

Presepe is Art and Hope. We Met the "Mago delle Moschelle"

A.B. (December 14, 2010)



The exhibit "Nativity in the World/ from Naples to New York" opens up at the Italian Cultural Institute. "The presepe is something new based upon tradition, something new which can create work force today" says the curator -Filomena Maria Sardella- who also stresses the message of hope embedded in this show. For Giuseppe Reale, Director of Museo Arci, "in a city and land so affected by individualism and fragmentation, the presepe, as a choral activity, which can help the reconstruction". The masterpieces of contemporary presepio art will be, along with older ones, on view until January 18. We met Luciano Testa, Master Artisan of the Presepe for the last 25 years

p { margin-bottom: 0.08in; }Christmas, Naples, presepe. Some things simply go hand in hand with each other, and the traditional Neapolitan presepe is as ancient as it is inevitable. Thanks to the Cardinal of Naples Crescenzo Sepe, between December 14 and January 18 at the [Italian Cultural](#)



[Institute](#) [2], an exhibit of Neapolitan presepi will be on view in New York. "38 presepi pieces of which 34 are works of unique artisans that are part of the historic [AIAP - Associazione Italiana Amici del Presepe](#) [3]" [Italian Association Friends of Presepe], says curator Filomena Maria Sardella.

Among these Luciano Testa, who has been a Master Artisan of the Presepe for 25 years. He studied at art school, but was intrigued after seeing friends making models. He speaks about his shepherds, that measure between 0.4 and 2 inches, with the passion of someone who deeply loves what he does. Large hands for an artisan who builds tiny fragile clay statues, and yet he is known in Naples as the Re delle Moschelle (King of Miniatures), as Roberto De Simone baptized him. Luciano tells us how since the late 19th century the houses of the Neapolitan lower class were very small and needed smaller statues for smaller presepi. "Making larger statues is easier, the smaller ones are modeled by very few, while the others are made in casts", he told us with pride. And among those who own Luciano's shepherds are President Scalfaro, Luca De Filippo, and Roberto De Simone.

"To make a shepherd one starts from the head, and slowly moves down to the rest of the upper body", continues Luciano, "then come the legs, arms, and according to what the face expresses, clothes are added. A jacket if it's a man, a skirt and apron if it's a woman". Luciano works alone but always uses the plural when he speaks, referring to the AIAP, the Italian Association Friends of Presepio, the organization that reaches out to all those interested in the presepe, anywhere in Italy, that self-finances courses at the Poggioreale penitentiary, and at the Casa Circondariale in Secondigliano, as well as children courses in the city. "We have saved some souls", says Luciano, "someone even opened a shop in San Gregorio Armeno". The spreading of presepi art can be a concrete opportunity for the reintegration of young Neapolitans in the working world.

And this is one of the reasons the Cardinal of Naples had to want this exhibition held in New York. "It is a special event because it contains a powerful message of hope" confirms the curator, Filomena Maria Sardella. The objects on view are made by artists today. After all, "the presepe is something new based upon tradition, something new which can create a work force today" explains one of the organizers. In addition to that "Cardinal Sepe supports this event", says Giuseppe Reale, Director of the [Museo ARCI](#) [4], "because in a city and land so affected by individualism and fragmentation, the presepe, as a choral activity, can help the reconstruction". And from this point of view the presepe becomes an opportunity for building social life and family traditions.

"The mise en scene of daily life becomes imaginary as well", adds the curator, "the artisans work every year in creating new figurines, portraying satirically well-known public figures of today".

This event will be made even more special by the presence of the two Master Artisans of the Presepe, Luciano Testa and Gino Baia, who will give a demonstration of their talent on the opening day, at 6:30pm. Also, Cardinal Sepe himself will be visiting the Cultural Institute during his trip to New York in January.

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