

HISTORY OF THE NATIVITY

The origin of the nativity scene, which represents the birth of Jesus Christ, is found in the words of St. Luke, "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Many believe the "manger" to have been in a grotto, since at that time in Palestine, natural grottos served as refuges for travelers and as stables for animals.

The first known representation of the Nativity is a fresco in the Catacombs of Rome, dating to about 100 AD, which depicts Mary holding baby Jesus. In the 300s it was St. Ambrose, after whom this neighborhood parish is named, who said the ox and donkey shared the stable with the Holy Family and kept them warm. In 494, St. Jerome described the actual location, a grotto with the manger carved in rock and supported by wooden legs. The grotto may still be viewed in Bethlehem.

In the following centuries, the nativity was represented in paintings and bas reliefs, until 1223 when St. Francis of Assisi popularized the tradition by representing the nativity with live models in a natural cave in the town of Greccio in central Italy. With his recreation he told story of the Christmas miracle by means of live performances. Over time, with the encouragement of several religious orders, the creation of nativity scenes in permanent materials became popular. In the 16th century, intensely religious full size wooden statues were found in most churches and convents. Wealthy patrons paid artists for elaborate Presepi for their homes. During this century the first landscapes in relief began to replace the typical painted background. Particularly in Genoa and Naples in the 17th and 18th centuries, the nativity scene grew to a true art form.

Then, with the exception of the elaborate baroque Presepi primarily seen in Naples, Presepi developed in simpler forms with more historical accuracy. Figures were made in wood, terra cotta, clay, marble, plaster or papier-mâché. In addition to the statues of Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the donkey and ox, we began to see statues depicting

many decorative elements: angels, shepherds, sheep, the three wise men, and other animals. Elements of domestic life were added to the scene and the Presepi began to include the whole village of peasants, shepherds, fishermen, craftsmen, common people and nobles, found in their daily activities or in recreational moments, at the market, in their workshops, taverns, streets and squares, in a town or in the countryside.

Artists were eventually replaced by artisans who often used moulds and these less expensive figures were produced to meet the demand of the general public. By the 19th century, Presepi in their more affordable form were a popular tradition with all social classes. Today it remains the focus of decoration for the Christmas season in Italy. The long tradition of crèches in Italy exemplifies a rich artistic culture, and provides great insight into Italian religious and storytelling history.

ITALIAN REGIONAL TRADITIONS

Many of Italy's 20 regions are known for their distinctive Presepi. The style, setting and materials used are often characteristic of the region and times.

Artisans in Puglia, particularly in Lecce, distinguish themselves in the use of papier-mâché (cartapesta) draped over iron wire frame, while in Trentino Alto-Adige you will find mostly wood. In Campania, terra cotta with cloth is commonly used. Elaborate paper sets are found in Amalfi. Gesso (plaster) is particularly seen in Lombard. In Sicily, Presepi are made of wax and terra cotta but you will also find such materials as coral, bone, ivory, mother-of-pearl, alabaster, shells and other materials from the sea.

A fundamental component of the 18th century Presepio in Naples is the market, with fruit and vegetables, hams, fish, and every imaginable food and ware, an explosion of color and shapes. In so doing, this very poor city invented a scene where hunger did not exist.

Creche art in Liguria developed in the baroque age, later than in other parts of

Italy. The typical baroque Presepio in Liguria, particularly in Genoa, is made of carved wooden figures, either gold-plated or painted.

In addition to regional distinctions in materials, you find regionally distinct settings. In Rome the Presepi are often surrounded by a countryside of cypress, pine and olive trees, the ancient aqueducts and ruins. In Naples, the many minor characters stand on a rock, possibly set inside the ruins of a church, surrounded by the village, with the whole scene inevitably in the shadows of Vesuvius.

To learn more about these regional traditions, visit: www.presepi.it

NATIVITY DISPLAYS

The nativity scene is the traditional Christmas decoration in Italy, and Italian spend much time and effort preparing the Presepio for their home. Community associations throughout Italy organize Nativity exhibits such as this one, where artists submit entries for the competition. The most impressive exhibits are found in Milan, Rome and Naples

where treasure troves of crèche objects-true works of art in coral and gold are displayed. You will find exhibitions with hundreds of crèches and mechanized figurines, as well as museums devoted solely to Presepi. The Museo della Certosa di San Martino houses the largest collection of crèches in the world. One of the most visited displays is the scene built by the city's maintenance workmen near St. Peter's which was visited each year by Pope John Paul II. The figures are larger than life, made in the 18th century for Saint Vincent Pallotti and donated by the Pallottine Fathers to the Pope.

