

A close-up photograph of a man in traditional 18th-century Neapolitan costume. He is wearing a turban with a woven pattern and a red jacket with gold embroidery. He is playing a wind instrument, possibly a piffero, with a yellow mouthpiece. The background is blurred, showing other people in similar costumes.

The 18th-century
Neapolitan crèche
a masterpiece of baroque spectacle

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Carmine Romano

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Colnaghi and Porcini are delighted to be collaborating on the presentation of this remarkable *presepe* this Christmas 2021, and to be continuing this centuries-old tradition that is so dear to many generations of Neapolitans.

Monumental in scale, this work of art transcends artistic hierarchies in its uniting of a plethora of different artistic techniques and mediums. The 18th century Neapolitan townsfolk mingle with angels and magi; scrawny chickens and street dogs crowd around the feet of processing musicians. The eye can endlessly roam over the scenes of this spectacle – you notice different details every time – from the shining glass eyes of the figures, to their wicker baskets, their coral jewellery, the glittering sequins adorning their costumes, the daggers swinging at the hips of moustachioed bandits, and the brass instruments of the musicians and the strings on their harps. The craftsmanship that went into the creation of every one of these details is truly unsurpassed. We are honoured to be showing such a high-quality example of these *presepi*, so few of which can be seen outside the city of their creation.

Dario's knowledge of the artistic traditions of his native Naples was learned at the elbow of his father Vincenzo Porcini who, in addition to being an art dealer, is also one of the most important collectors of Neapolitan *presepi*. His expertise in the field was matched only by his sincere passion for these scenes: a passion that was shared not only among the Porcini family but with the wider world thanks to his sale of the exceptional *Presepe* to the Art Institute of Chicago in 2013. Dario is proud to honour his father's legacy in the presentation of this work of art at Colnaghi's London gallery.



Introduction

"The Gospel translated into Neapolitan" – that is how the playwright Michele Cuciniello defined the Neapolitan crèche, also called *presepe* in Italian or *presebbio* in Neapolitan. Cuciniello (1825–1889), who was also a scenographer and collector, donated his collection of eighteenth-century Neapolitan nativity scene figures to the San Martino Museum, where, on December 28, 1878¹, the collection was set up under his direction, a large installation known today as the "Presepe Cuciniello".

Cuciniello's definition rather neatly brings out the singularity, to say nothing of the strangeness of the Neapolitan nativity scene, which restages the birth of Jesus Christ in eighteenth-century Naples. The crèche is no puppet show, but rather a sophisticated temporary installation that boldly transgresses artistic hierarchies, uniting them in a coherent hodgepodge of the aesthetic genres of art history. Plebian and aristocratic, pagan and sacred, refined and artisanal living art and museum pieces, the *presepe* stages the sacred scene in miniature in a true-to-life Neapolitan setting commissioned by all strata of society – from the royal family to the nobility to the bourgeoisie – from renowned artists

and sometimes even the best local sculptors. The mid-eighteenth through early-nineteenth century, the golden age of the Neapolitan nativity scene, is historically linked to the foundation of the Kingdom of Naples, whose independence began in 1734 with the reign of Bourbon King Carlo VII (1734 – 1759), and continued with his son, Ferdinand IV (1759–1825). The high artistic quality of Neapolitan crèche scenes continued during the Parthenopean Republic of 1799 – the short-lived regime that followed the French occupation of Naples – and throughout the reign of Joachim Murat (1806–1815), only to decline with the Restoration and Ferdinand's return to the throne as King Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies.



The Cuciniello Crèche
(18th - 19th cent.)
Certosa e Museo di San Martino, Naples.

Inauguration of the Cuciniello Crèche
from *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, January 25, 1880.

Historical and iconographic highlights of the origin of the Neapolitan crèche

The presepe is a plastic representation of the birth of Jesus. The earliest and most famous representation of the Nativity dates back to Christmas Eve in 1223, when St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) celebrated mass in the Grotto of Greccio, a small village half-way between Rome and Assisi, before a babe in a manger, an ox, and an ass. This event, which made quite a stir among those present, was remembered and repeated with the spread of Franciscanism. A scene in the cycle of frescos on the life of St. Francis, attributed to Giotto and painted on the walls of the nave in the Basilica of Assisi, depicts this very Nativity scene. The source the painter used is a passage from the *Legenda Major* where St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio quotes from Tommaso da Celano's ephrastic description of it: "The friars gather, the common people join them; their voices resound through the woods, and this venerable night is bathed in lights, made solemn

and sonorous with harmonious lauds. The man of God [Francis] stands before the nativity scene, full of piety, weeping, overcome with joy. A solemn mass is celebrated before the nativity scene and Francis chants the holy gospel. Then he preaches to the people around him and speaks of the birth of the poor king, whom he [...] calls 'the Child of Bethlehem.'"⁹

The city of Naples, where Franciscanism quickly took hold thanks to the protection and support of the Angevin sovereigns, was fertile ground for the representation of nativity scenes like the one in Greccio at the turn of the fourteenth century. Among the first examples of sculpted nativity scenes is a crèche traditionally thought to have been given by Queen Sancia to the Cloister of the Poor Clares at the church of Santa Chiara in Naples, one that was completed before 1340¹, the year the nunnery was consecrated.



Francesco Liani
(Italian, c. 1712/14 – 1783)
Charles of Bourbon
c. 1758, oil on canvas, inv. N. OA 503
Museo e Real Bosco di
Capodimonte, Naples.



Francesco Liani
(Italian, c. 1712/14 – 1783)
Maria Amalia of Saxony
c. 1758, oil on canvas, inv. N. OA 504
Museo e Real Bosco di
Capodimonte, Naples.



Francesco Liani
(Italian, c. 1712/14 – 1783)
Ferdinand IV
c. 1760, oil on canvas, inv. N. CE 2162
Museo e Real Bosco di
Capodimonte, Naples.

The nativity scene was assembled in a grotto in the cloister and consisted of very few figures. The only one that has survived is that of the Virgin Mary lying on a bed, dressed like a lady of the Angevin court, hence in accord with the traditional costume of her time. This iconography was inspired by the "Revelations" of St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373), in which she tells of her vision of the virgin birth². The presence of a later iconographic pattern, based on the theological principles of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, which were very influential in Italy and Spain, is evident in a nativity scene sculpted in marble in the central panel on the base of the funerary monument of Archbishop Arrigo Minutolo (d. 1412) located in the chapel bearing his name in the Duomo of Naples. The panel shows the Madonna and St. Joseph kneeling in adoration of the Christ Child lying in a manger. In addition to these holy figures there are two shepherds with four sheep, while the angels draw near to worship the Messiah.

From marble to wood, and we come to one of the most important nativity scenes created and preserved in Naples. Jacobello Pepe commissioned it to two brothers, known in Neapolitan sources as Pietro and Giovanni Alemanno, artists of German origin, for the Recco chapel in the church of San Giovanni a Carbonara in 1478³. Sources tell that it was composed of "forty-one free-standing

polychrome wooden figures, among which are the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and the Christ Child, as well as an ox and an ass, eleven angels, two prophets and two sibyls, three shepherds, twelve sheep, and four trees."⁴ A few years later, in 1484, Antonietta de Gennaro, Jacobello's widow, asked Francesco Fiore, known as Torio⁵, to paint and gild the statues that had been made by the Alemanno brothers. The sumptuousness of the gilding can still be seen on the surviving pieces, held in the San Martino Museum in Naples.

More modern in its composition is the nativity



Giotto (Italian, c. 1266/77-1337)
The Nativity Scene at Greccio
 1275-1290. Fresco, 290x 270 cm
 Upper Basilica of Assisi



Anceymoras,
Virgin Mary
14th century, polychrome wood, Certosa e Museo di San Martino, Naples.

scene for the large altarpiece of St. Eustace in the Santa Maria la Nova church by Giovanni da Nola (c. 1488-1558), who set the sacred representation within an architectonic setting. This is the first time that a shepherd appears on the scene, drawing near to have a better look. Similar in its composition is the nativity scene commissioned to the same artist by the humanist poet Jacopo Sannazaro for the church of Santa Maria del Parto in Mergellina (Naples) in about 1520⁹, again depicting the shepherds in adoration. The scene, of which few pieces remain, contains several superb figures of worshipping shepherds.

In the same period of time, Gaetano da Thiene¹⁰ (1480-1547), founder of the order of the Theatines (Congregation of Clerics Regular), came to Naples from the court of Pope Julius II in Rome. This saintly priest settled near the hospital of the Incurabili (the terminally ill) and built the oratory of Santa Maria

della Stalletta on land donated by Maria Lorenza Longo, founder of the hospital, to whom he served as confessor. And it was the oratory of Santa Maria della Stalletta that he composed the first nativity scene of the Theatines. The innovation this cleric introduced, often seen as the father and inventor of the Neapolitan *presepe*, was the use of movable figures, which allowed the nativity scene to be assembled and disassembled so as to be installed only in the Christmas season.

This marked a technical revolution that would last all through the 16th and 17th centuries. From the end of the 17th century and the first quarter of the 18th, the artisans began to reduce the size of the nativity-scene figures to a height of 38-40 centimeters¹¹. This was made possible thanks to the use of mannequins



Anonymous
Jesuit monument in Cupole Minutolo (early XVth century)
Cupole – Minutolo Chapel, Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary, Naples.

made out of flax tow and iron wire. In the beginning these mannequins were furnished with painted wooden heads, but in time the heads were made of painted terracotta, modeled by well-known sculptors.

This technical revolution quickly transformed the Neapolitan nativity scene into a miniature Neapolitan theater, commissioned not only by the churches but also by the wealthy and powerful, who had nativity scenes composed for their pleasure with large figures. This we know from the foreign travelers of the time, like the Abbé de Saint-Non²⁰ or Goethe²¹, and from sketches of Neapolitan crèches in the journal of the German painter Antonio Clemente Leunenschloss²² (1685-1762). These drawings, which compare the German

nativity scene culture with that of Italy, reward us with important suggestions for reflecting on the scenery in contemporary Neapolitan crèches. While the German nativity scenes lacked any pictorial pretensions or relation to objective reality, the Neapolitan ones were artistically composed and gave visitors a unified vision by letting them enter the *presepe* through a central passageway, thus taking part in the scene, a panorama with hills made of tuff and moss to represent forests. The intent was not so much mimetic as it was to fit the scene into its environment, as if it were an extension of the city of Naples, or the city an extension of the nativity scene.

When the Neapolitan *presepe* was in its glory, that is, when this art form was a living expression of the



Pietro and Giovanni Altmanno (German, 17th - 18th cent.)
Crèche
1478, Certosa e Museo di San Martino, Naples.

reality of its own time, no less attention was paid to the figures, the animals, the artifacts, and even the most minute details than to the overall scene. It was then that a felicitous confluence of the three elements necessary for this artistic genre occurred: first, rich patrons competing among themselves to see who could produce the most beautiful crèche; second, artists skilled in modeling clay or

in woodcarving brought to these small-scale arts the same technical genius applied to the larger marble monuments in palaces and churches; third, an intellectual environment that reconciled the Neapolitan people's sense of Catholicism with the open-mindedness of the Enlightenment and the originality of popular entertainment.

"I have seen the nativity scenes and truly, as unhandy as these Neapolitans may be in other things, how deft they are in this child's play,"²² wrote Luigi Varvitelli (1700-1773). Varvitelli, the architect, sees this "child's play" in the fervor to create and enjoy the Neapolitan crèche, as if it were one of the many fleeting trends that so often took hold in the aristocracy in the 18th century. Although there is certainly a playful side to the crèche that is often confused with mere entertainment, in reality it has no less dignity than a monumental construction such as Varvitelli's royal palace in Caserta.

As we have seen, the nativity scene is linked to traditional Christian rituals and has been part of the history of Western art from the early Middle Ages to the Renaissance, but the particular form it assumed in eighteenth-century Naples is unique. In no other location did it ever awaken such passion as it did in Naples at that time, becoming a mirror in which the city could see itself. An art form so illusionary is perhaps a remnant of Naples' baroque past, an attitude that delights even today in challenging the confines of rationality. The Neapolitan nativity scene reached its theatrical moments of splendor, its golden age, when the skill



San Carlo Theatre
1737, Naples



Royal Palace
1752, Caserta



Antonio Joli (Italian, 1770 - 1777)
Ferdinand IV on horseback with the court at Capodimonte
 1763, oil on canvas, inv. N. DA 135
 Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples

and refined constructive techniques of its artisans allowed them to create figures whose expressions, physical attitudes, and gestures were true to everyday life, each character telling his or her own impassioned story. According to Padre Andrea De Jorio⁶, this theatricality was akin to that which he found on antique pottery, which conveyed bits of narrative that could then and can still today be deciphered.

