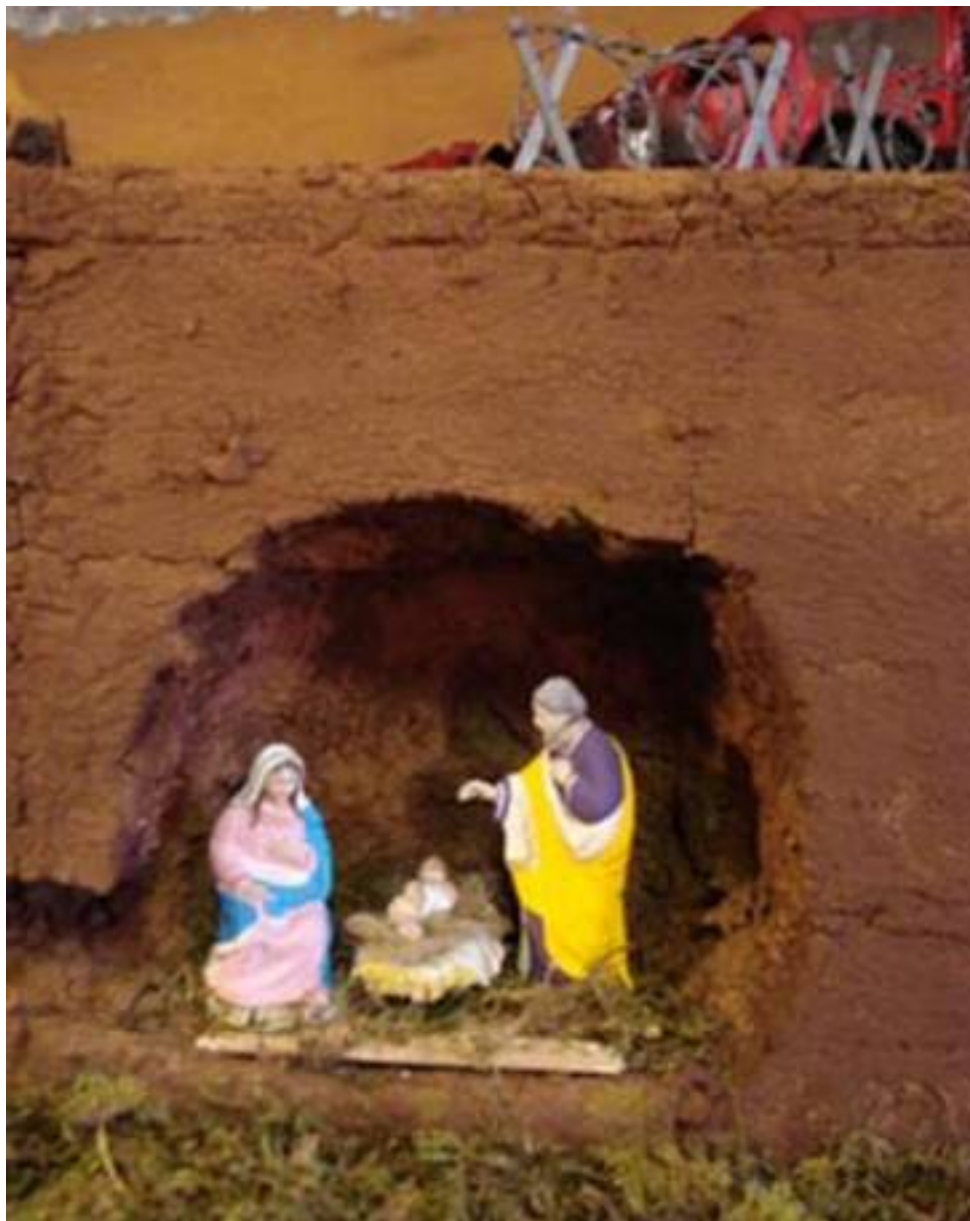


Gramsci's Presepio

Joey Ski (December 25, 2007)



The domestic presepio, an example of living folklore.



