

The Basel Doll's House Museum presents:

## **“Neapolitan Folk Art” – a special exhibition devoted to the famous nativity scenes from Naples**

**From 31 October 2003 to 25 April 2004 the Basel Doll's House Museum presents the famous Neapolitan folk art of crafting nativity scenes. Working entirely by hand over a period of many months, the Neapolitan nativity-scene artist Mario Capuano has created a scene occupying an area of more than 15 square metres, specially for the Doll's House Museum.**

### **History**

The Neapolitan art of nativity-scene making has its origin in the portrayal of the Holy Family that the brothers Giovanni and Pietro Alemanno produced for the Duke of Calabria in 1478. 41 painted and gilded wooden figures adorned the representation. (Regrettably, the idea that Saint Francis invented the nativity scene at Christmas 1223 is thus only a beautiful legend.) These original nativity scenes were simple and clear in their lines, so as to concentrate attention on what was essential; they were intended as an invitation to prayer. Therefore in these nativity scenes there is also no secondary material of any kind, which would only have been distracting.

In about 1500 the style changed. Documents confirm that as early as 1532 the nobleman Matteo Mastrogiudice of Sorrento had a nativity scene with painted terracotta figures made to his order. The portrayal continued to show the Holy Family, but now in addition ox and ass, dog, sheep and goat also appeared, as well as two shepherds and three angels. As the setting, hints of a landscape could already be recognised. This nativity scene has unfortunately disappeared.

The figures in the Neapolitan nativity scene are called “pastori”, which in fact means shepherds. How this name came to be used is no longer known today. The figures were either carved from wood, or formed from terracotta. In the first half of the 16th century more and more artists devoted themselves to creating these figures. Among the best-known artists of that period were Michele Perrone and his brothers Aniello and Donato. “Pastori” from their workshop can still be seen today in various museums. In the second half of the 16th century

the first jointed dolls made from wood appeared. Moveable arms and legs made it possible to place them in exactly the desired position. They were also given fabric clothing, but they still looked very stiff. When these were replaced by dolls whose bodies consisted of a wire framework covered with hempen thread cannot be verified exactly. Documents, however, indicate that these new dolls were already present in nativity scenes in 1741. This new type of figure made it possible to match the body and gestures to the personality being portrayed.

The first detail which is essential to the traditional, old Neapolitan nativity scene is the so-called “Natività”: the Blessed Virgin, seated, gazing at the Infant Jesus, with Saint Joseph standing at her side or behind her. At first the Holy Family is portrayed in a cave or a stable, later one can detect parts of a temple. Throughout the history of the Neapolitan art of nativity-scene making, only the figures of the Holy Family and the angels wear classical robes. With all other figures the clothes change and depict the current trends in fashion.

The second obligatory detail is the “Announcement of the Birth of Jesus to the Shepherds”: a small hut or an isolated house on the bank of a river, with sheep, goats and oxen watched over by shepherds. In each case three of the shepherds were completely overcome by the angel’s announcement. These three shepherds were always portrayed as a young lad, a middle-aged man and an old man – symbolising the passage of human life. A fourth shepherd was depicted sleeping; this is intended to signify that mankind was asleep until the birth of Christ.

The third traditional detail showed a tavern with householders and guests, who sit at a table laid for a meal and are being served. This symbolises that the Holy Family was denied lodging.

Last of all and by now an indispensable element was the scene of the arrival of the three Magi with their caravan from the East. This was influenced by the notions that the Neapolitans had of the East at that time. Balthazar, the oldest of the Magi, usually stood before the Infant Jesus, or he was seated on a grey horse, which moved at walking pace. Melchior was portrayed on a brown or chestnut horse, trotting. Caspar was given a black horse, which reared up and was kept under control by a groom. The costumes and equipment of the oriental procession were stunning: lavishly furnished with daggers and caskets, richly set with jewels and gold.