Foremost among the several conditions that facilitated this golden age was the political situation following the accession of the Bourbons to the

throne. On May 17, 1734, Carlo of Bourbon, son of Elisabetta Farnese and Philip V of Spain, great-grandson of Louis XIV, was victorious in the Battle of Bitonto, near Bari, and was proclaimed King of Naples. His kingship was sanctioned by the peace agreements following the Polish War of Succession between Austria and Spain. Naples, which had been Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Norman, Swabian, Angevin, and Aragonese, became a vicerealty of Spain in 1503 and two centuries later, in 1707, a vicerealty of Austria. With Carlo, Naples returned to Spain, but this time as an independent realm,

the only large one in Italy, encompassing most of the "boot" along with Sicily and Sardinia. With its 400,000 inhabitants, the city of Naples was the third largest in Europe, after London and Paris, and by far the largest in Italy¹⁷.

This excursus on the long history of Naples leads right to the heart of our subject, for the creation of a new kingdom in Europe in the 18th century most certainly required the diplomatic agreements negotiated by Carlo's mother, the mighty Elizabetha Farnese, and it was essential to have the tangible signs of regal respectability that the fine arts could bestow. Her present to Carlo of the famous Farnese collection, which he ultimately brought to Naples, gave the city a collection comparable to those of other European monarchies, and he set himself to developing royal manufactories.

Shortly after his inauguration, Carlo wed Maria Amelia of Saxony, granddaughter of Augustus II, the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, who brought the art of porcelain to Dresden through the

royal manufactory in nearby Meissen. Carlo and Maria Amelia, of one mind, together began to develop their kingdom's own artistic program by engaging the very best artists. Under their auspices, the china manufactory of Capodimonte, the construction of the San Carlo Theater, the royal palaces in Caserta, Portici, Carditello, and Capodimonte, and extensive engineering works make Naples a center of the European Enlightenment. Life at court is lavish and enormous sums of money are spent, a luxurious splurge serving as an ostentatious display of political power. Highly specialized craftsmen flocked from throughout Italy as well as from France and Austria: silk weavers from Lyons, porcelain artisans from Vienna and Florence, upholsterers from Medicean factories, together with *pietre dure* craftsmen. From Venice came glass-blowers and glaziers. The city thrived with industries producing silk and china. The growing demand of the court and the rich southern aristocracy for luxury goods stimulated development of high-quality artisanal production



Giuseppe Sammartino (Italian, 1720-1798)
 Relief Christ
 1753, marble, St. Severo Chapel, Naples.



Giuseppe Sammartino (Italian, 1720-1798)
 Crèche figure
 18th cent., painted terracotta.



and trade with other countries. It is in this boom of artistry and Enlightenment culture that the art of the Neapolitan crèche developed. Every craftsman, every artist had a part in this "child's play," as Luigi Vanvitelli referred to it.

The classic bibliography on the artists who dedicated themselves to the Neapolitan nativity scene is extensive. It comprises the greatest names in Neapolitan 18th and 19th-century sculpture. Among these are Domenico Antonio Vaccaro (Italian, 1687-1745), Matteo Bottiglieri (Italian, active from 1685 to 1765), Francesco Celebrano (Italian, 1729-1814), Giuseppe Sanmartino (Italian, 1720-1793), Giuseppe Gori (Italian, 1739-1815), Lorenzo Mosca (Italian, active 1760 - 1789), Giuseppe Salvatore Franco (Italian, 18th-19th century), Angelo (Italian, active from 1758 to 1824), and Francesco Gallo (Italian, active from 1770 to 1829). Additionally, it includes sculptors who specialized in figures of animals such as Francesco di Nardo, and Nicola and Saverio Vassallo (Italian, active from 1760 to 1825).

These artists were those who, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, modeled in clay the heads and busts of the presepe figures, that is, the noblest part of the body, one that determines character, moral, and psychological expression of a person. The head is first fired and then painted. This part of the nativity figure is also the most closely linked to the art of sculpture, whereas the realization of the rest of the body is a more artisanal endeavor. The wooden feet and hands, the bodies



Angelo Viva (Italian, active from 1758 to 1824)
Apollo and the Muses
 c. 1758; papier-mâché
 Trattorio di Corte, Royal Palace, Naples.

of wire and tow were crafted by other artisans and assembled in the workshop. Animal and vegetable carvers, creators of miniature objects and musical instruments completed the list.

The certainty that these great names in sculpture

dedicated themselves to the Neapolitan nativity scene comes from the payment records kept at the city's major banks. From the amounts paid, one can understand the enormous interest these artists had in creating nativity figures. For their nativities, great aristocrats and royalty were willing to pay a fortune. Indeed, in the artistic sphere of the eighteenth century, these commissions were not considered inferior in importance to commissions for large sculptural groups or paintings.

A note of payment addressed to the sculptor Sanmartino, reads: "To Giuseppe Sanmartino, 5 ducats, and 4 *grana* to Giuseppe Gori and for it to Stefano Palumbo upon completion of 20 ducats for the washing of 22 half-busts of clay, and for carrying them to the furnace and returning them to his room [...]" and again "To Nicola Vassallo from Felice Giannattasio for [...] three wooden horses that he must make to perfection, just the right size of the shepherds of his crèche."²⁰ "To Saverio Vassallo for two mules and a wooden horse [and for 29 figures] for having made their hands and feet of wood, bodies of tow, with spun iron wires, for having colored them and put them together."²¹

In the 19th century, museums began to collect nativity scenes – such as the Cuciniello crèche donated to the Certosa e Museo di San Martino by its creator and designer, Michele Cuciniello – creating a sort of philological and archetypal scenographic model that would determine the exhibition of *presepe* for the following decades. The knowledge that was gleaned from these collecting activities – especially that of

Antonio Perrone, the first scholar of the Neapolitan nativity scene²² – confirmed many attributions, still in use today, that documented artists for whom a monograph did not always exist, or whose contributions to nativity art had not yet been taken into consideration. This approach to connoisseurship thus distances itself from traditional art history by becoming almost a genre unto itself, which centers an attention to morphological (e.g. the shape of the ear, the shape of the nose) and technical (e.g. the brightness and transparency of the surface) details that would determine the artist's characteristics and ground the attribution. This scholarly approach, although more elementary, is not foreign to the analytical method developed in the same period by Giovanni Morelli²³ (1816 – 1891) to distinguish the "manner" of a painter.

As a useful modern support to the attributions made in the 19th-century, there are a series of heads of *presepe* figures, modeled in terracotta (and many of which are now in Munich collections), which contain the sculptor's signature carved inside. Since the sculptor's signature is present within the terracotta head, research on and access to it would necessitate the disassembly of the figure that, according to contemporary conservation practice, would compromise the originality of the artifact (unless disassembly in its constituent parts is necessary for the preservation of a figure). When disassembly is not possible, the use of diagnostic techniques such as X-rays can be of great help²⁴.

Francesco Celibrano (Italian, 1729 – 1811)
The Deposition
 c. 1766 – 68, marble
 Main altar, St. Severo Chapel, Naples.



An 18th-century Neapolitan crèche



The crèche dates from the mid-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century, and was made in Naples, Italy. It consists of 421 items in total.

It is displayed on a twenty-first century custom setting - designed by Alfredo Laino - and is housed in a wooden cabinet with a custom lighting system that can be controlled to simulate sunset and sunrise lighting conditions.

Figures:

Polychromed terracotta heads with painted glass eyes, wooden limbs, and bodies of wire wrapped in hemp; clothing made variously of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century silks, cottons, linens, leather, and paper, some with metallic threads; some figures with additional elements in gold, silver, pearl, coral, ivory, and wood; additional figures. — *Accademie* – entirely modeled of polychromed terracotta or carved wood.
112 total: 94 figures, 6 putti, 5 seraphims, 5 groups of seraphims, 2 accademie

Animals:

Polychromed terracotta, painted wood, iron, and lead; some with painted glass eyes and additional elements in leather, string, and metal, and additional groups of animals composed entirely of polychromed terracotta.
52 total: 37 terracotta animals, 13 carved wood animals, 2 terracotta groups of animals.

Objects:

Painted terracotta, gold, silver, copper, iron or other metals, coral, pearls, ceramic, wax, raw clay, paper, glass, fabric, string, straw, basket fibers and alabaster.
257 total: 66 objects in different materials, 63 painted terracotta objects, 50 wax objects, 36 metal and silver objects, 20 musical instruments, 22 jewels.

Furniture:

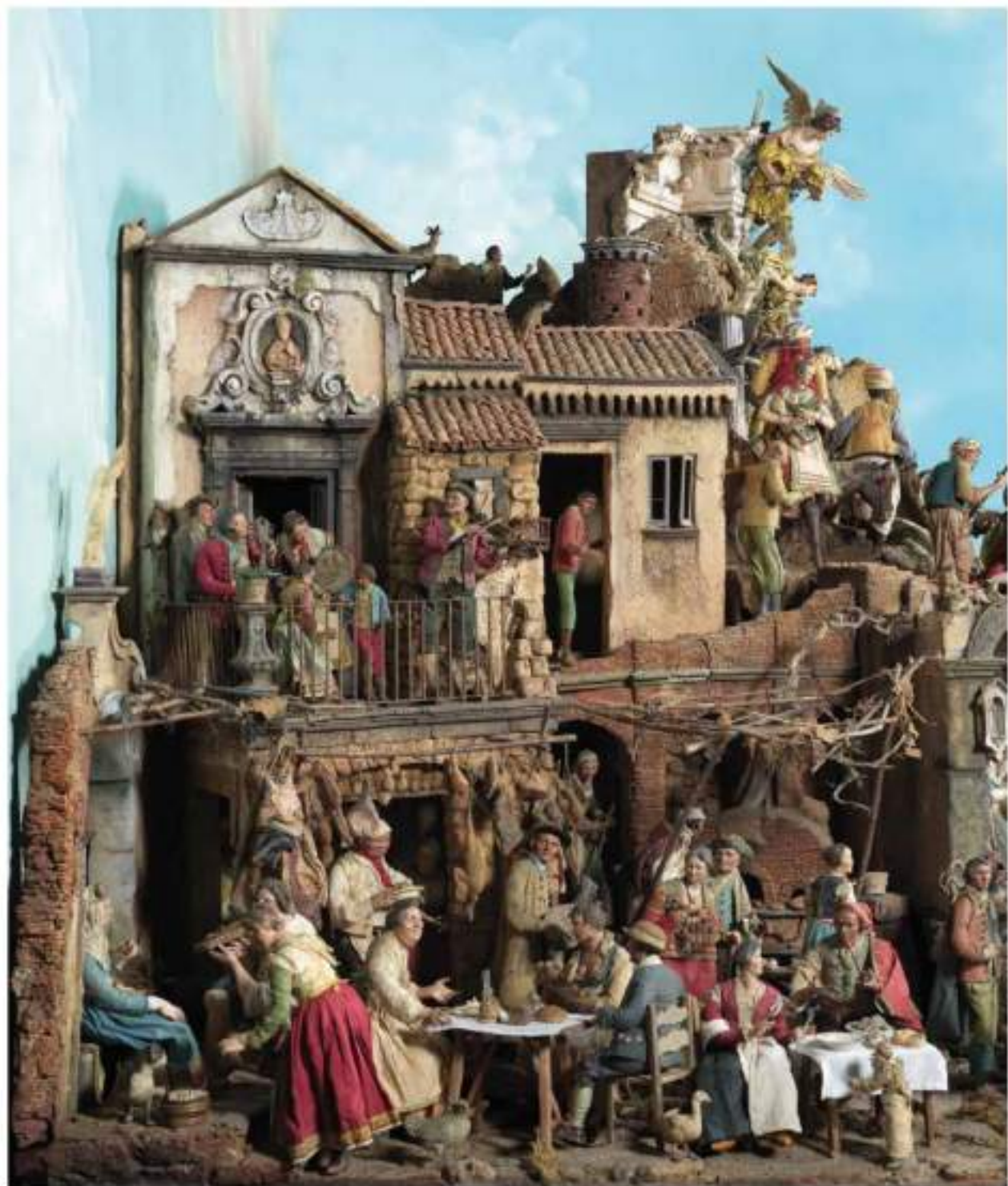
wood, metal, and fabric.

