



The History of the Christmas Crib

Three-dimensional scenes representing Christ's birth became popular in Europe during the sixteenth century. In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic church undertook its own reforms and, as part of this Counter-Reformation, sought to promote religious faith through the emotional appeal of art. Nativity scenes with three-dimensional, mobile figures, made by local craftspeople from wood and other materials, illuminated the divine mystery for believers. These vivid tableaux, known as cribs, seemed to make the viewers participants in the event, and they became popular components of Christmas celebrations. Centuries earlier, in 1223, Saint Francis of Assisi had demonstrated the value of a theatrical presentation of holy events when he staged his famous nativity scene in the Italian town of Greccio, filling a manger with hay and leading a live ox and ass to the outdoor site where he preached his Christmas sermon.

In the sixteenth century, the crib tradition spread across Europe, and it still forms an integral part of Christmas celebrations there, from the largest Italian cities to the smallest Bavarian towns. The

crib is called *crèche* in France (a term also used in English-speaking countries), *Krippe* in Germany, *presepio* in Italy, and *nacimiento* in Spain. By the eighteenth century, cribs in the baroque style were extremely intricate, often including whole towns as well as the traditional biblical figures—the holy family, shepherds, and the three kings. Specialized craftspeople, particularly in Italy and Bavaria (in southern Germany), vied to create the most resplendent carved, painted, and dressed crib figures, which were intended to produce a profound emotional experience for the viewer. Moved by the religious nature of the cribs, wealthy patrons spared no expense in commissioning them.

Nativity scenes are assembled at the beginning of Advent (four Sundays before Christmas), and the three kings are added on Twelfth Night (January 6). The largest public collection of *crèches* is in the Bavarian National Museum in Munich, where a special staff sets up 250 of them. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts displays three European cribs every Christmas season in its annual exhibition "Holiday Traditions in the Period Rooms."



The Institute's Bavarian Krippe: A Rare Crib

The Bavarian crib owned by The Minneapolis Institute of Arts is a baroque *Krippe* that probably dates to the mid-eighteenth century. Katie Millhiser, a historian of European holiday traditions, describes it as more elaborate than nativities in the churches of Salzburg. The colorful Germanic-style buildings are characteristic of eighteenth-century Bavaria. This *Krippe* would have been appropriate for a baroque church; the lavish gold costumes worn by the figures and the gold starburst motif on the stable roof would have echoed the building's opulent decor.

The history of the Institute's *Krippe* indicates an abiding American interest in European crib traditions. Shortly after World War I, the *Krippe* was given to John N. Then, of Hastings, Minnesota, by the family of his close friend Johann Zwinck of the Bavarian town of Oberammergau, where a famous Passion play is enacted every ten years. Newspaper accounts from the 1940s state that the crib was created by Hyazinth Reimer, an eighteenth-century wood-carver, who passed it on to the Zwinck family.

Mr. Then, who owned a large collection of nativity figures and wrote two books on the Christ-

mas traditions of the world, stressed the rarity of even single figures from eighteenth-century cribs. Upon his death, the nativity set was inherited by his sisters in Minneapolis, from whose estate the Friends of the Institute purchased it in 1993. In 1994, the Friends gave the *Krippe* to The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The *Krippe* consists of more than eighty pieces, of which almost half are human figures. The carved wood heads, hands, and feet are hand painted and fastened to the bodies with wire so they can be moved in different positions; one commission for crib figures dating back to the sixteenth century requests a similar flexible construction. Silk costumes adorn the human figures. The most sumptuous are the robes of the three wise men; painted to simulate ermine, they are embellished with gold-paper trim, metallic thread, and sequins. The black Ethiopian king wears a multilayered beaded necklace, and precious stones painted on his face simulate jewels draped from his headpiece. Members of the kings' extensive entourage wear similarly detailed costumes.

The animals are depicted with varying accu-



racy because the wood-carvers had never seen some of them. The elephant, for example, resembles a mammoth, and the camels, too, look rather odd. But the horse, an animal that was familiar to Bavarians, is very lifelike. In the mid-twentieth century, the set had more than forty lambs, but now only twenty-two remain; such a large number suggests that this *Krippe* may have belonged to a convent school, with each lamb representing a child.

Bethlehem looks like a German town. Because the artist was not familiar with Middle Eastern architecture, he created buildings similar to those of his native town, just as northern Renaissance painters of the fifteenth century portrayed biblical scenes against a background featuring the cities where they lived. The painted wooden structures boast windows of real glass with silver-paper mullions. A collection of two-dimensional buildings originally stood behind the wooden structures in the foreground, continuing the perspective into the distance. A painted backdrop showing towns in the countryside was purchased with the set. Though this nativity scene has historically been shown both with and without the backdrop, it is not known whether the backdrop originally belonged with the set, and its poor condition precludes its display with the *Krippe* at this time.

In the Institute's *Krippe*, the shepherds have discovered the holy family in the stable. The wise men's entourage is advancing from distant lands to the town of Bethlehem; palm trees and sand indi-



cate their crossing of a desert. The townspeople, stirred by their approach, are moving in the path of the wise men. An angel holds a sign that proclaims the miracle with the words (in German) "Glory to God in the Highest/and Peace to Men on Earth." Other significant elements in the scene are the ruin, symbolizing the end of paganism and the beginning of Christianity, and the flower held by a small boy, possibly star anise, one of the spices traded from the East and considered more valuable than gold.

When the Friends purchased the *Krippe*, it was in disrepair. Buildings were fragmented, most of the costumes were flattened and soiled from age and careless storage, and some of the figures were miss-

ing arms and legs. Conservators from the Upper Midwest Conservation Association spent 220 hours cleaning and humidifying the garments to restore them, as closely as possible, to their original appearance. They painstakingly carved and painted new legs for the animals and reattached limbs and clothing to the human figures. They repaired the buildings and replaced damaged silver-paper mullions. As a result, the set now looks much as the crib maker intended.

A *Krippe* as complete and elaborate as this one is rare, especially in the United States. Such lovingly made scenes usually belonged to a church and seldom, if ever, traveled and remained intact.