

Making and Performing the Nativity Scene in Italy

Rachel E. Boyd

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Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America

Saint Francis is widely credited as the inventor of the Nativity scene. In 1223, Francis decided to celebrate the Christmas mass by reconstructing, in the central Italian town of Greccio, the environment of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. According to saint's first biographer, Thomas of Celano, Francis's desire was "to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay."¹ In order to fulfill the saint's wish, his companion John of Greccio found a suitable spot in a forest, where he prepared a manger, carried in hay, and enlisted a local ox and ass to complete the scene. Worshippers carried candles and torches to the site, and one of them experienced a miraculous vision: a lifeless child, presumably Christ himself, appeared in the manger, and Francis awoke him from a deep slumber.

Francis's careful scenography soon inspired the making of more permanent representations, ranging from Arnolfo di Cambio's marble group (ca. 1291) for the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome to the extraordinary multi-media ensembles crafted by Neapolitan artisans to this day. Known as *presepi* in Italian, these three-dimensional reconstructions of Christ's Nativity range widely in scale, scope, and materials: painted terracotta was popular in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Tuscany, while later examples from Naples and Sicily were made from wood, wax, and fabric, as well as coral and shell.

This project sets out to write a new history of the *presepio* from the thirteenth century to the present. My work focuses on the social functions and interactive dimensions of these ensembles: specifically, it examines the roles *presepi* played in their viewers' lives and the ways in which people of all social and economic classes interacted with them. In my Italian Academy presentation, I analyzed the role of the body in experiencing early modern *presepi* from central and northern Italy.

¹ Thomas of Celano, *Life of St. Francis* (1229), in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, trans. and ed. Regis Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (Hyde Park, 1999), vol. 1, p. 255.