It was the Bourbon king Charles III, with his “nativity-scene folly”, who triggered the absolute heyday of Neapolitan nativity-scene crafting in the 18th century. This passion was passed on

to other noblemen, well-to-do citizens, monasteries and churches. Under Charles III, in addition to the birth scene, the angels, shepherds and the Magi, the simple Neapolitans also made their entry into the nativity scene. Details from the everyday life of ordinary citizens became part of the nativity scene. The artists saw the possibility of depicting the characteristic faces of the population. Beggars and cripples with their handicaps and deformations were portrayed authentically, just as they formed part of the normal townscape at that time. And as the setting, whole landscapes with buildings slowly came into being.

These nativity scenes were also provided with a wealth of so-called accessories. They included slaughtered animals or half-animals hung up, made from terracotta, as well as the fruits and vegetables typical of the region, often arranged in woven baskets. At first the vegetables and fruit were made from terracotta, but later they were modelled from a block of wax. Plates, soup tureens, jugs, etc. appeared on tables laid for a meal; personal objects such as pipes, tobacco-boxes in silver or ivory and various pieces of jewellery adorned the figures with loving care; magnificent musical instruments were also essential to the scene.

Only a few people could afford splendid nativity scenes such as those of Charles III. Among those who could, however, were foreign royal houses such as those of Charles III's sons: Charles IV, who sat on the throne of Spain, and Ferdinand IV of Naples. They, too, ordered their nativity-scene figures, landscapes and their accessories from Neapolitan artists. Only figures made by the top master craftsmen with the most meticulous craftsmanship were used for these nativity scenes. The clothing materials even included gold threads. Shrines with jewels were also featured, as were cloaks set with diamonds and other valuable stones.

In these nativity scenes religious thinking and spirituality were pushed entirely into the background, and were completely lost.

Some of these nativity scenes can be seen in Naples and the surrounding area. The museum at San Martino (Naples) houses a collection of old nativity scenes. Among them are 19 figures from a nativity scene dating from 1478. The most famous scene is the one which the author Michele Cuciniello presented to the city of Naples: this dates from the 18th century and consists of 180 figures, 42 asses, 29 animals and 339 decorative objects. There is also a beautiful old nativity scene to admire in the Palazzo Reale in Caserta.

### **The present day**

In Via San Gregorio Armeno and a few of the adjoining alleyways you find countless shops and workshops in which nativity-scene figures, baskets with vegetables or fish and much

else are produced and sold throughout the year. Especially in the busy pre-Christmas period, a great deal goes on here in the old part of Naples. You can find everything you need to decorate a complete traditional Neapolitan nativity scene.

Special terracotta figures are on offer, portraying contemporary politicians or well-known film actors, and of course historical personalities. There is something for every taste here.

Usually the figures are 30 to 40 centimetres in height. The head is made from terracotta, the hands and feet are carved from wood, or are also in terracotta. The body consists of a skeleton made from wire and hempen thread, so that the figures can easily be made to take up particular attitudes. The head, hands and feet are hand-painted. Eyes made from glass give the figures a life-like expression.

Whereas north of the Alps great care and effort is lavished on decorating a Christmas tree, in Italy people set great store by providing an impressive nativity scene. This tradition is especially deeply rooted in Naples and the surrounding area.

Set out on an area of some 15 square metres, you can admire a nativity scene which reflects everyday life in Naples in the 18th century. You can see people enjoying a meal, or women gossiping on their balconies, and various tradespeople are shown going about their work. And of course the “Natività” with the Holy Family is there, too, set in a ruin-like temple, with shepherds, angels and the three Magi.

Working entirely by hand over a period of many months, the Neapolitan nativity-scene artist Mario Capuano has created the complete scene for the special exhibition, with the buildings, figures and hundreds of other decorative objects. The Capuano family has been active in the art of nativity-scene crafting since as long ago as 1840. Their recent important works include a nativity scene for the pilgrimage church in San Giovanni Rotondo, where Padre Pio worked, and one for the present King of Spain, Juan Carlos.

All in all, the typical Neapolitan nativity scene provides a wonderful “miniature” insight into the life and traditions of bygone Naples.

### **Opening hours**

Museum/Shop: every day from 11.00 a.m. until 5.00 p.m., Thursdays until 8.00 p.m.

Café: every day from 10.00 a.m. until 6.00 p.m., Thursdays until 9.00 p.m.

Admission: CHF 7.00 / CHF 5.00, children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No surcharge for the special exhibition. The entire building is suitable for wheelchairs.

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