To learn more about the many exhibits in Italy, see: www.presepio.org

Refer to the list of display locations to plan your route. Some locations will be reached easier out of order which will be evident by using this map. Perimeter displays may best be accessed by car. The star designates the location of St. Ambrose Church. Additional information about the Presepi will be found at each display location.



*We are pleased to bring a bit of this
Italian tradition to the Hill with Presepio exhibits
in the windows of the following merchants:*

MARCONI AVENUE (EAST SIDE)

- 1. Herbaria Soap • 2016 Marconi Avenue**
“Tu scendi dalle stelle” by *The Mariani Family*
- 2. Amighetti’s Bakery • 5141 Wilson Avenue**
“O dolce Bambino Gesù”
*Made by Sr. Felicetta Cola, compliments of
Marianne Peri Sack*
“Natale Bianca della Mamma”
in loving memory of Josephine Peri
- 3. St. Ambrose Church**
5130 Wilson at Marconi Ave.
*(Inside after 12/23) “Venite adoremus”
by St. Ambrose Church*
- 4. Belli Fiori • 2122 Marconi Avenue**
“Polonaise Natività” by *The Monolo Family*
- 5. Vitale’s Bakery • 2130 Marconi Avenue**
“O Dio Bambino” by *The Vitale Family*

MARCONI AVENUE (WEST SIDE)

- 6. Shield Systems, Inc. • 5205 Bischoff Avenue**
“Imagine A Nativity” by *M&I Bank*
- 7. Just Be • 2133 Marconi Avenue**
“Silent Night” by *Maryann Schultz*
- 8. Steve’s Hot Dogs on The Hill • 2131 Marconi Ave**
“O Little Town of Bethlehem” by *the Stelzer Family*
- 9. Salono Milano • 2123 Marconi Avenue**
“Wise Men Seek Him Still”
by The Italian Club St. Louis
- 10. Winter Opera Saint Louis • 2105 Marconi Ave.**
“From the Workshop of Angela Tripi,” Sicilia
by the Blubaugh Family
- 11. **Girasole Gifts and Imports/
International Jewelry • 2103 Marconi Ave.**
“La Natività e la Storia della Montagna,”
Toscana by *Marie Cuccia-Brand and
Debbie Torpea Monolo*
“Bambino Gesù,” Lombardia by *Joe Monolo*

- 12. Gelato di Riso • 5204 Wilson Avenue**
“Nei ruderi romani” by *The Italian Club of St. Louis*
- 13. DiGregorio’s Italian Foods**
5200 Daggett Avenue
“In Memory of Sam DiGregorio”
by The DiGregorio Family
- 14. Bertarelli Cutlery • 1927 Marconi Avenue**
“La Sacra Famiglia” by *Gloria Griffiero*
- 15. Marconi Bakery • 1913 Marconi Avenue**
“Presepio di Cinisi” Sicilia
by La Festa di Santa Fara

PERIMETER LOCATIONS

- 16. Five Bistro • 5100 Daggett Avenue**
“Presepio della Nonna” by *The Devoti Family*
- 17. Guido’s Pizzeria & Tapas • 5046 Shaw Avenue**
“La Notte Sacra” by *Gloria Griffiero*
- 18. John Viviano & Sons • 5139 Shaw Avenue**
“Gloria a Dio” by *The Viviano Family*
- 19. Standard Refrigeration • 5218 Shaw Avenue**
“Tre Presepi in memoria di Charles
& Blanche Ponciroli” by *The Ponciroli Family*
- 20. John Volpi & Co. • 5250 Daggett Avenue**
“Gesù Bambino ‘È Nato” by *the Pasetti Family*
- 21. Gioia’s Deli • 1934 Macklind Avenue**
“Viene Signore Gesù” by *Cathy Donley*
- 22. Anthonino’s Taverna • 2225 Macklind Avenue**
“Dormi, Dormi, O Bel Bambino”
by Sam Greco Family
- 23. Urzi’s Italian Market • 5430 Southwest Avenue**
“Luce di luci” by *The Urzi Family*
- 24. Favazza’s Restaurant • 5201 Southwest Avenue**
“Oggi è nato Gesù” by *The Favazza Family*

NEAR THE HILL

- 25. Chris’ Pancake & Dining • 5980 Southwest Ave.**
“Osanna” by *Marie and Richard Brand*

**Brochures, maps and children’s paper presepi
available at this location.

The Italian Club of St. Louis and the Hill Business
Association are on the web at www.italianclubstl.org
& www.thehill-stl.org



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