

Our Christmas Tree: A Success Story Born at the ALBERTINA Museum

It was on Christmas Eve of 1823, with the whole city cloaked deeply in snow, that a decorated Christmas tree first stood in today's ALBERTINA Museum —founding a new tradition that eventually spread to all of Austria.

Christmas trees, originally the Protestant counterpart to the Catholic crèche, began appearing in Austria during the early 1800s—initially in private households and salons such as that of Fanny von Arnstein.

The decorated conifer only broke through to broader public prominence in Austria on that snowy Christmas of 1823 at the archducal palace, today's ALBERTINA Museum, from where it ultimately went forth to be embraced in every corner of the land.

1823 marked the first time that Princess Henriette of Nassau-Weilburg, the wife of Archduke Carl, celebrated Christmas together with her children in the audience chamber of this lordly palace (which they had inherited in 1822). To her children's delight and in keeping with a time-honored tradition of German Protestants, Princess Henriette had what was then commonly called a "grass tree" put up.

Protestant Custom in a Catholic Imperial House

Christmas Eve saw the archducal family gather before this new sort of tree, one richly decorated with gingerbread, confections, apples, nuts, and aromatic wax candles. Among their guests was Archduke Carl's brother, the frugal-minded Archduke Johann, who bemoaned such opulence and excess and was also quite taken aback by the absence of the traditional Catholic crèche.

Emperor Francis I, having learned of this magnificently decorated first Imperial-Royal Christmas tree in the palace of his brother Archduke Carl, decided to put up a Christmas tree of his own at the Vienna Hofburg in 1824. And with that, the Christmas tree had become "acceptable at court"—paving the way for its triumphal entry into Austrian Christmas tradition.

Vienna's first sellers of Christmas trees to the general public appeared in 1829 at the city gate known as the Schottentor—and by 1851, contemporary witnesses tell us, the pre-Christmas appearance of the square Am Hof had come to resemble a forest while numerous trees were also for sale in the then-suburb of Mariahilf.

In our present time, a Christmas tree is once again put up in the Albertina's State Rooms and decorated in a traditional manner every Christmas season—commemorating that December day in 1823 and Austria's most important Christmas tree of all...