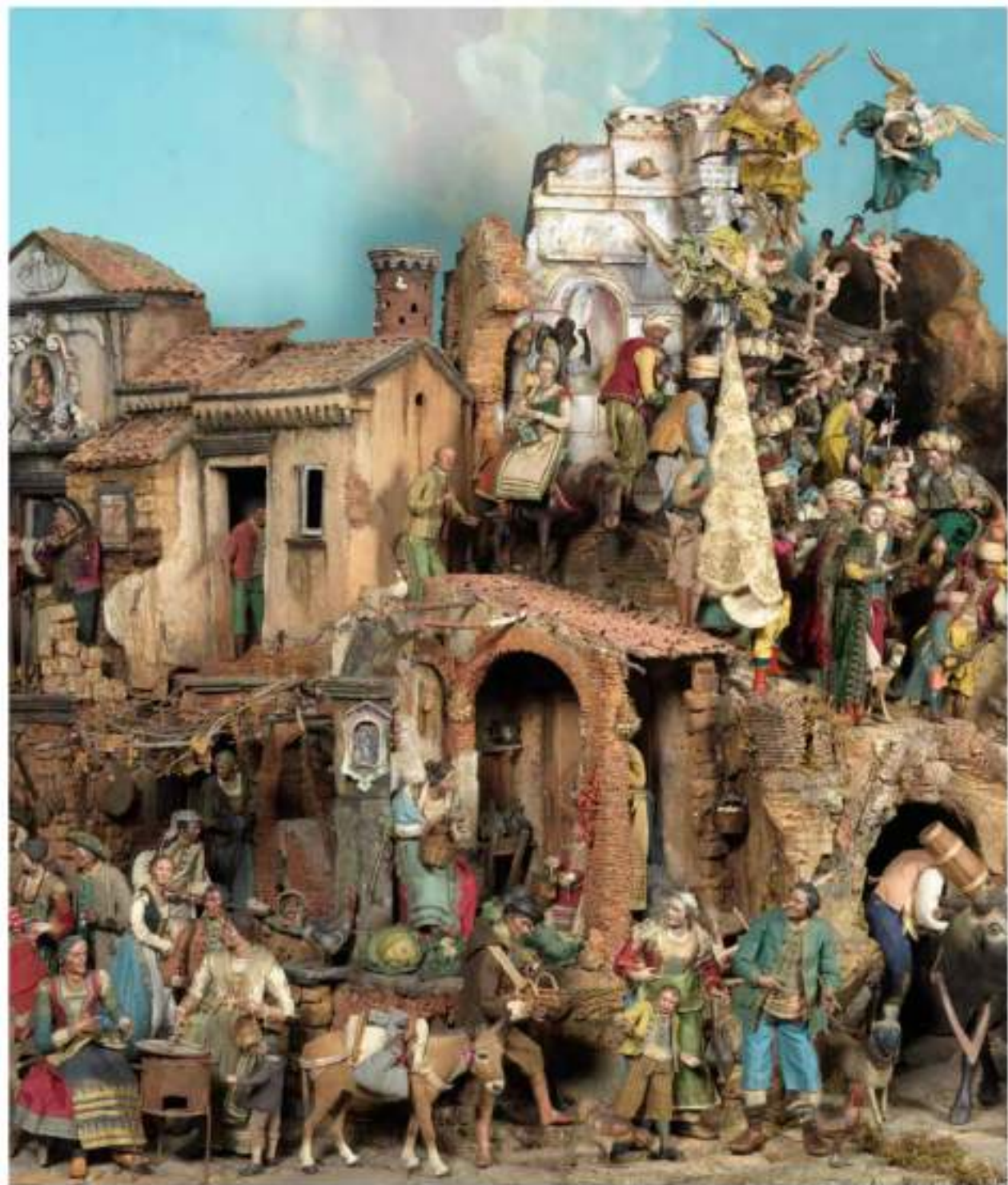
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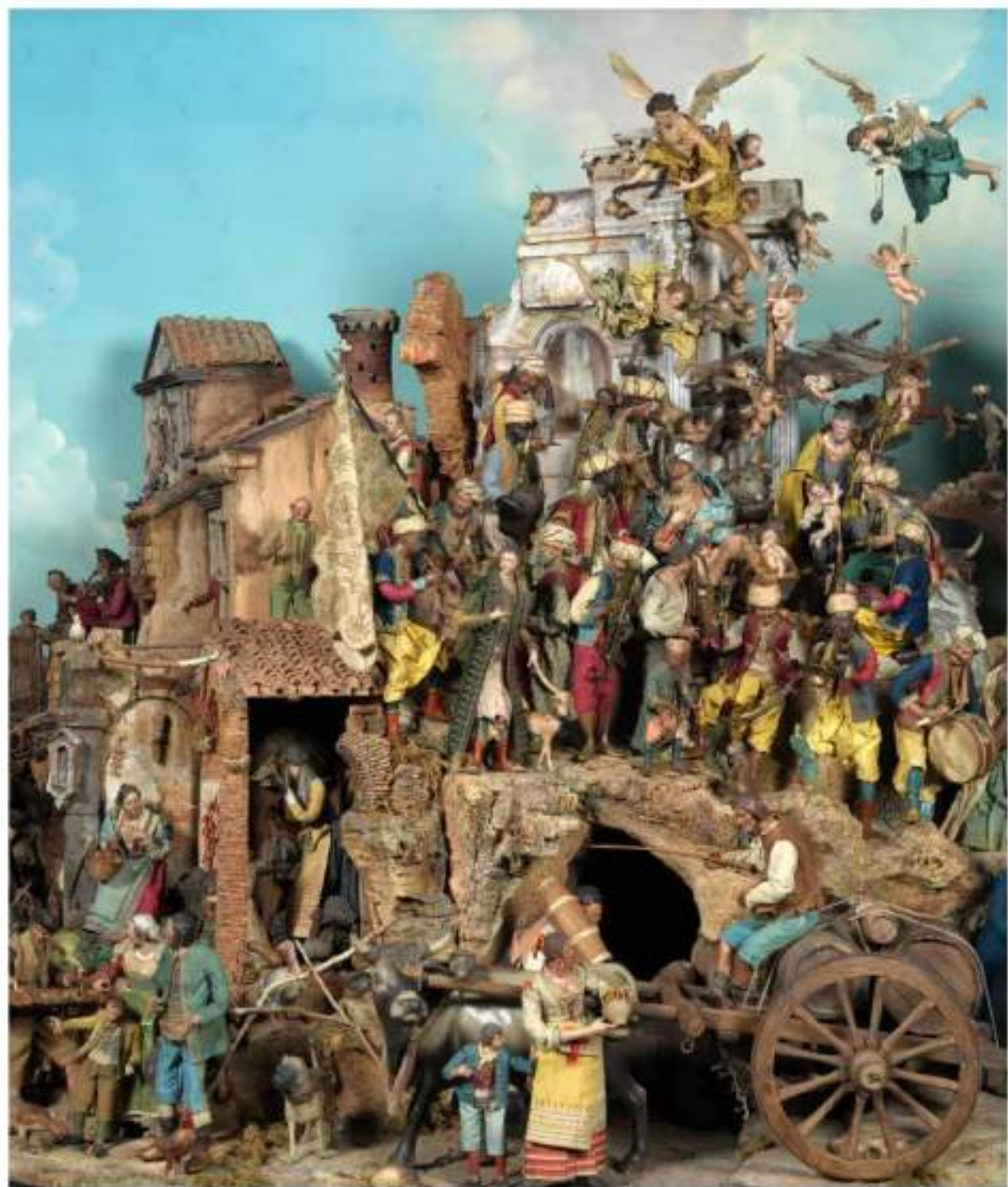
cork, wood, papier-mâché, twigs, and moss, with watercolor and gouache.



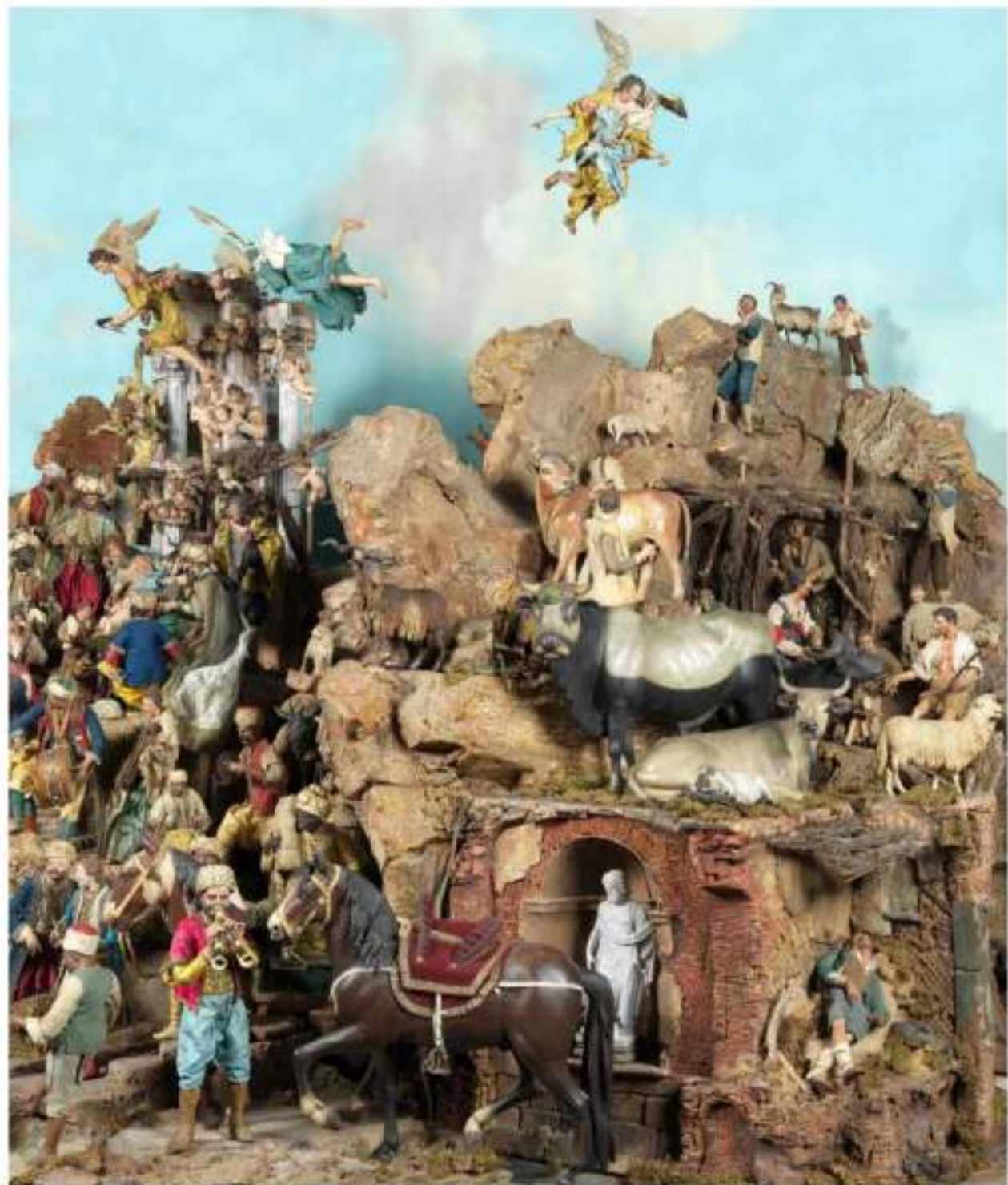














A Neapolitan crèche figure

What makes the eighteenth-century Neapolitan presepe unique are the techniques behind its realization. The figures were, in fact, created using an iron and hemp armature over which the head was modeled in terracotta. The head was the only partially modeled by the artist. To make the figures more durable, the limbs were fashioned from carved wood by dedicated, skilled artisans.

X-radiographs of a presepe figure (A) reveal the differing radio-opacities of the materials of its constitutive parts. The iron wire armature also served as the figure's skeleton, its flexible structure allowing the figures to be manipulated into different gestures and positions (B).

Another peculiar characteristic of the figures are their hand-painted glass eyes (C), which give the figures the appearance of lifelikeness in keeping with baroque conventions. For technical reasons (the glass can melt at the firing temperature of terracotta), they were inserted into the sculpted heads after firing. They were fixed in place by the use of stucco, which was also used to sculpt the figures' eyelids. Once the eyes were in place the head could be painted. X-radiographs clearly show the glass eyes inserted into a figure's head (D, E).

Once all the pieces were assembled, the unclothed figure was ready to be dressed.

In the case of the noble figures of the Orient, the clothes were richly decorated with cloth embroidered with gold thread and adorned with precious stones. The fabric used for the clothes was lightweight and soft (e.g., silk, *battista*, light cotton, etc.), and the clothes were affixed to the figure with nails to create the effect of natural drapery. Floral-patterned fabrics were designed with the small size of the figures in mind to ensure the correct proportions of the patterns once the garments were attached.

For the clothes of the popular and rustic classes (F), the models were often dressed in garb fashioned after the very well-known prints of the *vestitura del Regno*.







Theater and Theatrics

The Latin word *theatrum*, from the Greek θέατρον, derives from θεάομαι meaning "to watch, be a spectator". It indicates a building constructed and "equipped for theatrical representations," usually with a stage, a proscenium, a curtain, scenery, and a pit for the orchestra²¹. The Neapolitan crèche is characterized not only by its scenography but also by its silent theatrics expressed through the facial expressions, groupings, interaction, and gestures of the figures in the scene with their various roles and occupations. The crèche is a polysemic

"installation" that brings together mythology, both classical and Christian, with the traditional folk culture of Naples, made of superstitions and allusions that are often esoteric.

The Neapolitan crèche is so deeply rooted in reality that it sacrifices historical accuracy, enshrining the Nativity in what is actually a living portrait of contemporary Naples. Every crèche has its own author, one who sets the birth of the Christ Child in the present day of his home town.

Scenography

The scenography of a crèche was the creation of the scenographer or the collector who chose which scenes to represent or what part of the story to feature.