Since 2000, I have assembled an annual presepio in my home with figures purchased in shops on Naples' famed Via San Gregorio Armeno. In keeping with the Italian tradition, the Nativity scene is more than a mere crèche; it is a Lilliputian topography of the imagination crafted anew each year with a changing theme. Like many domestic presepi found in Italy and across the diaspora, my presepio is an anachronistic fantasyscape breaching the time-space continuum in which the New Testament Nativity is situated across a series of changing temporal and spatial planes. In 2007, the Christ Incarnate is depicted born in an underground cave below war torn Baghdad.

Italian scholars and journalists have done a great disservice to the living folk art of the Italian-style presepio. Ever burdened by the an elite tradition in the visual arts, writers of various stripes inform us ad nauseam of St. Francis's 13th century manger scene in Greccio, the hyper-realistic work of 17th and 18th centuries Baroque artists Giuseppe Sanmartino, Salvatore di Franco, and Saverio Vassallo, et al, and the ever hyped Via San Gregorio Armeno. Again and again, we read that presepio artistry is in decline and the tradition is dying. Rarely do we find a mere description, let alone an ethnography or serious analysis, of a simple presepio made at home.

The contemporary domestic Italian presepio is not preoccupied with showcasing individual examples of fine art collectibles. Instead, the inexpensive handcrafted and plaster cast figurines, while often treasured family heirlooms, are part of an artistic assemblage and theatric presentation constituting a holistic and complete creative entity. The presepio is not a static art object admired solely for its formal aesthetic attributes, but an ephemeral assemblage enlivened by narrative and performance in the service of Christian pedagogy, autobiography and family history, and the engendering and strengthening of community affiliation.

The aesthetics and meaning of the domestic presepio tradition of working people in Italy, let alone immigrants and their descendants, have received scant scholarly attention as compared to that of Baroque art work displayed by museums, multinational corporations, and the Italian government. Writing about Sicily, anthropologist Antonino Uccello notes that scholars of arte popolare often concentrate on the high art and artisan traditions as opposed to the lesser studied figures crafted by the *pasturara* (Il presepe popolare in Sicilia, Palermo: S. F. Flaccovio, 1979, 132-135). We know very little how everyday people conceived, constructed, and interacted with their domestic presepio. The few descriptions of subaltern-created presepi are extremely revealing despite the authors' disparaging intentions. Writing in 1923, T. G. Crippin informs us that children were the principal presepi builders in Rome during the first quarter of the twentieth century:

... the construction frequently includes the surrounds of Bethlehem, imagined in complete ignorance of geography and history; "an orgiastic medley of chaos and luxuriant riches, a radical negation of all the notions of time and space, this is what the bold Roman boy gathers around the crib, in which after all they sometimes forget to place the Bambino" (Christmas and Christmas Lore, London: Blackie and Son Ltd., 1923, 80).

Since temporal and spatial disruption is an element in contemporary presepi built by adults, we are left to wonder about the aesthetic intentions of these poor, young presepio builders.

Journalists are quick to pick up on political commentary expressed in contemporary Italian presepio, if even addressed in cursory fashion. Yes, we hear about Neapolitan craftsmen on Via San Gregorio Armeno depicting topical figures based on national and international politicians such as a decapitated Umberto Bossi of the separatist Lega Nord party and the media tycoon and Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi flanked by national police after he was brought up on corruption charges for the second time. Sometimes the politicians are simply portrayed as devils. This tells us more about Neapolitan craftspeople's ability to generate media attention than how presepio builders use

these political figures in their creations and in turn interpret them.

We know less about the priest in Livorno who, in 1996, used a black baby Jesus in an effort to draw attention to Italian racism against African immigrants and to the suffering of Africans in Rwanda and Zaire. At a school in Castel Maggiore (Emilia-Romagna), a 1997 Christmas display consisted of a framed print of the Nativity among contemporary ruins in a commentary on the destruction and government response to the earthquake that struck the Umbria region that year.

