

The Nativity

By Charlene Notgrass



NOTGRASS
HISTORY

The Nativity

Each December Christians in many countries seek to portray the beauty of that wonderful night two thousand years ago when the Savior of the world was born in Bethlehem. Artists create nativity scenes. Families set up displays inside and outside of their homes. Churches borrow animals, make costumes, and perform live nativity scenes to teach their communities about the birth of Jesus. They also hold special Christmas worship services. Churches and Christian schools put on Christmas pageants.

You can even find a nativity scene in a public places. Here is a photo of one in the lobby of a hotel in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.



The tradition of nativity scenes is 800 years old this Christmas. In 1223 Francis of Assisi planned a live nativity scene (or *presepio*) in Greccio in Italy. The scene helped onlookers feel the magnitude of the miraculous birth of Jesus that had occurred over a thousand years before.

Over the centuries, a desire to make nativity scenes with handmade figures spread across Europe. Families worked together to carve figures and to arrange the scenes. Famous sculptors made figures for the wealthy. Children sang around the nativity in Spain, France, and Germany.

In the Czech and Slovak Republics, families carved figures from wood and passed them down from generation to generation. They called the scene a *Bethlehem*. In Spain, the nativity scene, or *nacimiento*, always had a figure of a woman washing clothes.

In France, where a nativity scene is called a *crèche*, people added moss, stones, greens, and numerous *santon* figures, often made of terra cotta. The figures represented Bible characters and also everyday people, such as bakers, grocers, and friends.

This French relief sculpture of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph includes an unusual depiction. Joseph is warming Jesus' clothes over a fire.



Nativity by Circle of Antoine Le Moiturier, c. 1450, made in Burgundy, France, c. 1450. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan.

Italians also created nativity scenes with a wide variety of figures. In 1964 Loretta Hines Howard donated over 140 crèche figures created in Naples, Italy, c. 1750-1850. These depict Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; angels, shepherds, and sheep; the traveling magi and their companions; the throng of residents of Bethlehem, and travelers who were there for the census. The poseable figures are 12 to 15 inches tall. Their arms and legs are carved of wood. Their heads and shoulders are made of terra cotta. They are dressed in beautiful fabric, jewels, and embroidery. Below are the infant Jesus, Mary, Joseph, a shepherd, and a sheep from the collection.



Baby Jesus



Mary



Joseph



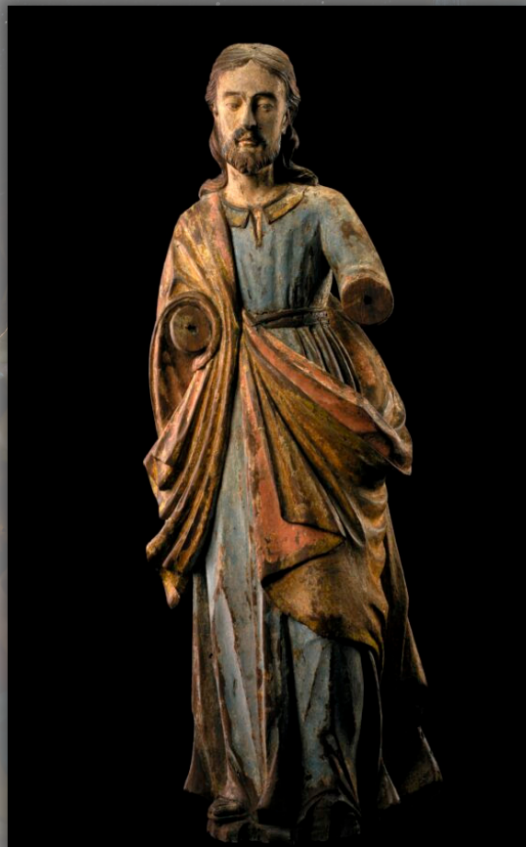
Shepherd



Sheep

*Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Gift of Loretta Hines Howard, 1964*

Puerto Ricans carve wooden figures called *santos*. This *santo* dates from the early 1700s.



*Saint Joseph (or San Jose) by Master of "La Merced." Courtesy of the
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Teodoro Vidal Collection.*

In Mexico, setting up the family's nativity scene, called a *nacimiento*, is one of the family's most important traditions. Mexican families also pass figures down from generation to generation. Public nativity scenes are common in Mexican towns. Some have even been as large as a football stadium.

From 1954 to 1957, Harvey's department store in Nashville, Tennessee, displayed a 280-foot long nativity scene along the side of the city's life-size replica of the Greek Parthenon.



Photograph taken in the 1960s by the family of Charlene Notgrass.

On December 22, 1960, photographer Marion S. Trikosko took this photo of the nativity scene in front of the National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse in Washington, D.C.



Praise God for giving us this wonderful real event to remember and proclaim, the birth of our Savior in the little town of Bethlehem.

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son;
and she wrapped Him in cloths,
and laid Him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.
Luke 2:7 NASB*

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