The Nativity scene is typically divided into two sections, each of which contains specific elements that are almost always present because of their narrative necessity. One section is sacred, containing a reenactment of the birth of Christ, angels in adoration, and the annunciation to the shepherds who come to worship him, to be joined by the three Kings from the Orient. The other section is secular, consisting of various scenes, such as the tavern, the market, and everyday activities like hunting, the *tarantella*, etc.

The scenography of the crèche depicts rural

Neapolitan architecture, set in a landscape that is both craggy and bucolic. The tempera paintings of the royal crèche in Caserta in 1844, viz. la "Procession of the Shepherds" and the "Procession of the Magi" by Salvatore Fergola²⁵ (1799-1874),



Thomas Jones (Welsh, 1742-1803)
A View of Naples
c. 1782, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London
11,4x16 cm, inv. N. NG6544.

give an idea of how those scenographies must have looked, where the mountains of an imagined Arcadia are depicted. Due to the perishable nature of the materials used in their construction, none of these ephemeral assemblages has survived, except for Father Rocco's, held in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich²⁶.

As a rule, the scenography of the crèche is made of cork bark to imitate mountain rock. Wrought by the

expert hands of Neapolitan craftsmen, it perfectly replicates tuff, the yellowish stone of the ground on which Naples rests, out of which Naples' *palazzi* are built, and much beloved by Thomas Jones. To complete the scenography there is a backdrop that acts as an enlargement of the crèche, creating an optical illusion extending beyond the scene's perimeter to include its panoramic surroundings.

However, the crèche was not a mere representation of Naples in miniature. It was not an attempt at mimesis that guided the construction of the project so much as it was an ingenious method of integrating the crèche in its environment, as if it were an extension of the city, or that the city itself were an extension of it. This is the effect of awe that the constructors of Nativity scenes seek to achieve, an optical suspension of disbelief.

The Neapolitan crèche was nothing less than a *trompe-l'œil*: the scenography in imitation tuff visibly connecting the nativity scenes with the city, itself becoming their continuation in perspective. Foreign observers have not failed to note the ingenuity of this illusionary use of perspective. In his *Italienische Reise* Goethe describes a crèche mounted on the terrace of a *palazzo* so that the scenography of the crèche was set within its natural environment with Vesuvius²⁷ in the background. Samuel Sharp, one of the first Europeans to mention the crèche, describes one that was so perfect in perspective that the village and mountains seen in the distance seemed to be a part of the crèche itself²⁸. In his *Voyage pittoresque*



ou description des Royaumes de Naples et de Sicile, the Abbot of Saint-Non gives us insight into what the enlightened minds of his time considered to be the aesthetic value of the Neapolitan crèche; it was not so much the beauty of the faces or the fine costumes as the architectural ingeniousness that made the crèche an "object worthy of the attention of the

artist or man of taste." He goes on to write that "the furnishings and accessories are placed with such artistry, and one might say with such magic that [the nativity scene] is beyond description. Ruins, neighborhoods, streams, bridges, waterfalls, and mountains, all these set together with such infinite care that an exceptional illusion is the result."²⁸

Ruins

The presence of ancient ruins is a typical feature of the Neapolitan presepe. The reconstruction in miniature of the ancient world in the crèche can serve as an example to better understand the underlying symbolism and the evocative power of anachronism. Often placed in a central position in the Nativity scene, the ruins play an eminently symbolic role in the scenography. It is mainly in the second half of the eighteenth century that they begin to appear in the crèches. No doubt their appearance has to do with the archeological discoveries from excavations at Paestum and Herculaneum, and later in Pompeii, and the resulting new taste for antiquities and the ancient world that invaded the decorative arts toward the end of the century. Naples is surrounded by ancient ruins; statues are unearthed or houses and theaters are brought to light. Piranesi's engravings are sold all over Europe. The city and the surrounding countryside are thronged with visitors on the Grand Tour, all clamoring to see the





ancient ruins. It is only natural that the presepe would reflect this phenomenon, becoming a prime vessel for recreations of ruins that evoke the time of Christ's birth while highlighting the ongoing excavations of Herculaneum as well as the Roman remains incorporated in buildings in contemporary Naples. As, for example, in the Torres brothers' crèche, the story told by Joseph Gorani (Italian, 1740–1819) makes it possible to understand that allusions to antiquity are to be found "in amphorae, classical statues, and Etruscan urns."³⁰ As we have said, the ritual message of the Neapolitan presepe is to relive the story of the birth of Christ. Following this line of thought in an article on the presence of ancient ruins in the Neapolitan nativity scene, Jessica Hughes suggests that the superimposing of different timeframes brings the Good Tidings of Great Joy into the here and now, perpetually announced to Christians and revitalized by every act of faith, in contrast with a historicist approach that would set the Nativity back into a distant time³¹.

Gesture and the Expression of Passion

The aesthetics of the late Baroque period, the historical moment in which the production of the Neapolitan presepe came into its own, fostered the dream of reproducing reality plastically, faithfully, and artistically, thanks to the handwork of artisans skilled in the use of basic materials. The eighteenth-century crèches made a great impression for their

compositional effectiveness and the true-to-life appearance of their figures. The shepherds and other characters were fashioned with great skill in the use of glass eyes, oil coloring, and various techniques to create an illusion of reality that awakened wonderment and awe. The theatricality of the crèche lies in its "imitation of life."

One of the most surprising characteristics of the crèche is certainly the strong emotional depth that the sculptors gave to the faces, expressing and communicating the state of mind of each character. Even if we consider only their countenances, we would still readily perceive each character's personality and emotional state. This reflection may sound banal, but communicating a "sentiment" in a face of about five centimeters is quite a feat. It takes artistic mastery in the expression of "sentiment" together with the technical skill to sculpt and color skin.

The description of passions²² or human physiognomy – from Aristotle²³ to Leonardo da Vinci²⁴, along with Gerolamo Cardano (*Metoposcopia*, published in 1560, illustrated with drawings)²⁵, Giambattista della Porta's famous *De humana physiognomia* (1586)²⁶, Ciro Spontone (*La Metoposcopia*, 1625)²⁷, Pomponio Gaurico²⁸, Engel, and Lavater²⁹ – was a fundamental field of study for history painting and sculpture in every Italian academy, and it was undoubtedly known by artisans, if only through hearsay.

Perhaps the Neapolitan humanist Pomponio Gaurico (1482-1530) is the figure most attuned with the concerns of Neapolitan artists. In his treatise *De scultura* he writes: "Physiognomy is a type of observation by which the qualities of the soul can be discerned through the characteristics of the body...[.] If [the eyes] are big enough and the gaze is slightly moist, they reveal a great mind, a sublime soul capable of great things, but also that



Engraving n. 15 from Andrea De Jorio, *La mimica degli artisti investigata nel gergo napoletano* del canonico Andrea De Jorio, 1832. Naples.

of a wrathful man, fond of wine, and immoderately prideful, like Alexander of Macedonia. If you see a large nose, solid and squat, like a lion's or Moloch's, you may take it as a sign of strength and arrogance. A square brow, as wide as it is high, is a very clear indication of prudence, wisdom, intelligence, and a splendid soul."⁴⁰



Engraving n. 21 from Andrea De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi: investigazioni nel gestire napoletano* del comico Andrea De Jorio. 1832, Naples.

Another treatise on physiognomy, written by the German philosopher and writer Johann Jakob Engel (1741-1802), is most interesting for our subject. In his *Letters on Gesticulation*⁴¹, he stresses the importance of gesture in the art of expressing the sentiments of the soul. In his treatise on expression and recitation, he holds that physiognomy must be "like gesticulation," because, he says, passions are to be described in all their complexity, they cannot be defined by a mere static representation of the face.

Engel makes a distinction between physiognomy, which "analyzed features that are fixed and permanent," and gesticulation, which "studies transitory movements of the body, indicative of a particular and well-defined state of mind." Gesticulation is thus no less important than facial expression for interpreting a figurative action.

If we consider the *crèche* to be a fixed image of an action suspended, or about to be concluded, then gesture – body language – becomes of fundamental importance, along with facial expressions. As in the *commedia dell'arte*, the figures in a Neapolitan *crèche* embody social types whose traits they mime with gestures typical of the theater where, even when farcical effects are intended, the character is revealed through a sole gesture.

In the *crèche* too, gesture reveals the person. Emphatic, overdone, far from the canons of naturalism and the sobriety of normal conversation, the gestures of the *crèche* figures are theatrical and hence can be understood at a

distance. Gesture is also useful to the narrative of this silent show in which dumb figures are mimes: the wonderstruck shepherd, unable to verbalize his words, raises his arms on high; the beggar cannot intone his mantra, but he plaintively holds out his hand to passerby. The gestures of the figures are synthesized in facial expression and the position of the body, a crucial element, laden with theatrical force – a force that Walter Benjamin found in the streets, squares, and buildings of the city of Naples.



Naples, the “Porous” City

In August of 1925, in an article simply titled “Naples,” published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*,¹² Walter Benjamin and Asya Lacis recount their impressions of Naples. It was only the first of a series about different cities, in which they describe each one’s form and, above all, its peculiar flux and dynamics, in other words imagery in motion. In Naples, a “porous” city, Benjamin sees a city in which life is lived outside in public spaces and yet, at the same time, there are nevertheless invisible and obscure spaces that are impossible to define. He writes: “The architecture is porous like this rock [tuff, the volcanic rock of and on which the town is built]. Actions coalesce with the buildings, courtyards, covered passageways, and stairways. In the evening these become the scene of a new and unexpected constellation.

The brand of definiteness is cast aside. No situation seems permanent, no form asserts itself as ‘thus

and not otherwise.’”¹³ This porousness derives not only from the indolence of the southern craftsman but also, above all, from a passion for improvisation, which demands that the space and the event be preserved at all cost. The buildings are used as a stage and are divided into numberless theatricals, all going on at the same time. Balconies, inner courtyards, windows, portals, stairways, roofs are at once stages and enclosures.

Benjamin makes Naples a place where no form, whether social or architectonic, is “conceived forever” but where everything is in a state of becoming and perpetual change. Thus, it is that the porousness of the architecture reflects the porosity of Neapolitan life, traits that come together in the passion for improvisation that gives rise to sundry forms in the spaces that he sees as the settings of folk theatricals, the boisterous traffic of street music relived as residues of ancient festivities and,

at the same time, preludes to the next performance. These lives are a far cry from those lived inside dark northern barracks. Indeed, Neapolitans descend from the houses to flood the public sphere of the streets, creating shared spaces and, at the same time, confirming the deep social differences that are evident even when different social classes congregate on the same stage: "Even the poorest existence is sovereign in its obscure awareness of being part, in spite of its degradation, of one of the unique images of the Neapolitan street, that of enjoying the sloth of poverty and partaking in the

great overall panorama."

Naples appears to Benjamin as a place of resistance to modernity trapped in a self-referential circuit, a resistance that expresses itself by living crammed in the gaps of this porosity¹⁰, holding on to values and archaic residues as a bulwark against change. This magnificent – indeed, inspired – description had to be quoted at length, for Benjamin succeeds in capturing the theatricality of the city, in which Naples becomes a grand stage where the Neapolitans play their parts just like their miniature counterparts in the *crèche*.



The Mise-en-scène of the Crèche and its Narrations

As part of its repertory, the crèche tells a story of the birth of Christ, one that is already well known and whose interpretation will always be new and unique depending on the actors and its staging – in effect, it is a show that is constantly renewed. The Neapolitan nativity scene is divided into successive acts,

as in a play, to allow the drama to unfold. The crèche assembles several *tableaux vivants*, one after the other. In the nativity scenes, sacred representations of the angels, the shepherds, the Wise Men, and the adoration overlap with scenes from everyday life, such as the tavern and the market.





The Nativity

The group of the Holy Family is made up of Joseph, Mary, and the Christ Child. Usually located at the focal point of the various other scenes of the *crèche*, the Holy Family is where the various movements and gazes converge.

Joseph and Mary are the only ones wearing clothes from the biblical era, making them anachronistic in comparison with the other figures, all of whom are dressed according to the fashion of the eighteenth century. Every element of these figures carries some symbolic and spiritual meaning. The Madonna is dressed in pink to signify her terrestrial birth and wrapped in an azure mantle as a symbol of her celestial spirituality. St. Joseph wears the colors of the priesthood, purple and yellow, indicating the union of the soul with God. He often has a priestly tonsure. He holds a staff in his hand bearing a blooming lily, a symbol of purity, but also of absolute trust in God and his acceptance of the divine origin of Mary's motherhood. And then there is Baby Jesus, naked in his incarnation, come into the world to redeem it from original sin. The *crèche* is the representation of Christ who is made flesh for the sake of mankind. Tommaso da Celano, St. Francis of Assisi's biographer, recounts the night when the first cradle was built in Greccio: "The Saint is there, in ecstasy before the crib, his spirit vibrant with compunction and ineffable joy. Then the priest solemnly celebrates the Eucharist before the crib, and he experiences a consolation greater than any he had ever known."⁴² This consolation is the perfect beatitude of which St. Thomas Aquinas speaks, a sublime happiness. For Thomas, man can only be happy when he receives

God (*fruitio Dei*), which becomes a possibility for mankind in the moment when Christ incarnates. Man yearns to experience the manifestation of God, but he can only do so within the limits inherent in his nature. With the incarnation, God becomes man so that man can converse with Him in the Faith, in a human way (*secundum modum humanum*). This is why St. Thomas defines the incarnation as a grace (*gratia incarnationis*), necessary for man to reach his beatitude.

