

The Neapolitan Presepio in New York

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[presepio2.jpg](#) [2]

In preparation of the visit of the Cardinal of Naples Crescenzo Sepe to New York next January, a series of precious pieces from Neapolitan Presepi will be exhibited at the Italian Cultural Institute from December 14 to January 18, 2011. Here is some background information and a few tips to better understand what this ancient neapolitan tradition is all about.

"Ma a te...te piace 'o presepe??" "No. Nun me piace. Voglio 'a zuppa 'e latte!" (Do you like the Presepio? No, I don't like it! I want my milk&cookies!)

In the well-known Neapolitan theatre comedy "Natale in Casa Cupiello" the son of famous Neapolitan comedian and author Edoardo de Filippo, starting from an approach of total refuse towards this bulwark of the local culture, slowly comes to appreciate the tradition of presepio, influenced by his father that reserves to it full and fierce respect.

The presepio, derived from the Latin word presepium, meaning manger, has been THE symbol of Christmas for Neapolitan families for dozens of generations, since at least ten centuries. The introduction of the tradition of luminous and sumptuous Christmas trees, that are today set up in almost every household in this period, has not reduced its importance, being the presepio commonly considered almost an act of devotion that people pay to Baby Jesus on the day of His Birth and to the culture of their native city.

The focus of the Nativity scene is obviously the cave where Baby Jesus was born, where St. Mary, St. Joseph, the ox and the donkey are placed. All around there are pastors and angels, with the market and the village in the background, and the comet enlightening the whole scene.

Large or small, rich or poor, every Neapolitan family has its own version of the presepio. Its components are mostly handmade: some make small waterfalls or fountains using aluminum foil, or houses, buildings, and boutiques with cardboard and crayons. The pastors and all the other characters populating the scene are usually made of wood, terracotta, or sometimes plastic (in the most modern versions) and are all (or almost) handmade in the famous San Gregorio Armeno, right in the historic center of Naples.

Surrounded by old and scruffy buildings, this street has its own soul and heart. Every day thousands of people walk across it, there is no tourist that gets to Naples without taking a quick tour to admire the artisanal presepios displayed outside the dozens of workshops that literally decor the side-walks with their latest creations. Not only the local craftsmen sell ALL you need to make your customized, personal, as big-and-rich-as-you-wish presepio, but they are also the custodians of the history of the presepio, and are always ready to share it with all of those who might ask them about it.

A few years ago we did the same, and that's how we found out about the origins of this tradition. An artisan who was standing right outside his workshop at the corner between San Gregorio and Via dei Tribunali, told us that the first prototype was made at the beginning of the XI century for the



Santa Maria Church. From that time on local churches inaugurated the tradition to set up a presepio during the Christmas period. The richest one, of which we still have some remainings, was donated by the queen Sancia d'Aragona to the Clarisse nuns in 1340.

It was in the XV century that the first artisans started designing and making wood and terracotta statuettes for the presepio. While at the end of the XVI century brothers Giovanni and Pietro Alemanno made the first wood representation of the Nativity scene, at the beginning of the XVII century sculptor Pietro Belverte created the first presepio with real stones for the San Domenico Maggiore church. It was in the XVII century that the presepio underwent its first evolution when, following the baroque current, artisans started introducing the first "prophane" elements, such as the market with its boutiques, and common people such as peasants, fishermen, butchers, but also dwarfs, mendicants, hosts, humble and poor people who populated the place of birth of Baby Jesus.

The golden epoque of the presepio, however, was the XVIII century, when it finally become a popular tradition in all ways, first among aristocrats. It was then that Giuseppe Sanmartino, maybe the greatest Neapolitan sculptor of the time, founded the first vocational school for presepio artists. The scene was more and more enriched with new figurines, some of which are still today considered "pillars" of every "respectful" presepio:

Benino or Benito: In the Holy Scriptures this character represents the "sleeping people to whom the angels announce the coming of the Christ". In the Neapolitan tradition he is the person the foresees in his dreams the invention of the presepio.

The wine cellar and Cicci Bacco: the wine represents the blood of Christ, given to the people for their salvation, while Cicci Bacco is a heirloom of antique pagan divinities.

The fisherman: Fish is the first symbol of the christians persecuted during the Roman empire. The character is a "fisherman of souls"

The two comrades: Uncle Vincenzo and Uncle Pasquale represent Fat Tuesday and the Death, the two moments that open and close the period of commemoration of the death of Jesus before Easter time.

The Three Wise Men: originally represented on the back of three different animals, the horse, the dromedary and the elephant, they symbolize Asia, Africa, and Europe, that find Baby Jesus after a long journey and honor him..

The art of the presepio touched its apex in the XIX century, when the famous and acclaimed presepio of Cucuniello was made (1887 - 1889) and displayed in the church of San Martino.

From them on the presepio was considered an exhibitory item. The [Banco di Napoli](#) [3], the [Certosa di San Martino](#) [4], and the [Royal Palace of Caserta](#) [5], are with no doubts the to-be-visited" places for those passionated of the tradition of presepio.

Those looking for "something more" to add to the tradition, instead, will most probably find in San Gregorio Armeno what they are looking for: craftsmen come out every year with something new and funny to add to every family's creation. So, besides the traditional figurines of pastors, sheeps, chickens, merchants, and so on, you will find characters inspired to the real, contemporary world, such as the Major of Naples, stars as Michael Jackson and Marylin Monroe, and sport people... and one above all, obsviously, Diego Maradona, the former soccer player that is venerated as a saint in Naples.

Last year, just to give you an example, we had the statuettes of the newly elected President Obama and of Berlusconi with a wounded face, after he was hit by a demonstrator in Milan with a souvenir.

The novelties are so many, every year, that even Neapolitan people never miss their one-day-tour in this small neighborhood of Naples. Even tourists understand the magic of this tradition, that has spread well behind the borders of Naples and of the Campania Region, well behind Italy, and/or Europe.

Even in America, in fact, it has become object of deep interest, both from an anthropological and



religious point of view. Online shops selling statuettes of San Gregorio swarm about the web and intercontinental shippings of the different components of the presepio are very frequent in this period of the year.

However, in our opinion, in order to understand the true spirit behind the tradition of the presepio, a trip to Naples and a tour around San Gregorio Armeno is a must: only if you walk through those tiny and poor workshops and have a chance to talk to the craftsmen selling each statuette, each creation, as they were giving away their own baby, as they say, you can have a bit of Neapolitan Christmas in your own household.

If taking a trip at this time of the year is kind of difficult for you, however, you will still find your corner of San Gregorio Armeno at the exhibit "Nativity in the World" hosted by the Italian Cultural Institute. The exhibit will be inaugurated on Tuesday, December 14, 6pm, by the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute prof Riccardo Viale, Mons. Gennaro Martino, Vicar of the Cardinal, and Dr. Filomena Sardella - from the Regional office of the Ministry of Culture for Campania. It will be concluded on January 18, at the presence of His Eminence the Cardinal of Naples Crescenzo Sepe.

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