Carving school, where 24 registered students are training to become sculptors. Others come to the school to attend vocational courses in wood turning or white cooperage, which teaches the skills to make the traditional equipment found in alpine dairies, such as butter churns and milk pails. The school also provides training in wickerwork and basket weaving, as well as cooperage craft for wine making. Flück likes to keep his hand in: "Four fifths of my time I'm in the office, running the school, but ten percent I spend teaching, so I don't lose touch with what's happening on the ground." That leaves another ten percent, and those are entirely his. That's when he devotes himself to his own artwork, and it's not the chisel and mallet he then reaches for, but a chainsaw. He likes to work on a large scale. When starting on a log, he first sets to with hatchet and axe, then the chainsaw comes into play. With an unerring eye, Markus Flück slices his way into his favourite material, a large tree trunk from the local woodland. (rw)

Further reading: Schweizer Handwerkskunst, Orell Füssli Verlag, Zürich, 2016, ISBN 978-3-280-05627-1, ofv.ch

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