The incarnation of Christ, his earthly life, and his sacrifice, committed only once, becomes permanent and, above all, a present reality every time Holy Communion is celebrated. On this concept the philosopher Kierkegaard wrote: "Since in relation to the absolute, there is only one time, the present; whoever is not contemporary to the absolute, for him the absolute is nothing. Since Christ is the absolute, it can readily be seen that there is only one moment in relation to Him: the present moment."⁴³

The representation of the birth of Christ is also the representation of his incarnation, which culminates in the sacrifice that is celebrated later in the Holy Communion. This is why St. Francis felt the need to celebrate mass before the *presepe*. For this same reason, for centuries, the Nativity has been placed on the altar where Christmas masses are celebrated. On the same level are the manger with the incarnated Child and the pyx containing the wafer. Around the Child throng celestial figures in adoration – the angels – and terrestrial figures like the shepherds and the Magi.



Mary (attrib. to Giuseppe Gori, Italian, 1739 - 1815).



Joseph (attrib. to Giuseppe Gori, Italian, 1720 - 1815).

Angels in Adoration

The group of angels come down from Heaven to pay homage to Christ incarnate is the most spiritual representation of adoration in the crèche. As found in paintings, there are three kinds of adoring angels: clothed angels, cherubim, and seraphim.⁴¹ The clothed angels are mannequins made of tow with terracotta heads. They are garbed in a broad silk garment and a tunic in which a thin copper wire is stitched to imitate flight. They also have silk volants of various colors. The model for these

figures is found in seventeenth-century painting and, for Naples, in those of Francesco Solimena in particular; they are also modeled after the famous "guardian angels" by sculptors Nicola Fumo and Domenico Antonio Vaccaro, as well as the torch-bearing angels by Sanmartino on the sides of the altar in the Girolamini church in Naples.

The cherubs appear as babes with wings and are modeled on cupids, replicas of the Greek god Eros. These cupids could already be found



in ancient Roman times, as in the frescoes in the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, where they had a mainly decorative function. They were often used by Donatello in the Renaissance as an ornamental motif. Linked to music, they can be seen on the decoration of the balconies in the

San Carlo opera house in Naples. The seraphs are the purist of all the angels. Although they are described in Isalah as having six wings, in the *presepe*, as in paintings, they are represented as bodiless figures but for the head and two wings extending from the collar bone.





Angel (attrib. to Angelo Vivanti, Italian, active from 1758 to 1829).



An angel (attrib. to Angelo Viva, Italian, active from 1758 to 1824).



An angel (attrib. to Angelo Viva, Italian, active from 1758 to 1824).





The bagpipe players (*zampognari* or *pifferai*), (attrib. to Angelo Viva, Italian, active from 1758 to 1824).

The Adoration of the Shepherds

Close to the holy family we find the shepherds kneeling in wonder before the Child to offer baskets of fruit and lambs. Among them are two musicians, the *zampognari*, one playing a bagpipe and the other a shawm. In Naples, the *zampognari* are a typical Christmas presence. Already in the seventeenth century they would come down from the Abruzzo mountains in December to accompany the songs sung before the *presepe*⁶⁷ or before sacred images in the homes of the faithful during the "Novena di Natale"⁶⁸. This ritual would be repeated throughout the "Novena," i.e., the nine days before Christmas, from December 16

to Christmas Eve. In 1759, St. Alfonso Maria de' Liguori (1696-1787)⁶⁹ had the *Novena del Santo Natale* printed, introducing this content into the *novene* of the city. St. Alfonso, a devotee of crèches, was also the author of the Christmas song "Quando nascette ninnò" (1754), which tells the Nativity tale with great tenderness and intensity, using the dialect so that even Neapolitans who did not know Italian could understand it. From this song comes the better-known "Tu scendi dalle stelle," in Italian, which is still perhaps the best-known Christmas song all over Italy.





The Adoration of the Magi

The only acknowledged source for the arrival of the three Wise Men to the scene of the Nativity is Matthew 2:1-12: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." The gospel does not say how many⁵⁰ Wise Men came, but in modern iconography there are always three. Although various hypotheses are advanced as to why there should be three, three being a traditional symbol of perfection, as in the Trinity (*Omne trium est perfectum*)⁵¹, it is likely that it is suggested by the three gifts that the Magi bring Jesus: gold, frankincense⁵², and myrrh. As for the symbolic meaning of these gifts, tradition has it that the gold stands for Jesus' kingship, frankincense for his divinity, and myrrh for his mortality.

The Turkish costumes of the three kings references a taste for exotic apparel that had spread through Europe, and especially in Naples, in the eighteenth century.

The feature that makes the Neapolitan *presepe* a unique artistic creation is that the figures in the scene are contemporary with the period in which the *presepe* was conceived and created. The sacred event is not set in first-century Bethlehem but in eighteenth-century Naples, to which all the surrounding houses, artifacts, and costumes clearly belong. Thus, the *presepe* reflects contemporary

society and is itself a precious historical document. As we have seen, in the *presepe* the Magi, who have come from afar with their retinue to worship the Christ child, are dressed and turbaned like men from the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century. The identification of these foreigners as "Turks" is due to a series of events that took place in European political affairs, and particularly in Naples between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

After the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, relationships intensified between the Ottoman Empire and other countries, especially European ones. Many messages were brought by ambassadors sent from Constantinople to resolve diplomatic issues with various European countries⁵³.

The effect of these ambassadorial contacts on Europeans was enormous. For the first time, the magnificence of the Turkish empire could be truly appreciated. This is precisely what happened in 1741 in Naples, when the ambassador from Sultan Mahmud I, Hacı Husein Effendi, arrived with his entourage to sign a treaty for peace, trade, and navigation between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Naples. He stayed for over a month⁵⁴.

Before Effendi's arrival, people had had a somewhat negative view of Turks, a collective memory of Turkish raids, plunder, and violence. The visit of the Turkish envoys counteracted this memory and imposed a new narrative, that of an East full of rare and precious things, à la *Thousand and One Nights*,

A chronicler of the time wrote "We have seen the members of the Turkish legacy walking the streets of Naples [...] with their picturesque clothes; we have discovered their strange tastes, their singular customs; we have admired animals we had never seen before, sent or presented as gifts of the Great Lord. All this has made quite a stir and the echoes will last for years."⁵² This keen interest in the oriental world, in Naples as in the rest of Europe, influenced the applied arts and fashion, and indeed lasted for several decades.

In the Neapolitan nativity scenes, the cortege of the magi is often announced by a Turkish band playing oriental instruments and brassy. Such bands were familiar to Westerners, since they were present in carnival masques.

Sara Goudar⁵⁶, a friend of Casanova's and King Ferdinando IV's mistress, described the carnival in Naples in 1774 in these words: "A torrent of sounds

and cries erupted from the crowd, who poured into Toledo⁵⁷, taking both sides of the avenue to leave the way open for the floats to come through: it moved in waves, like an impetuous sea, in the midst of which, like splashes of color against a dark background, masks of all sorts: Turks, Africans, savages, Chinese, satyrs, cyclopes, sea monsters, witches, soothsayers, and gods and goddesses. This deluge of masks was urged on by the sound of an Ottoman march played by the brass band of the magnificent procession of prisoners, the rear was brought up by 24 eunuchs and the same number of Moors, janissaries, and richly done-up horses."⁵⁸ The brass band (*mehter*) of Turkish musicians was led by a band leader, called a *mehterbaga*, with a large baton to give the musicians the time. It was originally a military band, to accompany soldiers on the field of battle and keep their spirits up. In Europe, they were employed to celebrate grand events⁵⁹, even if their music was often held to be "deafening," horribly discordant for Western ears, and was eventually moderated. In the crèche, the military fiction of Turkish brass band is attenuated with their celebration of the birth of Christ.



An illustration from *Relazione della venuta di Hagi Hussein Effendi Ambasciatore straordinario della Porta Ottomana, e della pubblica audienza, che ha avuto dal Re nostro signore il giorno 18 settembre 1741* (Report of the arrival of Hagi Hussein Effendi, Ottoman Envoy Extraordinary, and of the public audience granted by our lord the King, September 18, 1741) (Francesco Ricciardi, Naples, 1741).



Giuseppe Bonito (Italian, 1707 - 1783)
Turkish Embassy in Naples
1741, oil on canvas, inv. N. P00054, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Plathazze (attrib. to Giuseppe Gori, Italian, 1788 - 1815).





Caspar (attrib. to Giuseppe Gori, Italian, 1739 - 1815)





Melchior (attrib. to Giuseppe Gori, Italian, 1799 - 1815)













A Persian man holding a bag
(attrib. to Giovanni Battista Pizzoni, Italian, active from 1750 to 1799)





The band leader called Motherday
(attrib. to Giovan Battista Polkore, Italian, active from 1760 to 1799).





A Persian band player with a Chapeau-chinois
(attrib. to Giovan Battista Polkora, Italian, active from 1750 to 1799).





A Peruvian bard player with a Yipon
(attrib. to Giovan Battista Polkoro, Italian, active from 1763 to 1799).





*A Persian band player with a double Zurna
(attrib. to Salvatore Di Franco, Italian, active late 18th – early 19th century).*





A Persian band player with a trumpet.
(attrib. to Giovan Battista Polkora, Italian, active from 1761 to 1799).





A Persian band player with a Turban
(attrib. to Giuseppe Gori, Italian, 1798-1815).





A Circassian band player with cymbals
(attrib. to Giovan Battista Polkuro, Italian, active from 1760 to 1799).





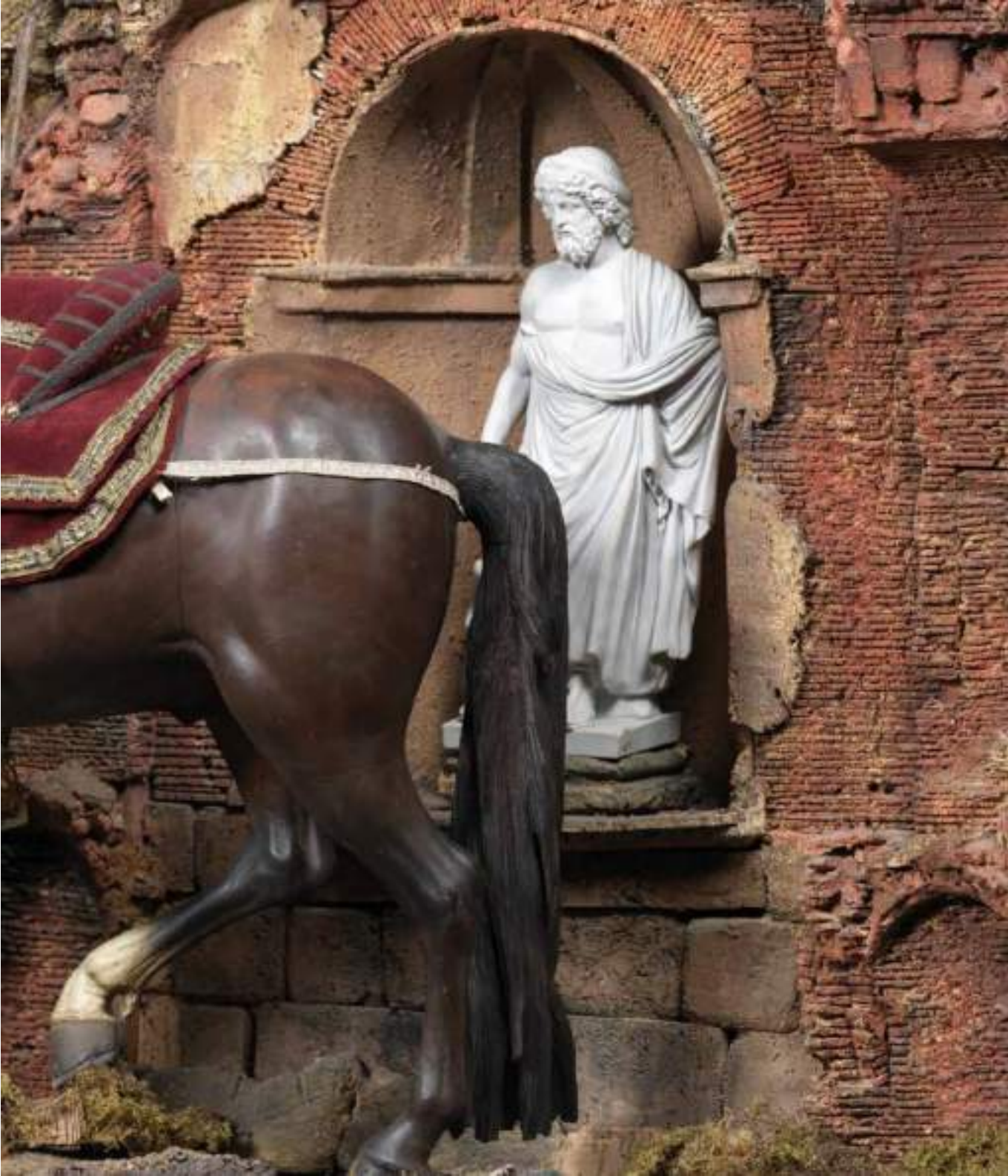
An Oriental woman (Samaritan) with a harp
(attrib. to Angelo Viva, Italian, active from 1758 to 1824).













