

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Neapolitan

Presepe

mid-18th century to early-nineteenth century
oil painted terracotta, carved wood,
painted glass, shaped wire, tin and cork,
with stitched silks and linen

288 x 440 x 274 cm.;

113 3/8 x 173 1/4 x 107 7/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Naples.

Literature

C. Romano, *The 18th-century Neapolitan crèche: A masterpiece of Baroque spectacle*,
Naples 2021.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

This wonderful Neapolitan crèche, also known as a *presepe*, constitutes the heart of our *NAPLES* exhibition. Displayed in a custom-made wooden cabinet designed by Alfredo Laino, which has a built-in lighting system that can simulate sunset and sunrise, the *presepe* restages the Nativity in an utterly engaging and sensory manner. Bringing together classical and Christian mythology with the traditional folk culture of every-day Naples, in a polysemic installation that roots the narrative in reality, this highly ornate and monumental scene consists of 421 items in total, including religious and secular figures, putti and seraphims (122), animals (52), objects (257) and pieces of furniture. The miniature objects – also known as *minuterie* – that can be found on the *presepe* were originally made by expert Florentine and Venetian workers in the Royal Manufactory founded by King Charles VI of Naples, father of King Ferdinand IV. King Charles established this factory in order to show off the craftsmanship of his Kingdom, and to compete with the artistic splendour of other European courts.

Origin

The earliest and most famous of the known Nativity re-enactments dates back to Christmas Eve in 1223, when Saint Francis of Assisi (1182 - 1226) celebrated mass in the Grotto of Greccio, a small village between Rome and Assisi. This event, having made such an impact on its attendants, was repeated as Franciscanism spread. This is evidenced by the fresco cycles on the life of Saint Francis on the walls of the nave in the Basilica of Assisi, attributed to Giotto (c. 1267 – 1337). The city of Naples was particularly fertile ground for the representation of Nativity scenes owing to the fact that Franciscanism had quickly taken hold due to the protection and support of the Angevin sovereigns. Amongst the first examples of sculpted depictions of the Nativity is a smaller crèche traditionally thought to have been given by Queen Sancia to the Cloister of the Poor Clares at the church of Santa Chiara in Naples, which was completed before 1340: the year the nunnery was consecrated.

In the following centuries, the creation of such crèches became an artistic genre in its own right, whereby patrons competed amongst themselves to commission incredibly ornate examples as an expression of their wealth. The skill required to craft them began to rival the

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

level of technical genius that is applied when executing larger marble monuments that traditionally decorate palaces and churches.

Figures

In the present *presepe* each figure is originally constructed from wire. Wooden limbs were then added, that were later wrapped in hemp. The heads differ in that in order to achieve a higher level of detail they were made from polychromed terracotta with painted glass eyes that ensure a lifelike appearance. They were inserted into the head upon initial modelling after firing, using stucco to hold them in place.

Clothing & Fashion

The clothing worn by the figures in the *presepe* is used as a marker to enable the viewer to identify their narrative role, as well as signifying on their political, economic and social position in Naples under King Ferdinand IV. Costumes were equally important when the royal *presepe* was conceived: the King commissioned their creation from the factory of San Leucio, which he had founded in 1778. He later entrusted painters Alessandro d'Anna and Antonio Berotti to catalogue the different styles of clothing, which were individual to each province in the kingdom. Every village had its own way of dressing; clothes were proudly worn as an indicator of unique local identity on occasions such as festivals, during which citizens donned brightly coloured garments cut in ornate ways. The fashion in our *presepe* is based on such specific historical knowledge, and therefore acts almost like a contemporary snapshot of the Bourbon world: a historical document in its own right.

The Holy Family are distinguished from the other figures that occupy the scene by their clothing, which is stylistically rooted in usual Biblical iconography. The Madonna wears a pink robe, to signify her terrestrial birth, wrapped in an azure mantle that symbolises her celestial spirituality. Saint Joseph is in purple and yellow - the colours which represent the priesthood - to indicate the union of his soul with God. Lastly, the Christ Child attracts our attention by his lack of clothing, naked in His incarnation, his flesh emphasised as a reminder of his innocence and his sacrifice for the sake of mankind.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

The Three Kings situated around the Holy Family are dressed in traditional Turkish costume, therefore revealing the increasing demand for exotic apparel that was spreading across Europe at this time. This trend was perhaps formed by the strengthening relationship between European countries and the Ottoman Empire, which intensified after the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699. The kings are richly dressed in silks that are fixed to the figures with nails to mimic the effect of drapery, and decorated with jewels and precious metals fashioned by the same goldsmiths who worked for the court, including gold, silver, ivory, coral and pearls.

The rest of the figures, which include an array of bystanders, cherubs, seraphims, shepherds, and musicians, also known as *zampognari*, wear silks, cottons, linens, leather, and paper with metallic thread, while other characters don additional items of clothing and accessories.

Setting & Narrative

The entire stage sits on overlapping blocks of cork and wood paper-mâché, decorated with twigs and moss that have been painted with watercolour and gouache to imitate mountain rock, perfectly replicating 'tuff': the yellowish stone upon which Naples rests. Most of the figures are dispersed into small clusters, while some are suspended from the ceiling using transparent wire thus creating several *tableaux vivants* - scenes one after the other that allow the drama to unfold. Gestures and facial expressions connect each figure to one another to create a more cohesive narrative, and also help to direct the viewer's gaze.

The Colnaghi *presepe* is divided into two sections: the sacred sphere, which includes the depiction of the newly born Christ Child flanked by His parents, the angels in Adoration, the Annunciation of the Shepherds and the Three Kings, and then the secular plane which is comprised of everyday happenings that ground the religious narrative in our world - as exemplified by the presence of the tavern, the market, and festive dancing traditional to Southern Italy, known as the *tarantella*. The backdrop of a bright blue sky serves to intensify each of these moments by creating an optical illusion that enlarges the feel of the crèche further, and which extends the conceptual narrative beyond each scene's perimeter.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

The anachronistic presence of ancient ruins on the apex of the mountain, a typical feature of *presepi* and indeed other religious artworks, serves to imbue the scene with symbolism. It signifies the end of the old order, and thus gives further legitimacy to Christ in that the scene of His birth is situated among the ruins of the Classical world. The inclusion of these ruins, and the inclusion of the statue of the Farnese Asclepius at the lower right of the *presepe*, also evidences a growing interest in the ancient world that invaded the decorative arts towards the end of the eighteenth century, stemming from the arrival in Naples of the Farnese collection of Roman antiquities, and also from the archaeological discoveries being made at the excavations of Paestrum, Herculaneum and later in Pompeii.