Live evergreens have been used indoors during the Christmas season for centuries, and decorated Christmas trees were first recorded in Germany in the mid-17th Century (Hart et al. 1990). Early seasonal decorations consisted, in part, of “edibles”: real fruits and nuts, gingerbread cookies, candies, peanuts, apples, and even popcorn. But during the early 1800s, the Germans in the mountainous region of northern Bavaria, in a town named Lauscha, developed the skill of glassblowing, at first producing glass beads for the millinery trade, and later, round glass ornaments called “kugels” (in German, it means “ball”), which were the earliest Christmas glass ornaments. In 1867, a gas works was built in Lauscha that provided not only a reliable source of fuel for glassmaking, but also a steady and adjustable flame, which allowed glassblowers to produce thin-walled, delicate glass items (Snyder 1985).

The skills of the Lauschan glassblowers rapidly increased, and they soon developed the first mouth-blown molded glass figural ornaments, creating elaborate images that reflected their day-to-day lives. By 1930, more than 2,000 homes and 6,000 people in Lauscha and the immediate area were engaged in the glass ornament trade (Snyder 1985). Between 1870 and 1940, the people crafted more than 5,000 glass molds.

The craftsmen heated a clear glass tube over a flame to exactly the right temperature and inserted it into a plaster-of-Paris figural mold. The father of the house (Rogers and Hawkins 1983) then blew air into the exposed end of the tube to expand the glass, forcing the glass to take the shape of the mold. It was cooled, removed from the mold, and a silver nitrate solution was swirled inside the hollow glass form to give it a bright, silver glow (this silver nitrate solution was perfected by glassblowers).
ers in 1870). Members of the family, including children, would then carefully apply the paint, caps, and finishing touches of wire wrap, spun glass, or scraps to the figures (Merck 1992). From the late 1800s through about 1940, the town of Lauscha and its surrounding area produced 95% of the ornaments decorating American Christmas trees (Johnson 1987).

Most of the early figural ornaments came in a variety of colors and sizes and depicted designs from nature and objects commonly found in the workers’ lives or around the house (Brenner 1986). These early designs included figures of their cottages, their pets or livestock, birds that were kept in nearby cages, insect residents and insects that may have entered the Christmas tree when it was brought into the house, and objects associated with Christmas legends or the Christian faith, such as fish, doves, and spiders. (Oestreich [1998] states that spiders have a unique relationship with the Christmas tree, and led to the tradition of using tinsel as a decoration...but because spiders do have eight legs, we’ll leave it to the reader to explore this relationship.)

Because the glassblowers worked most of the year, up to 15 or 16 hours a day, with bright gas flames throughout the night, it was inevitable that moths were attracted into the cottages, where they fluttered around the flames. Without a doubt, this led to various glass figures of butterflies and moths, which represent some of the most strikingly beautiful ornaments ever produced. These ornaments would generally have blown glass (Fig. 1a) or composite bodies (Fig. 1b), with attached spun-glass wings that were painted in gorgeous colors and glued to the bodies. Frequently, the bodies were finished with an Art Deco swirl design or with the addition of spun-glass tails to make quite a showpiece (Fig. 2).

Spun glass, as its name implies, was literally spun from glass rods. The glassblower melted the end of a glass rod over the flame and pulled the glass drops out into a thin strand. As the glassblower pushed the rod through the flame, another family member wound the strand over a wheel (Stille 1979), creating thin glass “threads” that were used for tails and wings of butterflies, moths, birds, etc. Other butterfly and moth ornaments were easier to produce and consisted of the insect with spread wings embossed onto geometric shapes, such as rectangles and ovals (Fig. 3), or embossed onto objects such as lamps (Fig. 4). Many embossed figures actually show the segmented body, wings, legs, and even antennae.