The Annunciation to the Shepherds

Coming back to the sacred representation in the crèche, one of the scenes that commemorates and enhances the importance of the sacred event is the annunciation to the shepherds, as found in the Gospel according to Luke. It tells that an angel from God brings the shepherds, who were in their fields tending their sheep, the good tidings of the birth of the Messiah. This episode is also often represented by seventeenth-century painters.

Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, who worked in Naples²⁰ on several occasions, depicted common people in their rude living conditions. In his *Adoration* he gives a naturalistic view of the shepherds come to worship Christ. Another painter active in Naples was the so-called Maestro dell'Annuncio ai Pastori, author of many paintings on this theme, all made in Naples. It is important to mention these strong iconographic models from the seventeenth century because they were the very ones that inspired the artists of the next century to create figures of the same scene for the Neapolitan crèche. From them comes also the expression of awe, impressed in terracotta, on the faces of the shepherds while they gaze upward, mouths agape, lifting their arms as if to receive the light emanating from the angel, their countenances expressing wonderment and joy. This scene is generally composed of an angel with a cartouche inscribed with the Nativity, shepherds in ecstasy, and another shepherd, Benino, who lies fast asleep.

The group is located near a hut or shed, with flocks and herds nearby.

Benino is a stock figure in these scenes, and is usually a boy or a young shepherd. He gets his name from a character in a religious work on the birth of Jesus, the *Carata dei Pastori* (1698) by the playwright and librettist Andrea Petrucci (1651-1706), before the creation of the *opera buffa* in Southern Italy. The



A shepherd (attrib. to Lorenzo Moccia, Italian, active 1760 - 1789).

Cantata, which is still performed at Christmas time in Naples by the company directed by the famous actor and singer Peppe Barra¹¹, tells the story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and the obstacles demons set in their path to keep Jesus from being born. The demons are ultimately defeated by the angels and the work ends with the shepherds, hunters, and fishermen worshiping the Child. Among the shepherds is a lad, Benino, who is sleeping until he is awakened by Armenzio, an old shepherd. Benino tells him of a wonderful dream he had had about "a splendid baby being born in a

dark grotto in Bethlehem." For this reason, albeit some interpretations¹² see the sleeping shepherd as representing those who do not acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah and remain indifferent to His message, most Neapolitans see Benino as the shepherd in the crèche who dreams about the babe in the manger, and who – according to an ancient legend – must not be woken or the crib will vanish along with his dream.

Symbolically, it is as if Benino, in his initiatory dream, prepares for a journey towards spiritual awakening sent to him by a guardian angel¹³.



Benino the sleeping shepherd (attrib. to Francesco Cappiello, Italian, active 1770-1800).





The Secular Representation: the tavern and daily life

"Ambivalence" is critical to reading the crèche. A subject, character, or animal always means something other than itself, and often can have several meanings, and can even mean something and its opposite.

Take the scene of the tavern (or inn), a place of pleasure, fun, games, good food, dance and song. It is also the place where Joseph and Mary, looking for a place to sleep, have been turned away. And it is also frequented by women of ill repute and

shady characters.

The innkeeper, a main character, is often portrayed as a shrewd and crafty personage who takes advantage of his customers. In the Neapolitan writer Giambattista Basile's "Cunto de fuerco," the "Tale of the Ogre,"²⁴ the innkeeper cheats a certain Antuono out of certain magical objects he has by intoxicating him with bread, wine, soup, and meat. In Andrea Petrucci's "Canzata del pastori," Belphegor disguises himself as an innkeeper in his



Gaspare Traversi (Italian, c. 1722 - 1770)

The Drunk

1733-34, oil on canvas, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples.



Returning to the tavern we must not forget about food, the real protagonist. Food that is displayed, hung up, desired. Food – and this is true only in the world around about the crib – is so abundant that it almost satiates, vicariously, those Neapolitan *lazzaroni* who for centuries never had enough to eat. There are other actions that take place in the tavern that are fundamental to the scene, like the *tarantella*, a traditional dance of Southern Italy. There was no true Neapolitan hostility in which one could not play and dance the *tarantella*. The typical scene shows two dancers playing castanets, while a third is a lad playing the *trichefallocche*. In Naples, the *tarantella* is usually danced, generally by common people, on special occasions, the most important one being the feast day of the Madonna dell'Arco²⁰. People would go on a pilgrimage to this sanctuary, a few hours' walk from Naples, and on the way there and on the way back, they would celebrate, drinking wine and dancing as long as they could, a celebration that has roots in pre-Christian rites.

In the eighteenth century and during the first half of the nineteenth, when a trip to Italy became fashionable throughout Europe, the *tarantella* attracted the attention of travelers on the Grand Tour. Great musicians composed classical versions,

like the one orchestrated by Gioacchino Rossini, *La danza* (1835). Franz Liszt made a transcription for the piano, while Chopin used it for his *Tarantella* in A major, op. 43 (1841). *La tarantella*, with rituals similar to exorcism, is typically danced in a tavern, a place rife with dark, ambivalent meanings. Finally, we have the market with its goods on display for sale and its actors, each bearing his or her own esoteric and anthropological meanings: the chestnut roaster, the choesemonger, *Cicciurco* with his wagon loaded with barrels and kegs, and other vendors.



A peasant woman playing the *trichefallocche*
(attrib. to Salvatore (D) Franco, Italian, active late 18th – early 19th century).









Costumes

The costume the nativity figure wears is identical to that worn by an actor. Indeed, costumes are important because, along with gestures and attitude, they reveal a figure's character. However, in nativity scenes, the costume never indicates a particular taste or personality; rather, it denotes a profession or character type. The nativity scene is, effectively, one big parade where everyone wears a uniform indicative of their status and social class. As in reality, where appearances often reveal character, the costumes of the *croche* figures are really their second skin.

Moreover, as in theater, the figures' costumes are always luxurious. Not only are they the result of a social, even ethnographic study of Neapolitan life, but they are also made from precious materials: for example, the costumes for the royal *presepe*, or nativity scene, are produced in the factory of San

Leucio⁷, founded in 1778 by King Ferdinand near the Royal Palace of Caserta.

Fashion in eighteenth-century Naples followed two main trends. On the one hand, the aristocratic class went to increasingly extravagant lengths to conform to the sophisticated fashions of the European courts. On the other hand, the popular class took refuge in stereotyped local costumes defined by a marked propensity for theatricality and excessive decoration. Travelers on the Grand Tour immediately perceived this characteristic local dress.

To create the costumes of the shepherds, artisans used silk along with fine cottons, *batiste* (a fine, semi-transparent linen), and linen. Because of the small size of the figures, silk fabrics with patterns (such as flowers, polka dots, and stripes) were made in miniature to give even more verisimilitude to the final rendering of the dress.





A strolling musician (or peregrinatore)
(attrib. to Francesco Cappello, Italian, active from 1770 to 1800)



A peasant woman and a child (attrib. to Lorenzo Mosca, Italian, active from 1760 to 1780).

Dresses of the Kingdom

In 1783, Ferdinand IV, King of Naples, entrusted the painters Alessandro D'Anna and Antonio Berotti with the task of documenting the styles, costumes, and characteristic clothing of the various provinces of his kingdom. This ethnographic survey was intended to feed the contemporary European interest in popular customs as well as curiosity for all that was new, unprecedented, and exotic.

In the Kingdom of Naples, every small village, even the most isolated, had its own distinctive costume, one proudly worn as a representation of a unique local identity. For festive occasions it was

embellished with bright colors and elaborate cuts⁷². The illustrations reproduced in the *Dresses of the Kingdom* were very successful. Not only were they reinterpreted by various artists during the nineteenth century, but they were also used to decorate the porcelain and figures produced at the Royal Manufactory. Indeed, they were used to dress the figures of the nativity scene held in the royal collection. The *presepe* thus became a sort of snapshot of the Bourbon world, with its popular figures dressed in characteristic festive costumes.



Luigi del Giudice (Italian c. 1764 - 1829)

Costumi delle Provincie di Principato Ultra. Festa di Montevergine, S. Angelo dei Lombardi, Lioni, Castel Frangi, Volturno, Boscuta, Bagnoli, Guardia Lombardi

Early 18th cent., watercolored etching, inv. N. 3531, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples.



A chestnut vendor
(attrib. to Giuseppe De Luca, Italian, active between 1795 and 1827).





A secondary figure (*mezzo-carattere*) with a pipe:
(attrib. to Lorenzo Mosca, Italian, active from 1760 to 1780).





A peasant girl
(attrib. to Niccolò Frangini, Italian, active late 18th - early 19th century).





A bourgeois
(attrib. to Lorenzo Mosca, Italian, active from 1760 to 1780).





A peasant woman
(attrib. to Angelo Vivanti, Italian, active from 1758 to 1824).





A bourgeois
(attrib. to Lorenzo Mosca, Italian, active from 1760 to 1789).





A peasant girl
(attrib. to Francesco Coppicella, Italian, active from 1770 to 1800).





A bourgeois (*mizozo-carattere*)
[attrib. to Giovanni Battista Poldoro, Italian, active from 1750 to 1799].





A peasant woman
(attrib. to Camillo Ceccheno, Italian, active late 18th - early 19th century).

A peasant girl
(attrib. to Nicola Inghisi, Italian, active late 18th - early 19th century).





A Tiraboli vendor N. Sorrento
(attrib. to Niccolò Bonini, Italian, active from 1760 to 1806)





An old peasant woman with a goiter
(attrib. to Niccolò Bonini, Italian, active from 1760 to 1806)





A peasant man
(attrib. to Francesco Cippicelli, Italian, active from 1770 to 1800).



Hairstyles

Another important element of nativity figures are their hairstyles, which were fashioned from a hairstyle modeled first by the sculptor in terracotta. In fact, it is possible to date a nativity figure through an analysis of its hairstyle because it can be traced back to a specific historical moment.

Women's hairstyles essentially belong to three types: those influenced by Turkish styles, Neoclassical-inspired styles, and, finally, simple popular hairstyles. In Turkish hairstyles, the hair is usually pulled back from the top of the head with colored silk bands and veils. Neoclassical hairstyles feature thin ribbons and bows that hold the hair back. Such styles reference the frescoes of Herculaneum reproduced in the 1757 text by Ottavio Antonio Bayardi, *Le pitture antiche*

*d'Ercolano e contorni*⁷. Finally, in popular hairstyles, hair is pulled back and covered with traditional local materials.

Masculine hairstyles also drew inspiration from various oriental sources. For example, one such source was the Circassians who, according to custom, shaved their hair to leave only a tuft worn on the side of the head. Long mustaches are another distinctive feature of foreign grooming traditions adapted in Neapolitan grooming and nativity scenes. The Circassians used to shave their beards but wore long, thick mustaches. Commoners sported unkempt hair, while others shaved their heads, leaving only two tufts of hair on the side so they could wear hats more comfortably.











Jakob Philipp Hackert (German, 1734-1807)
Royal Family Roaming on Cardinale's Estate
 1791, oil on canvas; 56.5 x 100 cm, inv. N. OA 7209
 Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples



Jakob Philipp Hackert (German, 1734-1807)
Sketch for the fresco Ferdinand IV with His Family at the Harvest at the Cardinale's Estate
 1791, oil on canvas; 54 x 100 cm, inv. N. OA 7217
 Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples

Farm Animals

The Neapolitan nativity scene is like a Virgilian tribute to bucolic culture. The many animals featured in the nativity scene and especially in Tavern scenes, such as rabbits, turkeys, chickens, and pigeons, are those typically found in the farmyards of Campania. From the Middle Ages until the end of World War II, throughout Italy, especially in rural areas, these animals shared the spaces of daily life with humans, without fences or cages, as they appear in the *presepe*. On rare occasions we find animals such as wild boars, foxes, and deer in nativity scenes. Other *presepe* animals – present above all in the scene of the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* – are cattle, sheep, and horses.

Among domestic animals, those most represented and important in the Bourbon period are dogs. Dogs were trained for hunting and as pets. Hunting was the favorite activity of Charles of Bourbon and especially of his son Ferdinand IV, and it was practiced in many parts of the kingdom. During the 18th century, many *presepe* artists began to paint portraits of these dogs, so beloved by their royal masters, and it is thanks to these portraits that we understand this aspect of Bourbon daily life.

