

## NOTES & QUERIES

### ON THE STATUS OF THE CHRISTMAS CRIB IN THE UNITED STATES

Franz H. Mueller

No typical American Christmas crib exists, nor is there an ideal Italian, Austrian, French or German creche type. America's ethnic pluralism has resulted in a variety of three-dimensional representations of the Nativity, each type reflecting, at least to a degree, the national origins of those who made and used them. A scientifically satisfactory account of the present state of Nativity art in the United States would require a greater expenditure of time, effort and money than this writer can afford. The readers will, therefore, have to content themselves with something of a quasi-geographic survey which offers representative examples from various parts of this country.

We will start our survey in Maine where we find a collector, exhibitor, and distributor of Provencal *santons*, French-born Helene P. Carter of Topsham. She spends most of her time in the Provence, ferreting out and buying up good-quality *santons*. She has written an informative article called "What is a Santon?", and distributed it among interested audiences. Mrs. Carter speaks in schools, libraries, and museums on the origins, production technique, and significance of those crèche figures. The Criquet Shop, a store in Damariscotte, ME, sells a great variety of imported *santons*, largely those made by the *santonnier* (santon-maker) M. Carbonel. The shop's illustrated catalogue with colored figures of some 122 figurines models, landscapes, etc., is fun to examine.

In the New England of the Puritans, the celebration

of Christmas was abhorred as popish and was legally forbidden. The Catholic Irish who later settled in the same area had no crèche tradition of their own. But the Portuguese fishermen who came from the Azores and made their home in the coastal regions of Cape Cod and the State of Rhode Island brought a type of crib still found around New Bedford, Providence, and Bristol, mostly in the homes of older people. This crib is usually built into a Christmas pyramid, topped by the **Menino Jesus** (or **Bom Jesus**), adorned with candles and little dishes of sprouting wheat, beans, or peas. Perched over the scene is usually the **Galo dos felicidades** ("cock of blessing"). The crib figures are often made from fine fabric with embroidered faces.

In mountainous New Hampshire, there is at least one folk artist, Mrs. Susan N. Collins of Littleton, who carves crib figures. In Connecticut we find a beautiful crib on the grounds of the priory Regina Laudis of the nuns of St. Benedict. It is literally in-"stalled" in a former sheep-fold and attracts many visitors. Tarrytown, New York, is the seat of a group named **Art Of The Nativity** which annually arranges an exhibit of traditional and modern Christmas cribs. The exhibit has been sponsored by local Methodists, at present the only organization that promotes the Christmas crib as an object of religious art. Mention should be made of the **Völkerkrippe** (creche of nations) by the German-Austrian craftsman Albert Fehrenbacher, a restorer who works for a museum. He began to build this crib, dedicated to the reconciliation of nations, in a Russian P.O.W. camp. It is an extended landscape with numerous subdivisions representing different races and people in their respective native environments. The Metropolitan Museum in New York annually puts up a large Rossellino crib with some 140 figures under a tall fir tree. For many years, the White House, though in its private quarters, has set up a large creche, usually of Italian origin.

Ninety years ago, the so-called **Christmas Gardens** first appeared in Baltimore. They were, and are, panoramic representations of Christmas scenes in miniature, elaborately displayed in private homes and front yards. From the beginning, the Christmas Gardens were less a religious-

ly motivated display of the Nativity than entertaining winter landscapes of which the barn or cave of Bethlehem was just a part. Originally, the manger was central - both in fact and in mind - but over the course of time, the emphasis has shifted to details, playful aspects of display and mechanical tricks. Nobody has as yet been able to trace the origins of the Baltimore Christmas Gardens which now seem to be dying out. But since it appears to have been mainly Germans who started and fostered this custom, it is assumed to have been introduced by Pennsylvania Dutch who had moved into the city about a century ago.

The Moravians were victims of religious persecution and fled to America, especially to Pennsylvania and North Carolina. They called their Christmas cribs "Putz." In **Krippenkunst in Böhmen und Mähren**,<sup>1</sup> Karasek and Lanz have drawn attention to the fact that in the area of As in the Egerland (Chebsky Kray) the term "Putz" has long been used for the Christmas Pyramid which may be looked upon as a forerunner of or substitute for the Christmas tree. As in the case of the Portuguese-American pyramid-type crib, the Christmas pyramid may encase a Nativity scene. The Moravians added statues, miniature buildings, moss, wood, stumps, fancy scenery, trick lighting, water mills, stores, and even an operating railroad. This distracted from the central idea of a Nativity scene and led to a secularization of the "Putz."

