A Neapolitan Christmas Crib

OLGA RAGGIO  Associate Research Curator of Western European Arts

Writing from Naples in March 1766, Samuel Sharp, a respectable British surgeon and an attentive and perceptive traveler, related that before Christmas, “during three weeks or a month, there is a species of devotion to be seen here, almost peculiar to Naples. . . . This is a dedication of a Presepio . . . in many of their churches, and many of their private houses. . . . It is a group of little figures, or puppets, representing the whole transaction. There are the Wise men of the East, with a star over their heads on one spot: The shepherds attending their flocks, with the Angel descending over them on another: The Virgin, the Infant, Joseph, and the ass, on another. In short the composer has introduced such figures and historical facts, into the group, as the New Testament, and sometimes his own genius, have suggested.” Here, in brief, is one of the earliest descriptions of those removable Christmas cribs that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, had become as much a part of custom in Naples as the gay Carnival in Venice, or the Easter procession in Seville.

Originally a purely devotional practice—a “pious exercise,” as it was called in the seventeenth century—Christmas crib building at home could claim its precedents in the medieval mystery plays of the Nativity as much as in the sculptured Nativity groups set in churches. In the form described by Sharp, with “little figures, or puppets” and stagelike sets, it made its appearance in Naples sometime about 1670, much encouraged, it appears, by the Jesuits. It was soon practiced by the leading families of the aristocracy, who, at Christmastime, kept open house to let a delighted populace come in to see the presepio. When in 1734 Charles III of Bourbon became king of Naples, the royal family itself took a lead in the fashion. Often, we read, the King was seen amusing himself modeling and baking little clay cakes for the Royal Creche, arranging shepherds and devising perspective views, while the Queen sewed costumes for the figures throughout the year, to please her husband and children.

It is undoubtedly through the interest taken by Charles III, who was as keen on his porcelain factory at Capodimonte as on the excavations he promoted at Pompeii, that the making of Christmas crib figures took its momentum. The crude wooden statuettes produced by the carvers of devotionalia were replaced by more sophisticated pastori mobili, “mobile shepherds,” as they were called in Naples. These, we learn from a local historian, Pietro Napoli-Signorelli, were to be portrayed in as natural a fashion as possible, with “faces . . . full of lively expression, soft complexions, speaking physiognomies, the hair finished with utmost care.” The best sculptors of Naples were asked to lend their talents to the new task, ladies of the court no doubt vied in dressing up the figures, and, as sets and lighting effects became more elaborate and were changed every year to make room for new “inventions” and hundreds of figures, still other artists were engaged with the duties of “Christmas crib directors.” For, as noted our British visitor, “. . . what renders a Presepio really an object of a man of taste, is the artful disposition of the figures, amidst scenery of perspective, most wonderfully deceitful to the eye.” “A certain merchant,” he continued, “has one on the top of his house, where the perspective is so well preserved, that, by being open at one end, the distant country and mountains become

1. Cherubs, Polychromed terracotta. Height 8 ¼ inches. 64.164.60

All the figures illustrated in this article are Italian (Neapolitan), second half of the XVIII century, and are part of a collection of Christmas crib figures given to the Museum by Loretta Hines Howard, 64.164.1-167. They will be displayed on a Christmas tree in the Main Hall of the Museum during the Christmas season.
a continuity of the Presepio, and seem really to be a part of it. . . . A nobleman here had one, where so much silver, and so many beautiful scenes were admitted onto the work, that it was valued at eight thousand pounds. . . . All the poor people, if they are not already provided with a Presepio, purchase a cheap trumpery one at this season, which, with care and locking up the remainder of the year, will last them their lives.” An Italian eighteenth-century drawing at the Cooper Union Museum (Figure 13) is perhaps the sketch of such a scenic presepio. No set has been preserved in its pristine state, and those which can still be seen in Naples and Rome are in fact no more than traditional reconstructions (Figure 2).

Last year, a most distinguished collection of about 140 Neapolitan Christmas crib figures, dating from the second half of the eighteenth century, was generously presented to the Museum by Loretta Hines Howard. They will be put on display in the Main Hall in December. They come for the most part from the famous Catello collection in Naples, where many of them were shown in 1950 at an exhibition of sculptures from Neapolitan Christmas cribs held at the Royal Palace. The varied assortment includes figures from the three traditional scenes of a complete Neapolitan presepio: the Nativity, with angels, shepherds, and sheep; the procession of the three Magi, with their colorful retinue of Orientals and Moors; and the varied and gay crowd of coun-
3, 4, and 5. Burgher, country girl, and Moor. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, and tow and wire. Height about 15 inches. 64.164.101, 80, 86

6. Group of Orientals. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire, silver, and silver-gilt. Height of larger figures about 15 inches. 64.164.64, 74, 89, 87, 105, 106, 88, 110, 111, 163
7. Nativity group. Mary and Joseph, attributed to Salvatore di Franco; Jesus, to Giuseppe Sammartino. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabrics, tow and wire, silver-gilt, straw, and cork. Height of Joseph 15 inches. 64.164.1-3

try and town people thronging the tavern, or inn, of Bethlehem – the diversorium mentioned by St. Luke, where on the Holy Night there was no place for Mary and Joseph. Averaging between twelve and fifteen inches in height, according to the position they were to take in perspective in the stage set, the figurines are pliable and can be given poses at will, according to their facial expressions. Their bodies are made of tow and wire, their arms and legs are finely carved of wood, and their heads and shoulders are modeled of terracotta and accurately finished. Their attire, often enriched by accessories, jewels, and embroideries, is a sheer joy for the lover of folklore and eighteenth-century costumes. It is still for the most part original.

