

# Nativity Creche Art Dramatizes Story Of Birth Of Christ

According to legend, remnants of the manger at Bethlehem were brought to Italy by early Christians. So it is not surprising that some 1300 years later, St. Francis of Assisi should have chosen to renew its spirit and meaning in the hermitage of Greccio in the Umbrian mountains.

"I desire to represent the birth of that Child in Bethlehem in such a way that with our bodily eyes we may see all that He suffered for lack of the necessities for a newborn babe, and how he lay in the manger between the ox and ass." His friend, Giovanni Vellita, proceeded to carry out these instructions, setting up a life-size manger with straw and a live ox and ass. Members of the community posed as Mary, Joseph and the shepherds and a wax figure of the Christ Child was placed in the manger. A great throng assembled to worship at the site on Christmas Eve 1223. Many songs and hymns were sung, and so impressive and awe-inspiring was the ceremony that Greccio assumed the fame of a second Bethlehem as the news spread far and wide.

Inspired by St. Francis, artisans and craftsmen began to make miniature manger scenes for their homes, and the creches spread all over Europe.

Whole families fashioned the little figures from wood or clay and created replicas of Bethlehem, as they imagined it would look. Often these scenes looked more like their own villages than the Holy Land.

In Naples, these creches developed into a fashionable art because of the interest of the Bourbon King Carlo III, who set the pace by the elaborate settings of the Nativity scene, which he had set up in his castle every Christmas Eve.

The members of the court took up the hobby of their king and soon all the great Neapolitan families were vying with each other to produce brilliant and lavish

creche displays. They employed the talents of the best sculptors and the ladies of the great houses frequently made elaborate clothes of velvets and satins for the figures.

The most outstanding of these figures were produced in the workshops of Naples during the second half of the eighteenth century. The Metropolitan Museum has a large collection of them, which are usually on display during the Christmas season. Most of these are from the famous collection owned by the great Neapolitan Catello family.

The figures, an average of 12 to 18 inches in height, have pliable bodies of wov-

en twine and wire, expressive faces. The limbs are of finely carved wood. The figures are dressed in 18th century costumes, enriched with jewels and embroidery. The heads and shoulders of the figures, modeled in terracotta and painted in flesh tones, are credited to some of 18th-century Naples' finest sculptors: Giuseppe Sammartino and his pupils, Salvatore de Franco, Giuseppe Gori and Angelo Viva.

Creches are also popular in other parts of Europe notably Provence in France, and in Spain. But none has reached the high degree of artistic elegance of those of 18th century Naples.



THE THREE KINGS, attributed to Giuseppe Sammartino. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire and silver-gilt. 14 1/2" to 15" high. Italian (Neapolitan) 2nd half of 18th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Loretta H. Howard.



NATIVITY GROUP, Mary and Joseph attributed to Salvatore di Franco; Baby Jesus to Giuseppe Sammartino. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire, silver-gilt, straw and cork. Height of Joseph, 15". Italian (Neapolitan) 2nd half of 18th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Loretta H. Howard.

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ANGEL WITH CENSER, attributed to Giuseppe Sammartino. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire and silver-gilt, 15" high. Italian (Neapolitan) 2nd half of 18th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Loretta H. Howard.

AWED SHEPHERDS AND THEIR GOATS, polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire. Shepherds 15 1/2" high. Italian (Neapolitan) 2nd half of 18th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Loretta H. Howard.

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