The "Putz" now depicts all the antecedents of the Nativity: the Prophets who foretold the coming of the Savior to the Annunciation of the Heavenly Host, the events which followed the birth of Jesus such as the Coming of the Magi, the murder of the Holy Innocents and the Flight to Egypt. However, the folk art of the "Putz" consists largely in its dioramic or panoramic arrangement, the dressing up of the figurines and the embellishment of the scenery. The statuettes are rarely homemade but mostly imported from Italy and Germany. The future of the "Putz" seems to be no longer as certain as it used to be, as the younger generation of the Moravian Brethren is no longer as intensely interested in the custom as their elders. The sense of tradition and devotion is faltering, and there

is little motivation left to engage in the setting up of a "Putz" and to devote many weeks to its preparation and perfection.

In Virginia, North Carolina, Illinois, and Minnesota, we find handsome crèche made from the byproducts of the corn plant such as the stalks, the silk, the tassels and especially the husks. In the mountains of Tennessee and in other southern and southwestern states, crib figures are at times made from roots and stumps of the poplar tree, the wood of the horse chestnut and the pine tree. It seems that pine wood is used particularly by the Indians and Mexicans.

What the **santonniers** are in France, the **santeros** are in New Mexico and elsewhere. But while the **santonniers** primarily make crib figures, the **santeros** make all kinds of sacred images, especially statues and pictures. Perhaps these carvings and paintings, especially those with a Nativity theme, originally served to venerate the saints during processions and miracle plays. In predominantly Spanish speaking communities, the Advent and Christmas seasons are often ushered in with dramatic representations of liturgical episodes. The more important ones are **Los Pasteros**, a pastoral play, and **Las Posadas**, the search for an inn or lodging by Mary and Joseph. In the **jornadas** that move from house to house, the players usually carry statues of Mary and Joseph with them on a portable platform. These figures may be handmade or commercially manufactured. The shepherds travel towards a stationary crib or **nacimiento** where one finds statues or actors representing Mary and Joseph. It seems that the few surviving **santeros** now follow more their own artistic taste than any indigenous tradition; they may satisfy the demand of museums and tourists more than the wants of their neighbors and kinfolks.

None of the old cribs seem to have survived in the missions of California, New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona. The crib tradition, however, has survived; the mission churches still show outdoor and indoor cribs, which are partly the handiwork of devoted and skilled parishioners.

Outdoor cribs and Christmas pageants are restricted to Catholic churches and communities. Catholics appear to prefer their cribs in their churches and homes, while

other Christian denominations select front yards, quadrangles, or forecourts. Businesses display Nativity scenes in their display cases, glass-roofed courts and parking lots. Certain civic organizations, religious orders, and even private individuals exhibit at Christmas time representations of the Nativity with sculptured or stuffed figures and lifelike details. Some of these pageants consist of large tableaux of loosely unified biblical scenes related to the Christmas story. There are collectors of dolls, marionettes, and figurines who make their crib figures available for public view. Many art museums own and exhibit some crèche figures or complete cribs of different ages and countries. Some youth organizations as well as private schools have contests in crib building. Art teachers in both public and private schools are producing new types of crèches. This may encourage their pupils to try to build their own crèches at home.

Fortunately, an active generation of American artists present their contemporaries with amazing creations, among them truly good representations of the Nativity in wood, ceramics, and glass. As a mature theology of the Incarnation is reaching the masses of the faithful in the United States, there is hope that there will eventually develop another, not weakly and effusively sentimental, but strong and truly meaningful art of the Nativity.

#### NOTES

- 1 Karasek, A. and J. Lanz. **Krippenkunst in Böhmen und Mähren** (Marburg 1974), p. 86.

Dr., Litt. D.h.c. Franz H. Mueller, Professor emeritus of economics, has collected considerable material over the years dealing with the art of the Nativity. He offers his material to anyone who wants to do research in this area or write a thesis about it. In the following abridged article, he provides an overview on crèche in the United States. (His address is: 2110 Wellesley Ave, Saint Paul, Minnesota 55105).