

CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS IN ITALY

Traditionally, the main focus of Christmas decorations in Italy is the Nativity scene, presepe or presepio in Italian. Every church has a presepe and they can be found in squares, shops, and other public areas. Displays often go beyond the manger scene and may even include a representation of the entire village. Presepi are usually set up starting December 8, the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception, through January 6, Epiphany but some are unveiled on Christmas Eve.

Many people set up cribs in their houses. Figurines for nativity scenes are made in many parts of Italy. Some of the best cribs come from Naples and Sicily. Although the presepe is usually set up before Christmas, the baby Jesus is added on Christmas Eve.

Householders, churches and towns in Italy compete for the best presepe. The cities of Rome, Naples and the Vatican all have famous cribs. Most of Italy's cribs are made in Naples and this city in particular has a lot of competition for the best crib.

History of the Crib

The tradition of sculpting nativity scenes for churches goes back to the 13th-century. Although not the first to create a crib, Saint Francis of Assisi helped popularize the tradition. In mid-December 1223, in a cave in the town of Greccio, Saint Francis prepared a living crib scene with the help of local people. The living crib scene was complete with real characters, shepherds, peasants, monks, a straw-filled manger, a baby Jesus and animals. Accompanied by others he celebrated the Christmas Eve mass using the crib as his altar. There were many claims of miraculous healings following this depiction of the birth of Jesus. The reenactment of the Christmas story spread to Naples and the rest of Italy.

Style and Materials

Carving figurines for nativity scenes started in the late 13th century when Arnolfo di Cambio was commissioned to carve marble nativity figures for the first Rome Jubilee held in 1300. The nativity can be seen in the museum of Santa Maria Maggiore Church.

Today, the typical Italian tradition of the crib is realized in different style, forms and sizes. The use of various materials reflects the geographical origin and the different historical periods in which the artisans were operating.

The Sicilian presepe, for instance, features materials such as coral, ivory, bone, mother-of-pearl, alabaster, and other sea materials. The Roman presepe reproduced the typical landscape of the Roman country, including pine and olive trees and the ancient aqueducts. The Pugliese crib is distinguished by the use of paper-pulp.

Today that tradition lives on in the center of Naples. The narrow street of Via San Gregorio Armeno is crowded with hundreds of artisan workshops. There are colorful window displays and stalls overflowing with Nativity scenes.

Best places to see Presepi, in Italy

Naples is the best city to visit for its presepi. Hundreds of nativity scenes are erected throughout the city. Some cribs are very elaborate and may be handmade or use antique figures. Starting December 8, the Church Gesu Nuovo, in Piazza del Gesu, displays nativity scene art work from the Neapolitan Nativity Scenes Association.

In Rome some of the biggest and most elaborate presepi are found in Piazza del Popolo, Piazza Euclide, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and Santa Maria d'Aracoeli on the Capitoline Hill. A life-size nativity scene is set up in Piazza Navona where a Christmas marketplace is also set up. The Church of Saints Cosma e Damiano, by the main entrance to the Roman Forum, has a large nativity scene from Naples on display all year.

In summary, the tradition of cribs in Italy exemplifies a culture rich in artistic creativity, and provides insight into Italian religious and storytelling history.

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