



If There's a Presepi, It's Christmas Time

Judith Harris (December 19, 2015)

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Babbo Natale aka Santa Claus is ubiquitous, lying atop apartment rooftops, dangling from balconies and, in animated doll form, dancing in front of cafes. But the authentic, made-in-Italy Italian Christmas creche, the "presepe," is alive and well throughout the land. We know that Christmas is at hand when we see the men from our village, one hour north of Rome, depositing the tall logs in the square by the lake front. These logs become the framework for a labyrinthine "presepe" as big as, or bigger than, many of the hillside cottages of the town. Inside, when it is finished, there is a manger scene with life-sized figures of Mary and Joseph, beautifully outfitted in Biblical attire, and baby Jesus in a manger. And there will be ample space for the animals, all of them alive: sheep, a donkey, an ox.

And this is only one of our presepi, for a half dozen others are scattered throughout the old walled town of Trevignano Romano, whose origins are 7th century Etruscan. The same is true of other town nearby, such as the similarly ancient Sutri, a few miles distant. There too the townspeople have erected another half dozen creche scenes. Each is prettier than the last, and almost amazingly elaborate.

But they are also more typical than special: throughout all of Rome, and for that matter the rest of Italy, every holiday season its historic churches turn over an entire side chapel to a nativity scene, often with moving parts and lights. Other important creche scenes are on view in churches in cities like Assisi and Urbino. Of the many towns where the multitude of figurines for these presepi are created, Naples is the most famous, and its nativity figures are sold all year round.

These traditional Christmas nativity scenes were inspired by the Biblical words by St. Luke, who recorded that Mary gave birth to her child and placed him in a manger. This inspired such early descriptions of the birth of Christ as in the "Grotto of the Savior," in the words of St. Jerome, a place for pilgrims to visit. The popularity of the creche grew in the Middle Ages, and, most importantly, in 1223 St. Francis is said to have organized a "presepio" at Greccio in Assisi, in a tradition which continued, until it reached its apex in the 18th Century.



Among the most popular today is the so-called "presepe vivente", or "living" creche, named because the figures and animals represented are living local people. Of all these, that at tiny Greccio near the Assisi associated with St. Francis is the most beloved of all at Christmas time. As the first (so they believe) to recreate a nativity, the Greccesi call their town "the new Bethlehem". Each year they put on, almost every evening from Dec. 24 through Jan. 6, a playlet in six scenes, with music, lights and settings, in which actors are dressed in medieval costumes. The Greccio presepe is intended to evoke the Franciscan monks who, after toiling in the fields, recreated that first nativity scene 20 years after the death of St. Francis.

Another Umbrian town, Rasiglia, puts its living presepe on view from Dec. 26 through Jan. 6 every evening from 4 to 8 pm. The speciality there is to illustrate not only the Christmas story, but also the historical background of the local ancient crafts: carpentry, inn keeping, weaving, sewing clothes. A blacksmith makes horse shoes, and a chimney sweep passes with his long broom. For Rasiglia, this is "our way to involve the new generations with their parents and grandparents, and offer them a glance into the past of our historical, cultural and environmental heritage. The point is to bring back the enjoyment and pride in our roots."

(For a photo panorama of 16 Christmas creches from all over Italy, go to [>>>](#) [1])

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