One group of insects depicted on glass Christmas ornaments during the early years of production are the beetles. These insects were likely not only attracted to the gas flames of the glassblowers, but probably entered the cottages in early fall seeking an over-wintering site, thus becoming a part of the glassblower’s life. Often the beetle is embossed across the front of an object, such as a pear, and is shown with large “pinchers” (Fig. 5a), or it is depicted on a flower (Fig. 5b). The petals on the front of the flower are ill defined, and often this ornament is mistaken for a spider on a web. However, the embossed insect clearly depicts only six legs, removing any doubt as to its classification (Fig. 5b). The beetle ornament may also be a large, oval shape with wings that may or may not meet in the center (Fig. 6), eyes painted on, and six embossed or paper legs on the reverse side (it was extremely difficult to actually blow the individual legs, so they were either embossed in the ornament or were paper attachments glued onto the ornament) (Fig. 7).

In 20th century Germany, when an ornament was placed on the tree during the Christmas season, it usually had a very special meaning. One such ornament is the ladybug. These beetles received their name many years ago in Europe. When the wine grapes were attacked by an outbreak of aphids, the farmers prayed to the Virgin Mary for help in saving their crop. Shortly thereafter, as the

![Fig. 2. Glass-bodied moths with spun-glass tail (top and bottom left) and swirl-design body (bottom right).](https://academic.oup.com/ae/article-abstract/52/4/240/2389714/fig2)

![Fig. 3. Some embossed butterfly ornaments.](https://academic.oup.com/ae/article-abstract/52/4/240/2389714/fig3)

![Fig. 4. Butterfly embossed on lamp.](https://academic.oup.com/ae/article-abstract/52/4/240/2389714/fig4)

![Fig. 5. a. Beetles embossed on pear (left) and b. flower (right).](https://academic.oup.com/ae/article-abstract/52/4/240/2389714/fig5)
aphid population reached high levels, the crop was saved by little red beetles with black spots that ate nearly all the aphids and saved the grape industry. The farmers believed their prayers to Mary (also referred to as “Our Lady”) were answered. In her honor, the beetles were named “Merienkafer” (“Merien” for Mary, and “kafer” for beetle), which soon became “ladybug.” The beetles were highly cherished by the farmers. In Europe, ladybugs are still considered a good luck symbol, and thus many old and new Christmas insect ornaments today are red ladybugs (Fig. 8).

Post–World War II

F. W. Woolworth (of Woolworth’s 5&10 fame) discovered glass ornaments on a toy- and doll-seeking trip to Sonneberg, Germany in 1888 and started importing them into the United States for sale in his stores during the Christmas season. They rapidly sold out; and for the next 40 years, America became the German glassblowers’ largest market. After WWII, other manufacturers joined in the competition for the American market. Czechoslovakian glassblowers produced many beaded insect ornaments (Figs. 9), and West German glassblowers produced copies of the old glass ornaments using the original molds smuggled from East Germany. One company, the Inge-Glas Company, still produces new insect ornaments (look for their patented star-shaped cap) blown in original 1870–1920s molds. Italian glassblowers also sold their wares to the American wholesalers and produced beautiful insect ornaments such as the clip-on grasshopper (Fig. 10) during the 1950s. Firms such as the Polanaise Ornament Company and the Kurt Adler Company still produce a unique selection of modern insect Christmas ornaments, such as the intricate free-blown praying mantid (Fig. 11).

Regardless of whether the insect ornaments are antique, a reproduction, free blown, or even made from a modern mold, they still have a unique charm and desirability that fascinates the young and old alike. These ornaments will forever grace many Christmas trees throughout the world during the holiday season, recapturing the essence of that “old-fashioned” Christmas brought into so many homes by the glassblowers of Lauscha.

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Lillie W. Ghidiu, Upper Deerfield School System, 7 Tunbridge Drive, Bridgeton, NJ 08302. Lillie uses her insect glass ornaments as well as her real insect collection to teach 4-5th graders about entomology at Moore School. Gerald M. Ghidiu, Rutgers Agricultural Research and Extension Center, 121 Northville Road, Bridgeton, NJ 08302. Gerald is a vegetable extension specialist at Rutgers University and guest lectures on science and entomology at area schools.