

# A Christmas Tradition

## Nutcrackers on Display at Allegany Museum, Cumberland, Maryland



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**Lincoln, Reagan, and Julian McKay (left to right)**  
display just a few of the various sized Nutcrackers  
on display at the Allegany Museum.

Christmas of 1974 was an exciting time for my family. My father Gary, mother Janet and I had recently moved from our small third floor apartment at 400 Washington Street to a larger space on the first floor. The bigger rooms allowed more opportunity to decorate for the holidays

with a brand new seven-foot tree and ornaments both new and old. Many of these came from my paternal grandparents Hugh and Mildred Bartik, including two nutcrackers who looked very regal presiding over our festivities from the living room mantle with their soldiers'



Some of the over 1,000 nutcrackers from Gary Bartik's collection that will be displayed at the Allegheny Museum. The majority shown here are Steinbach's.

**Inset:** The oldest nutcracker in Gary's collection is pre-WWII, hand carved by a German master woodcarver.

uniforms and grimaced faces. Our decorations were not the grandest on a street known for its extravagant displays of greenery and lights, but they were the most beautiful thing my four-year-old eyes had ever seen. And those two nutcrackers? They were the start of something big.

During the rest of the 1970s my father sporadically added to his nutcracker collection, occasionally finding one in a gift or antique shop. Nutcrackers became popular in America during the late 1940s when the G.I.s brought them home after World War II, but their appeal quickly faded because most were produced in the Erzgebirge region of East Germany and they became difficult to get when that area was closed off from the west, so collectors quickly lost interest.

The 1980s were a much better time for nutcrackers. My father's interest was rekindled



and he was able to grow his collection rapidly for two reasons. First, Cold War hostilities had thawed between East and West Germany, so trade regulations eased. The Berlin Wall came down, and the colorful nutcrackers from the Erzgebirge workshops of Steinbach and other crafters flowed freely into the West and onto American mantles. Second, in 1984 my Mother brought home "the one" from a mall gift shop. He was a fierce Viking complete with horned helmet, spear, wooly beard and piercing eyes. This was the perfect gift, combining my father's love of Norse history and Christmas decorations. He was overjoyed when he opened this very special



**Ericableu Bartik with a few favorite nutcrackers from her collection.**

gift on Christmas morning and decided to start collecting again.

Over the next three decades our home was filled with nutcrackers of all shapes and sizes in various costumes, from bakers and bowlers to soldiers and Santas. A college trip to Europe and a summer job at Busch Gardens enabled me to purchase some of my father's first Steinbachs. Much as my family loved the nutcrackers, eventually there were too many to display at home, so my father began showing them at public venues such as libraries for everyone to see, and maybe even capture a little of the excitement my family felt in 1974.

Today, I have a small nutcracker collection of my own and I'm always on the lookout for them in my travels. My father still loves sharing his collection. It has grown to over a thousand and will be on display at the Allegany Museum November 25th through December 30th. You are cordially invited to visit and share this treasured holiday tradition with your family.

**Allegany Museum**  
**3 Pershing St., Cumberland, MD**  
**[www.alleganymuseum.org](http://www.alleganymuseum.org)**

## Nutcrack History

The first nutcrackers were simple metal tools that were used throughout Europe as early as 200 AD. They didn't change much until the 17<sup>th</sup> century when a farmer in Germany's Erzgebirge region held a contest to see if anyone could come up with a more efficient way to crack nuts. The winner was a puppeteer who had created a wooden doll with strong jaws and a levered mouth. People liked this quicker method to break open nuts for their holiday celebrations, and the wooden nutcrackers became a staple in German homes over the next 100 years.

By the mid-1800s nutcrackers found their way into popular culture. They were associated with good luck and abundance, probably because nuts were considered a delicacy. Nutcrackers were often given as Christmas gifts and became more elaborate. The simple wooden dolls began to sport fancy dress and colorful painted faces. E.T.A. Hoffman took notice of this trend and made it the subject of his short story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. The composer, Peter Tchaikovsky, admired Hoffman's work and adapted the story into a ballet that premiered in 1892. *The Nutcracker Suite* ballet has remained popular with audiences ever since.

The expansion of woodworking factories such as Steinbach in Erzgebirge made it possible to export nutcrackers to the rest of Europe.

Although nutcrackers had long been popular in Germany, they were slow to catch on in America. Soldiers returning from WWII often brought back a nutcracker in a soldier's dress uniform as a memento. However, because Erzgebirge where most nutcrackers were made was in East Germany, exports slowed and nutcrackers didn't flood the American market until the 1980s when the Berlin wall fell. Once trade opened with the west, companies like Steinbach were eager to export their wares and nutcrackers became common Christmas decorations in this country. Original designs resembled soldiers and kings that are still popular today, but modern designs include whimsical characters along with animals and well-known personalities. The best are hand painted, take as many as 130 pieces to create and are prized for their craftsmanship.