By far the largest group of figures in the Howard crèche is made up of a host of delightfully dimpled cherubs, delicately modeled like biscuit figurines, and some fifty large and elegant angels (Figures 1, 8, 10). These, clad in swirling pastel draperies, their hair knotted by a mystical wind, their cheeks flustered by sweet celestial emotion, are seen swinging their finely chased silver-gilt censers or suspended in adoration. These heavenly creatures may once have belonged to a famous crib set up
every Christmas, until 1826, by the De Giorgio family, which had an extraordinary Glory of angels that the people flocked to admire. But we will never know for sure. For by the middle of the nineteenth century nearly all the great family cribs of the preceding century had been broken up, their sets dismembered, their figures sold singly or in small groups to dealers and collectors, who would then show them in vitrines, as objects of curiosity rather than devotion.

According to a tradition that seems to be supported by stylistic comparisons with figures in the collections of Naples and in the

8. Angel with censer, attributed to Giuseppe Sammartino. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire, and silver-gilt. Height 15 inches. 64.164.9

9. Startled shepherds and their goats. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire. Height of shepherds 15 1/2 inches. 64.164.93, 96, 124, 131
vast holdings of the Bavarian National Museum in Munich, some of the most winsome heads of the Howard angels are to be credited to the best eighteenth-century masters: Giuseppe Sammartino (1720-1793), well known for his monumental sculptures in marble and in stucco, his pupils Salvatore di Franco, Giuseppe Gori, and Angelo Viva, and one Lorenzo Mosca (d. 1789), who was employed at the Royal Porcelain Factory at Capodimonte and as stage director of the Royal Christmas Crib.

In the central group of the Holy Family—the Mistero, as Neapolitans used to call it—the noble and tender figures of Mary, Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger are also modeled and carved with exquisite care (Figure 7). They are attributed to Salvatore di Franco, who is mentioned by contemporary sources as one of the best presepio sculptors of the time. Next are the three Magi, splendidly attired in long cloaks of silk embroidered with silver, gold, and sequins, topped with simulated ermine capes, their costume perhaps inspired by the colorful garb worn by the Knights of San Gennaro on the yearly festival in Naples. They approach the Divine Infant with expressions of tender awe and piety, marvel or mystical expectation, gesturing with their delicate, nervous hands.

Behind the Magi came the mingled crowd of brightly dressed, exotic travelers, who symbolized the homage rendered by all nations to the Divine Child: there are Mongols and Moors mingled with Turks and Circassians, advancing on horseback or on foot, carrying their colorful trappings, banners, and lances, followed by their camels, attendants, and dogs (Figures 5, 6, 11). It is in this section of the presepio that the imagination of patrons and artists, free from literal fidelity to the Scriptures, fascinated by exotic costumes and types, gave itself full rein and indulged in the wildest flights, in a vein that reminds us of the Turqueries and eighteenth-century opera and ballet rather than sacred drama. To these figures belong some of the most elaborate accessories: finely chased and gilded scimitars and daggers, silver baskets, and purses, all miniature masterpieces executed by Neapolitan silversmiths and other specialized craftsmen.

A sure theatrical instinct presided over the creation of a Neapolitan Christmas crèche. The world of the exotic was counterbalanced by the more homely world of humble shepherds and simple folk, who act out their emo-

---

10. Angel with censer, attributed to Lorenzo Mosca. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, tow and wire, and silver-gilt. Height 15⅝ inches. 64.164.7, 145

11. Oriental with a camel. Polychromed terracotta, wood, fabric, leather, and tow and wire. Height 15⅛ inches. 64.164.75, 109


...tions and speak the language of the heart. We see some of the shepherds, clad in rough sheepskin clothes, awakened from their sleep by the Angel of the Lord, dazzled by the light that suddenly breaks through the night or bemused by the celestial music that fills the heavens, their faces reflecting their feelings with pulsating vitality and truth (Figure 9). Nothing is conventional here, and the eighteenth century has hardly left us more lively and natural portraits than these. Academically trained artists, sometimes well known as porcelain-modelers—like Francesco Celebrano, to whom, among others, figures like these are often attributed—have abandoned here the formulas of the “great art” in an effort to achieve the natural expression sought after in Christmas crib figures. A humorous, realistic note is struck by the sheep and goats. Skillfully modeled in terracotta, they are for the most part attributed to Saverio Vassallo, one of the best Neapolitan animaliers of the day.

The same naturalistic vein appears in the figures of people in the inn of Bethlehem (Figures 3, 4, 12). Here are rich burghers, merchants, or valets, some of which seem to be individual portraits of exhilarating realism; peasants in the gay attire of the islands of Ischia and Procida; or women coming from the countryside to peddle their produce, colorfully displayed in miniature baskets. All of them are potential actors of little genre scenes to be spontaneously set into action and made to relate to one another, in chatter or in laughter, under the sharp limelight of the stage, like the puppets of a miniature commedia dell’arte.

The magic of the theater and the warmth of simple, sincere emotions are still today the most endearing qualities of a Neapolitan crèche. Even the advent of the French Revolution and nineteenth-century rationalism was not able to destroy the charm that for years fascinated Neapolitans and foreigners alike. The Christmas crib remained “un vrai tableau parlant,” as wrote, at the close of the century, Count Giuseppe Gorani in his Mémoires secrets et critiques des Cours et des Gouvernements, “qui peut faire passer quelques moments agréables à l’homme le plus raisonnable.”

**Note**