



hansel + gretel set ★
witch is 4½" tall
 4066 • \$46.90



little red riding hood set ★
grandma is 5¼" tall
 4062 • \$47.90



snow white + the 7 dwarves ★
snow white is 4½" tall
 4073 • \$94.90

ENGELBERGER

 MADE IN GERMANY



There is something both magical and terrifying about riding the European rails. The simplicity and efficiency of moving through the German countryside without the need to understand the connections between places is coupled with the fear of missing the right stop as each is droned through the scratchy crackle of an intercom. My German is adequate, but not perfect, and there is more than one stop on this route that sounds to my untrained ear like my destination, Göppingen.

Luckily, I make out the names and get off at the right station. I ring up Herr Michael Engelberger to let him know I've arrived. Standing outside, I wait, not really knowing what I'm watching out for. I mean, what does a person who engages in the traditional art of carving and painting wooden figures look like? I imagine a stooped and wizened figure with nearsighted eyes from years of finely detailed work; someone lifted from the fairy tales that inspire many of his figures.

I am surprised when he presents himself. Hale, lively and jolly, he is more a showman and salesman than a cloistered artist. It is clear, though, that he is as committed to his artform as he is to his business. Becoming animated when describing his work, values and the company he has built in the years since he parted ways with Ostheimer, he takes pride in drawing distinctions both in the quality of the figures he produces and the practice of his business.

His commitment to the continual improvement of his figures is evident early in our conversation, when I show him a copy of our catalog. He immediately takes me to task for using a photo of our Baby Forest Animals that isn't showing the most current version of the bear cub. "You see these ears?" he asks. "Let me show you something."

Following him, we descend into his basement workshop where the transformation of raw wood to toy occurs. He pulls out of a box a newly finished bear cub. "This is the new design," he begins. "The ears are round, like a real bear cub." He cups his hands over his head to illustrate. It is a small detail, but clearly not minor for a man unwilling to rest on his laurels.

Still in the basement, I ask to see the whole process, from plank to plaything. He obliges me, showing me every step excepting the first—wood selection. Only the highest quality, whitest planks of the Linden tree go into his figures and for this he depends on dealers he has worked with for years to hand select the raw material.

Once he has the wood in his shop, he hand stamps the outline of the figure on the plank. Using a band saw, he precisely follows the outline, yielding a blank. Engelberger's figures are three dimensional, so he sets it on the cut edge and trims off material as needed. I ask him how he can do it so precisely. He grunts and pulls a micrometer from his breast pocket. Measuring it, he has trimmed to within 0.5mm of the ideal width—by hand, eye and experience!

Next comes shaping, which is done with a special sanding machine. It uses a high-speed rotating disc and dust collector to remove material quickly. As he moves the piece around the disc skillfully, it comes to life. Then it's into the tumbling sander with its brethren, where each piece is sanded by the action of sandpaper and blocks of wood. Removed after 30 minutes or so, each is ready for hand painting, by brush and airbrush. Later, Herr Engelberger confides to me that when it's hot in the summer, he takes the airbrushing operation outside so he can cool off in the pool as each layer of paint dries.

I am intrigued by the arduous nature of the work and ask him how it is that he alone can produce so many wooden figures. With a twinkle in his eye, he assures me that he is not the only woodworker producing the figures, but that he has a network of craftsmen, each of whom is a specialist charged with a few designs.

Maintaining the tradition, improving the product, employing local people. This is the commitment that Michael Engelberger brings to everything his business does. It is the reason that, even as other German firms outsource their production to Eastern Block countries with lower standards and wages, he ensures that his products can continue to bear a stamp proudly: Made in Germany.

—Jason Miller