

History of the Crèche

The earliest representation of the Nativity can be seen in a fresco found in the catacombs of St. Priscilla, 2nd century A.D., portraying the Mother and Child, the Three Wise Men and St. Joseph or perhaps the prophet Isaiah, and above, a star with eight points.



The Nativity of Jesus has been a major subject of Christian art since the 4th Century. The artistic depictions of the Nativity or birth of Jesus, celebrated at Christmas, are based on the narratives in the Bible, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and further elaborated by written, oral and artistic tradition. Christian art includes a great many representations of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. Such works are generally referred to as the “Madonna and Child” or “Virgin and Child.” They are not usually representations of the Nativity specifically, but are often devotional objects representing a particular aspect or attribute of the Virgin Mary, or Jesus. Nativity pictures, on the other hand, are specifically illustrative, and include many narrative details; they are a normal component of the sequences illustrating both the Life of Christ and the Life of the Virgin.

In later centuries, until about the 5th Century more frescoes of the Epiphany were painted in different catacombs. A fresco found in the catacomb of St. Sebastian shows a sort of manger with the ass and the ox, but Mary and Joseph are not seen.

Later in the 4th and 5th Century in bas-relief work on marble sarcophagi the figures of shepherds began to appear and gradually the Nativity Scene came to resemble the present day form with all the figures, the Child, Mary and Joseph, the ass, the ox, the Three Wise Men and the Shepherds. The Nativity has been depicted in many different media, both pictorial and sculptural. Pictorial forms include murals, panel paintings, manuscript illuminations, stained glass windows and oil paintings. The subject of the Nativity is often used for altarpieces, many of these combining both painted and sculptural elements. Other sculptural representations of the Nativity include ivory miniatures, carved stone sarcophagi, architectural features such as capitals and door lintels, and free standing sculptures.

In this sense, scholars agree that the oldest Nativity Scene in Italy is in marble attributed to Arnolfo di Cambio around 1289. Although some of the figures were broken or lost, this Nativity Scene can still be seen today in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. Up to 1870, many Popes came here to celebrate Christmas Mass.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Tradition attributes to Saint Francis the merit of introducing the Nativity Scene to the vast cycle of Christmas customs, when, at Christmas 1223 in the village of Greccio near Assisi, as we are told by St. Bonaventure, he took a manger and filled it with hay, tied an ass and an ox near it and with a crowd of people from all over the neighboring countryside attended the celebration of Mass in front of the crib.

However, in Greccio there were none of the figures of the Nativity in Bethlehem, none of the characters, Mary, Joseph, the Child, so that rather than a Nativity Scene, the crib built at Greccio can be seen as a development of Christmas liturgical ceremonies, which reconnect with the mysteries, sacred dramas in the Vulgate having as their subject episodes of the Old and New Testaments. From the 14th century onwards these religious representations became ever more lavish, with the addition of mobile puppets, that some consider the forefathers of our present day crib-figures.

The Christ Child in the manger and other pictures of the story of Bethlehem have been used in church services from the first centuries. But the crib in its present form and its use outside the church originated with St. Francis of Assisi. Through his famous celebration at Greccio, Italy, on Christmas Eve 1223, with a Bethlehem scene including live animals, he made the crib popular. Since then, it has been a familiar sight in Christian homes all over the world.