In my study of Italian-American presepio in New York City, I discovered the religious and political explications were found here. Presepio builders speak of their dioramas as places where the “true” meaning of Christmas is made manifest, a future-past utopia where the Christian ideals of humanity, peace, and harmony reign (“Imagined Places, Fragile Landscapes: Italian American Presepi (Nativity Crèches) in New York City,” [The Italian American Review](#) [2], 8.2, Autumn/Winter2001, 140-173). It is a site inhabited by the lamb and the lion (as in my father’s crèche), and by shepherds and kings. Lorraine Iachetta’s anti-gun and pro-animal politics overrode family tradition when she banished from her tableau figures depicting hunters with guns and butchers with slaughtered animals and hanging cuts of meat. A multitude of sheep is prominently displayed in their place: “They take precedence over everyone else; all the little lambs first. It’s your own personal statement, a little subtle hint that we should have reverence for animals” (December 10, 1989). Lorraine’s ascribed meaning is an integral part of the story or stories that her presepio makes manifest.

I conducted my primary research in the winter of 1989-90, just four months after a mob of Italian Americans killed African American teenager Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. His murder shocked the city and the public outrage shaped that year’s mayoral election. [Antonio Vigilante](#) [3] used his presepio, located in the basement of St. Athanasius Church, that year to comment on the racial strife that plagued his community and New York by featuring a multiracial cast of figures. Troubled by the racial killing, he drew my attention to the various statues and pointed out that they included “blacks, Mexicans, Arabs, and Neapolitans” all standing together. “È proprio quello che cercavo, un presepio con differente persone, differenti popoli, differenti lingue. Uno vede un tipo nero, un messicano e così da’ l'impressione di essere tutto differente. È un misto e va tutto bene.” (“It was just what I was looking for, a presepio with different people, different languages, different voices. You can see a black guy, a Mexican, and it gives the impression of being different. It’s a mix and it’s good” [December 21, 1989].).

Multicultural inclusion is expressed in a variety of ways. For the 2000 Christmas season, Frank De Bernardo of Kensington, Brooklyn incorporated plaster images of a nun, a priest, a police officer, and a hooded penitent found in Holy Week processions in Spain that he purchased while on vacation. For De Bernardo, the figure with the high-peaked hood represented the historic Roman Catholic Inquisition and the grouping was a simple but creative critique of what De Bernardo saw as religious persecution in the Vatican’s investigation, prohibition, and ultimate silencing of Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent for ministering to gay and lesbian Catholics in Maryland.

I had heard of a presepio in a Queens home made in December 2001 that set the Nativity amidst the ruins of the World Trade Center but I was never able to locate the maker.

It was with this understanding that I began building my presepio in 2000. I knew what mattered was not the individual pieces but the creativity of the piece. Each year, I chose a different theme, e.g. Roman ruins, Italian hill town, Puerto Rico beach, etc. While inducting the help of my children Akela and Lucca, I found it difficult to release my patriarchal control. But in 2007, they decided that they were taking over the presepio. They conceived of this year’s theme and executed its creation. I contributed ideas, assisting under close supervision, and implemented only pre-approved scenes. I negotiated, i.e., begged, for some presepio “real estate.”



A couple of years ago Lucca had the idea for a "World War III" presepio that would include some of the model airplanes he was building at the time. As this idea was kicked around, Akela thought of placing the Nativity underground after seeing a diorama of a Viet Cong tunnel at the International Spy Museum in D.C. before actually beginning, I was referring to this year's theme as "apocalyptic," cringing at the born again/Christian right implication. As things developed and we grabbled with both our original vision and our limited technical skills, Bush's disastrous war in Iraq came to permeate our humble creation, guiding its look and its politics, as we came to refer to [this year's presepio](#) [4] simply as "Baghdad."



All too often, vernacular cultural practices like the presepio are stripped of their contextual and historical presence, their counter-hegemonic potential dismissed as “quaint folklore” a safe relic from the past. People’s ability to be agents of their own lives, through vernacular knowledge, discourse, aesthetics, and skills are rendered indivisible. Each Christmas, the presepio imagination is set loose and all you have to do is look and listen.

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