At the end of the 19th century, Antonio Perrone²¹ – collector, *presepe* enthusiast, and author of a first *History of the nativity scene* – compiled a list of nativity figures representing dogs, which he had managed to find in the great 18th century *presepe* collections. In 1873 Perrone bought part of

the famous nativity scene from the priest Nicola Ricciardi. Ricciardi, who belonged to a family of wealthy silk merchants, lived near the workshop of the Vassallo brothers, who were considered, together with Francesco Gallo, the best sculptors of nativity scene animals. Ricciardi had commissioned several animals from these artists, including “a shepherd dog from the flock of Prince Antonio Borbone, a Danish dog, and several greyhounds from King Ferdinand IV.”

Allegedly the king was very surprised to see his animals portrayed in the Ricciardi *presepe*. The priest had also transcribed the names of the animals he had represented, and Perrone recorded all this information in his inventory. We therefore know the names that the Bourbons had given to their animals and their breed. There is, for example, the Danish dog Befezza, the shepherd





A cat (attrib. to Francesco di Nardo, Italian, active late 17th cent. - 1730).



A turkey (attrib. to Francesco Gallo, Italian, active 1770 - 1829).



A rabbit (attrib. to Nicola Testaldi, Italian, active late 18th - early 19th century).

dog *Sornione*, and *Fenz* the greyhound, as well as *Dammerina*, *Magrino*, *Riccio*, *Ragostella*, *Fedelino*, *Dessis*, *Spezzaferri* (Francis I's dog), *Trifance*, the shepherd dogs *Serpentone*, *Mastino*, *Ossa*, *Paradiso*, *Fritz*, *Assassino*, *Vulpicella*, *Leone* the intelligent *Barteleng*, and *Raja*, Ferdinand IV's mastiff.

Since his arrival in Naples in 1734, Charles III was faced with the difficult task of managing a kingdom in which most of the land under his dominion was still subject to the feudal system. The great work of the sovereign was to immediately try to change the situation by innovating agronomy, particularly in his own lands and royal estates. Indeed, it was there that new crops were developed and different breeds of livestock were introduced. Ferdinand IV continued his father's innovative project, especially at the royal estate of Carditello. There, Ferdinand oversaw a large buffalo breeding operation⁷⁵. From the milk of these animals comes one of the delicacies most appreciated by the Bourbons: buffalo mozzarella.

Reflecting these Bourbon agricultural projects in nativity scenes are the frequent presence of buffaloes, cows, bulls, and calves. These animals, with legs mostly made of carved wood and ears made of lead, were fashioned by specialized artists such as the brothers Saverio and Nicola Vassallo.

In other cases, rare – therefore much more precious – terracotta sculptural groups were

created, featuring more animals, such as in the case of wild boar hunting. Of great refinement are also the groups of "shorn" goats and sheep, realized with a special tool that precisely defines the texture of their coats. Precious racehorses

of the *Corsiero Napoletano*[®], donkeys, and mares with their miniaturized harnesses are present in market scenes and Adoration of the Magi scenes.



A sheep (attribution to Saverio Vassallo, Italian, active from 1760 to 1825).







A bull
(attrib. to Nicola Vassallo, Italian, active from 1760 to 1825).





A cow
attributed to Nicola Vissano, Italian, active from 1760 to 1825.





A male goat (zinowero)
(attrib to Saverio/Assalio, Italian, active from 1760 to 1825).





A donkey
attrib. to Francesco Gallo, Italian, active from 1770 to 1829.



A buffalo
attrib. to Francesco Gallo, Italian, active from 1770 to 1828).



An horse
(attrib. to Niccolò Vassallo, Italian, active from 1760 to 1825)







Jakob Philipp Hackert (German, 1737 - 1807)
Ferdinand IV hunting wild bear on the Persano estate
 oil on canvas 250x335 cm, inv. N. 04 7418
 Palazzo Reale, Caserta



A scene of a bear hunting entirely modelled of polychromed terracotta (attrib. to Francesco Galle, Italian, active from 1770 to 1829).





A cow entirely modeled of polychromed terracotta.
(attrib. to Savinio/Vassallo, Italian, active from 1760 to 1825).



A group of goats and sheep entirely modeled of polychromed terracotta.
(attrib. to Tommaso Schettini, Italian, active from the end of the 18th cent. to 1811).



*A hunter - arcadesia - entirely modeled of polychromed terracotta
(attrib. to Angelo Viva, Italian, active from 1758 to 1824).*





An Oriental woman (Georgiana) attrib. to Angelo Viva, Italian, active 1758 - 1824

Exotic Animals

In addition to farmyard animals, nativity scenes also feature a significant presence of exotic animals such as greyhounds, monkeys, parrots, camels, and elephants.

Along with the greyhound, the monkey is a typical animal in the procession of the Magi. It is usually represented clutching an apple and held on a leash by a page, dwarf, or characters dressed as magicians. In the past, the great intelligence and cunning of these primates made them figures charged with symbolic and magical values. In the Neapolitan *presepe*, in addition to the monkey, other animal species, not very common in Naples, are also represented, showing a clear taste for the exotic. The king's great passion for exotic animals continued when, as king of Spain, he commissioned Giambattista Tiepolo to paint a decorative fresco for the vault of his throne room in Madrid entitled *The Greatness of the Spanish Monarchy*. In this splendid

fresco by the artist and his sons Giandomenico and Lorenzo, the allegorical figures in the scene include many "rare beasts."

Charles' son, Ferdinand, also had a passion for exotic animals. After the 1814 death of his wife, Queen Maria Carolina, he entered a morganatic marriage with the Sicilian Lucia Migliaccio (1770–1826), Duchess of Florida, to whom he gave a villa, later called "La Floridiana." Built on the Vomero hill by the architect Antonio Niccolini and under Ferdinand's supervision, the villa featured a park and a menagerie with large cages for tigers, panthers, lions, bears, and also, more classically, peacocks, deer, and fallow deer. Ferdinand also gave the duchess eighteen kangaroos, which she exchanged, with the help of the Englishman William Accourt, for as many papyri from Herculaneum that had not yet been unrolled¹⁷.



A greyhound (attribution to Nicola Vassallo, Italian, active from 1766 to 1825).



Objects

With the accession of Charles to the throne of Naples in 1734, the city became the capital of an autonomous kingdom. After many years, Naples became the seat of a sovereign court, that used its grandeur and ostentatious pageantry as an *instrumenta regni*. To keep pace with the splendor of other European courts, the Neapolitan demand for fashionable and luxurious goods, which the local market obviously could not satisfy, increased dramatically. Thus Charles began a policy of stimulation of internal production with a series of initiatives, which Ferdinand continued. In 1738, Charles founded the Royal Manufactory. In 1737 he founded the Royal Tapestry Manufactory with an expert Florentine workforce, the first of its kind in the country; a manufactory of "mirrors and crystals" staffed by Venetians called the Company of Murano; and the porcelain workshop in the gardens of the Royal Palace. In 1750 Charles opened the Royal Manufactory of Capodimonte, the Royal Workshop of Pietre dure at San Carlo alle Mortelle staffed by Florentine craftsmen and the Seterie (Silk Factories) of San Leucio. The idea of importing "know-how" proved to be a success and in a few years the quality of craftsmanship reached very high levels in Naples⁷⁸.

It was these skilled workers who created "*minuterie*," or the miniature objects found on the Neapolitan presepe: musical instruments, silverware, basketry, wax fruit baskets, harnesses for horses, swords,

halberds, ceramics, furniture, and any other object in common use in daily life. To this end, eighteenth-century Naples hosted a flourishing community of jewelers, goldsmiths, instrument makers, potters, ceramists, and sculptors who devoted themselves, with the patience of a Carthusian monk and a true commitment to veracity, to reproduce in miniature all that is necessary to quotidian life.

Even the choice of material⁷⁹ is fundamental for the baroque reproduction of the smallest objects. In the *presepe*, there are certain objects that, because of their small size, need to be made of a material that has inherent properties of transparency and softness. This is particularly true in the case of reproductions of food. Fruits, foods, vegetables, if made with traditional materials such as painted clay or wood, end up losing their "freshness." Thus, wax was used for magnificent still-lives that reference the famous Neapolitan baroque genre paintings made by such artists as Giovan Battista Ruoppolo (Italian, 1629-1693), Giuseppe Recco (Italian, 1634 - 1695).





Veggiebör (attrib. to Giuseppe De Luca, Italian, active from 1785 to 1827).



Vegetables (attrib. to Giuseppe De Luca, Italian, active from 1785 to 1827).











Jewelry

Among the vast range of miniature objects, jewelry deserves special attention. What makes the production of jewelry for the nativity figures extraordinary is their size: they are made in proportion to the figures. These real miniatures were made by the same goldsmiths who fashioned jewelry for the court, and, above all, with the same materials: gold, silver, ivory, coral, and pearls.

Coral was used alone or mounted on earrings and brooches. The earrings of the wealthy working classes in the 18th century (through the end of the 19th century) were inspired by earrings worn by refined French ladies called *grandoles*, comprised

of a surmounted element followed by a second identical but larger element and three or more pendants. Common women, instead, adorned themselves with necklaces made of coral, a marine material which was considered a powerful guard against the evil eye.

While coral was common, pearls were more rare, precious, exotic, and highly symbolic. Sailors conducted the Neapolitan trade in pearls from India, Japan, and the Americas in the city of Torre del Greco, where pearl and coral jewelry are produced to this day.









alleluja. Don
nobis, '
1.62. Deus D
mus pastor.
et illas oportet
in meam audient

Notes

1. R. Causa, "Michele Cuciniello. Un uomo ed un presepe," in T. Pittipaldi, *Il presepe Cuciniello*, Naples, 1966, pp. 2–28.
2. See T. Pittipaldi, "Il Presepe Cuciniello. Storia di una raccolta, di una sezione espositiva, di un restauro" in *Il presepe Cuciniello*, T. Pittipaldi dir., Napoli, 1990, pp. 13–49.
3. Bonaventura da Bagnorea, *Legenda Major*, Milano, 1477 [1263], Capit. X, 7.
4. R. Causa, *Sculture lignee nella Campania*, Napoli, 1950, p. 89.
5. *Vita Sanctae Brigittae*, Acta Sanctorum (Act. Bruxellae, Typis Regijs, vol. IV, 1780), p. 478.
6. A. Filangieri DA Candida, *San Giovanni a Carbonara*, Napoli, 1924, p. 120.
7. G. Filangieri, *Il catalogo del Museo Filangieri*, Napoli, 1888, p. 209.
8. G. Filangieri, *Indice degli artefici delle arti maggiori e minori in più parte ignoti o poco noti ai napoletani e siciliani e delle altre regioni d'Italia o stranieri che operavano tra noi con notizie delle loro opere e del tempo del loro esercizio da studi e musci documentati raccolti e pubblicati per cura di Gaetano Filangieri*, Napoli, 1891, p. 120.
9. See F. Nicolini, *L'arte napoletana del Rinascimento e la lettera a Paolo Sammartino a M. Ant. Michel*, Napoli, 1925.
10. A. Caracciolo, *De iusto Cateari Thionici Colentae* 1682, p. 222.
11. S. Bellenger, C. Romano, *The Neapolitan Crèche at the Art Institute of Chicago*, London-New Haven, 2016, pp. 23–25.
12. R. De Saint-Non, *Voyage pittoresque ou description des Royaumes de Naples et de Sicile*, Paris 1781–1785, 5 vols., vol. I, p. 241.
13. J.W. Goethe, *Viaggio in Italia (1786–1788)*, Firenze, 1980 [Weimar 1880], pp. 308–319.
14. K. Langer, *Il Presepio italiano a Dresda nel 1717*, in "Il presepio", 1967, n. 52, p. 54.
15. «Ho veduto il Presepio che in vero tanto sono goffi nel recito, altrettanto sono abili in questa ragazzata, nella quale si applicano efficacemente questi Napoletani», V. Varvittelli, «Lettere 1752–1766», in *Le lettere di Luigi Varvittelli della Biblioteca Palatina di Caserta*, F. Strazzullo dir., Galati, 1976–1977, vol. III, pp. 240–241.
16. Andrea De Jorio (1769–1851) was the canon of the cathedral of Naples, archeology enthusiast, and director of the royal collections of Etruscan vases. He elaborates the hypothesis that the ancient gestural rhetoric he deciphered on the figurative decorations of ancient vases, was, in fact, also applicable to the gestural rhetoric used by contemporary Neapolitan society. The twenty-two engravings of the gestures that accompany De Jorio's text applies effectively to our reading of the gestures of the crèche figures, because De Jorio's interpretation is more relevant to understanding the gestuality of the XVIII century than it is for interpreting that of the ancient world. It is necessary to add that this language is still understood and used by Neapolitans today. See A. De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano del canonico Andrea De Jorio*, Napoli, 1832. See also, A. De Jorio, *Gesture in Naples and gesture in classical antiquity*, trans. Adam Kendon, Bloomington, 2000.
17. Charles de Brosses (1709–1777) on November 24th 1740 writes: «À mon sens, Naples est la seule ville d'Italie qui sente véritablement sa capitale: le mouvement, l'affluence du peuple, l'abondance et le fracas perpétuel des équipages: une Cour dans les formes, et assez brillante: le train et l'air magnifique qu'ont les grands seigneurs, tout contribue à lui donner cet extérieur vivant et animé qu'ont Paris et Londres, et qu'on ne trouve point du tout à Rome», C. De Brosses, *Lettres familières écrites d'Italie*, Paris, 1858, I, XXX, p. 272.
18. ASBN, (Archivio Storico Banco di Napoli) Banco di S. Maria del Popolo, Giornale copia polizze, matr. 2106, January 30, 1776.
19. ASBN, (Archivio Storico Banco di Napoli) Banco del Salvatore, Giornale, m. 1341, February 6, 1756.
20. ASBN, (Archivio Storico Banco di Napoli) Banco del Salvatore, Giornale, m. 1396, October 23, 1748, fol. 276.
21. See A. Perrone, *Genesi storica sul presepe*, Napoli, 1896.
22. Giovanni Morelli was an Italian politician and art historian. The "Morelli method," or the investigation of the representation of individual body parts (e.g., ears, hands, or feet) to recognize the hand of an artist, quickly became fundamental to the history of art, through his fundamental works: *Le opere dei maestri italiani nelle gallerie di Monaco, Dresda e Berlino*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1886 (Italian version) and *Della pittura italiana: studi storico-critici*, Milano, 1897. Those works inspired the English- and German-language scholarship of Bernard Berenson to Aby Warburg, transforming the history of art throughout Europe and the Americas. For an analysis of Morelli and his legacy, see H. Zerner, *Essays on the history of art*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.
23. See Carmine Romano, "La Crèche Napolitaine: Histoire, Théâtralité, Conservation" (PhD diss., Sorbonne Université, 2019), pp. 236–236.
24. F. Cruciani, *Lo spazio del teatro*, Roma-Bari, 1992, pp. 109–110.

25. E. Mancini, "Le maglie illusorie dei teatri di Natale" in *Il presepe napoletano*, 1996, pp.98-99.
26. See *Kinderrippe* in N. Gockereff, W. Haberland, *Krippen im Bayerischen Nationalmuseum*, München, Hirmer Verlag – Bayerischen Nationalmuseum, pp.256 et. 258-270.
27. J. W. Goethe, *Viaggio in Italia (1786-1788)*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1980, [Weimar,1896], pp.338-339.
28. S.Sharp, *Lettere dall'Italia, 1765-1766. A descrizione di quella età e costumi in quell'anni*, Italian trans. C. and G. Hutten, Lanciano, 1911, p. 104.
29. J. C. De Saint-Non, *Voyage pittoresque ou description des Royaumes de Naples et de Sicile*, Paris, 1781-1785, 5 voll., vol. I, p. 241.
30. J. Gorani, *Mémoires secrets et critiques des cours, des gouvernements, et des mœurs des principales états de l'Italie*, Paris, 1753, p. 329.
31. J. Hughes, « No retreat, even when broken. Classical ruins in the presepe napoletano », 2015, in J. Hughes e C. Buongiorno (dir) *Remembering Parthenope. The reception of Classical Naples from Antiquity to the present*, Oxford, 2015, p. 308.
32. F.Purzio, *Pittura di genere e cultura popolare*, in Porzio F. *Pittura Raffaele. Scenari di Genere e tradizione popolare*, Ginevra-Milano, 2008, pp.17-36, p.24.
33. See Aristotele, *Physiognomia*, Trans. M.E.Ferrini, Milano, 2007.
34. See L. Da Vinci, *Libro di Pittura*, C. Pedretti (dir.), 2 voll., Firenze, 1995.
35. See H.Carlskri, *Metoposcopia*, Laetitia: Parisiorum, Thomas Jolly, 3648.
36. See G.B.Della Porta, *De humana physiognomonia*, Vico Equense,1586.
37. See C.Sporiconi, *La Metoscopia : o cura commensuratione delle linee della fronte*, Verona, Herodi dell'Hilmberti, 1642 (1625).
38. See P.Gaurici, *De sculptura liber*, Aversa, Abrahami Goriaci, 1609.
39. See G. Laxer : *L'art de connaître les hommes par le Physiognomie*, Paris, 1820.
40. Gaurici,1609, cit., p.56.
41. J. J. Engel, *Lettere sulla numina*, trans. I. Subitani, in «Napoli. Acting Archives Review», 2013, pp. 293-379.
42. W. Benjamin, A.Lacis, « Nisapal », *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 19 agosto 1925, in W. Benjamin, *Immagini di città*, Torino, 2007, pp. 5-13.
43. D.Dottorini, *Weggere Benjamin : la forma della città, la depi-*
 più immagine della modernità, in « Riten et rythmes urbains », Aix-Marseille Université, Centre Aixois d'étude Romanes, n.19 (2008), pp.153-166, p.153.
44. See T. De Celano, *Vita primi sancti Francisci*, 1228-1230.
45. See His Excellency Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller (Pro-fect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), *Credere in Dio che si è incarnato*, Intervention at the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, 21 June 2013.
46. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. I, New York, 2005, p. 345.
47. See A.Mastelloni, *Il presepio architettato in nove ragiona-menti storico-morali per apparecchio alla solennità della nascita del Signore nella nobilissima chiesa della santissima Annunziata di Napoli*, Napoli, 1689, pp. 21, 23, 25.
48. The novena is an act of Christian devotion that consists mainly of reciting repeated prayers for nine consecutive days. The Christmas novena begins on December 11 and ends on December 24. This novena, which recalls Jesus's nine months in Mary's womb, is a prayerful act of preparation for the coming of Jesus. J. De Bouchard, *Usi e costumi a Napoli e costumi*, Napoli, 1853, p.248.
49. "Many Christians are accustomed to preparing in their homes, long in advance, the crib that represents the birth of Jesus Christ; few, however, think of preparing their hearts so that Jesus Christ can be born and rest within them. But we, too, want to be among those few Christians, so that we may be worthy of remaining animated by that happy fire, which makes souls happy on this earth and blissful in heaven." A. De Liguori, *Novena del Santo Natale*, Napoli, 1759, par. 9-10.
50. The term "Mēpai," in the original text of Matthew, used in the plural only indicates that it could be at least two people. In early iconographic representations of the Nati-vity, the number of the Magi varies from two to eight or, as in Armenia, twelve, to each of whom a name is attributed. See *European-American Illustrated Universal Encyclopedia*.
51. "The number three is a symbol of perfection." This is a medieval maxim of Kabbalistic origin evoking the sacred value of the number three. See Treccani dictionary.
52. It was Pope Leo I the Great (c. 390-461) who introduced this information into the doctrine by referring, for the first time, in one of his Sermons, to the "three" Magi: St. Leo the Great, Sermon XXXIV, no. 1-3, *sermoni di Natale*, s. L. Pauline Editoriale Librai, 2004.
53. H.Umakö, G. Renda, (dir.), *Ottomian Civilization*, vol. 2, An-kara, Kartal, 2003, p. 1082-1083.
54. The ambassador remained in Naples between August 11, 1741 and October 18 of the same year.
55. M.Schiapà, *Il Regno di Napoli al tempo di Carlo di Borbone*, Naples, Edizioni il Giglio, 1988, vol. I, p. 206.

56. Wife of Pierre Ange (an eighteenth century adventurer, friend of Casanova, specialist in agriculture and demography), Sara traveled with him throughout Europe and died in Paris in 1800. In the course of their tireless travels, the Goudars visited, among other places, Naples during the reign of Ferdinand IV. Sara became the king's mistress until the day when the king's legitimate wife, Maria Carolina, chased the Goudars out of the kingdom.
57. Via Toledo is one of the main arteries of Naples.
58. The carnival celebrations of 1774 opened at the San Carlo Theater with the opera *Alexander in the Indies* by maestro N. Piccini. G. Miranda, *Cronaca del Carnevale di Napoli nel sec. 16, 17, 18*, Napoli 1893, p. 35–40.
59. Edkowiec, «The Impact of Turkish Military Bands on European Court Festivals in the 17th and 18th Centuries», *Early Music*, vol. 34, n° 4 (novembre 2006), p. 533–559.
60. Caravaggio lived in Naples twice: in 1606, when he stayed for a year in the Spanish Quarter, and in the last period of his activity, in 1609, when he returned in Naples, where he stayed until 1610. See M.C. Terraghi, S. Bellenger, (ed.), *Caravaggio Napoli*, exh. cat. (Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, 2019), Napoli, 2019.
61. Neapolitan actor and singer of popular music.
62. The first edition was published by Andrea Petrucci in 1608 under the title *Il vero Lume tra l'ombra*, ovvero la *Spedosa Avvicina per la Nasca del Verbo Unamato*, and under the pseudonym of Ruggiero Casimiro Ujeno. See the entry "Petrucci Andrea" in the biographical Treccani dictionary of the Italians.
63. As in the *Pimandre*, where Hermes is taken by sleep before receiving the revelation from the Noös. Sleep is seen as a condition of change, and in this state the human being can experience another dimension of consciousness only to find himself changed upon awakening. C. Calanella, *Ritorno e la Sibilla: il presepe alle radici pagane della sacra rappresentazione*, Napoli, 2006, p. 172.
64. See G. Basile, *Il cuore dell'anti*, Napoli, Lazzaro Scorriglio, 1934.
65. G. Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, architetti, ed intagliatori, dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII. del 1572. fino a' tempi di papa Urbano VIII. nel 1642.* v. 1, 1733, p. 131.
66. C. Romano, *Il Presepe Napoletano. La collezione Arcora*, Napoli, 2018, p. 29.
67. The protagonist is a count with simple and not very aristocratic tastes who speaks Neapolitan and courts Chiarella, a common woman. Caught in a trap by different characters after two broken matrimonial promises, he manages to get out of trouble with the help of a spirit from a bottle. The wedding between the Count and Chiarella offers a moral conclusion to the story.
68. See *Il Settecento* in M. Vicenzi, *La musica a Napoli*, Napoli, 1984, pp. 70–156.
69. R. Causa, *Preface* in M. Causa Piccone (dir.), *Atti e Pregevoli, Disegni delle raccolte pubbliche napoletane*, [Napoli, Palazzo Reale, dicembre 1961–gennaio 1962] Napoli, 1962, p.3.
70. See R. Sorrentini, *La Madonna dell'Arco. Storia dell'immagine e del suo Santuario*, Napoli, 1985.
71. G. Tiscione, *L'arte della seta a Napoli e la colonia di San Leucio*, Consiglio dell'economia corporativa di Napoli, Napoli, 1932, p. 53–57; 126–129.
72. M.C. Musile et. A. Camillo–Perroni, (dir.), *Napoli–Firenze e ritorno. Costumi popolari del Regno di Napoli nelle collezioni Borboniche e Lorensi, esibizioni*, (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, 1991, Naples, Museo Duca di Martina, 1992), Napoli, 1991, pp.172, 201–203.
73. See G.A. Bayardi, *Le pitture antiche di Ercolano e costumi in esse con qualche spiegazione*, Napoli, 1757, T. 1.
74. A. Perrone, *Comi storici sul presepe per A. P. Napoli*, Tipografia Napoli, 1896, p.19.
75. See M. R. Iacono, *La tessitura agiografica di Carotide: fonti archivistiche in Un Elefante a Corte. Allevamenti, corse ed esibizioni alla Reggia di Caserta*, Napoli, 1992.
76. The Neapolitan sized *cowser napoletano* in French, *corcel napolitano* in Spanish) was considered, between the 15th and 18th centuries, one of the best in the world for military cavalry purposes. Beautiful, strong, and resilient, it was exported in great numbers from the Neapolitan provinces to all the other Italian states, as well as to Spain, France, Holland, England, Denmark, Germany, Prussia, Poland, Russia, and Austria-Hungary. Together with the Spanish, Berber, and Turkish horses, it has been used to enhance the bloodlines of the central and northern European breeds, in particular for its balanced physical and temperamental qualities derived from the constant natural selection to which it was subjected and suitably finalized by man through a careful breeding system dating back to antiquity. L. Bianchini, *Storia delle farnate del Regno di Napoli*, Napoli, 1850, p. 546.
77. C. Knight, *Gangari e pupari*, in «Cronache lucanensi», Napoli, Macchiaroli editore, 2002, n. 22, pp. 305–320.
78. See S. Bellenger, (dir.), *Carlo di Borbone. Un sovrano illuminato per Napoli*, Napoli, 2016.
79. See forthcoming essay by Caroline Paganassi, "A Woman of Supreme Goodness, and a Singular Talent: Anna Morandi Manzoni, Artist and Anatomist of Enlightenment Bologna" in *Portraits and Power: Representations of Female Intellectual Authority, Agency and Authorship in Early Modern and Enlightenment Europe*, eds. Beatrix Vacker and Lieve van Deinsen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022).

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