

## NOSTALGIA AND THE REPAIR OF PLACE: A NATIVITY SCENE IN ST. PETER'S SQUARE

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Since 1982, under the auspices of Pope John Paul II, the Vatican has annually unveiled a Nativity scene, or *presepe*, on Christmas Eve, an installation visited by thousands each year before its disassembly in early February for storage in the Vatican. Each year the giant *presepe* is a new commission. Each year, its artistic interpretation of the Nativity is presented in a dramatic unveiling ceremony, presided over by the Pope. The annual *presepe* conventionally reprises Christianity's founding moment in dramatic supersession: Year One recreated again. The monumental nativity is always placed in the center of the square, right in front of the Egyptian obelisk. A home for the holy family, annually built and housed in the *presepe*'s bricks and mortar, again rises in front of Egypt and the old religions.

And yet the Vatican's *presepe* is not always set in Bethlehem, nor are its mediations of time and place rigidly fixed. In 2007 the *presepe* was set in Joseph's carpentry shop in Nazareth in an effort to recreate the scene after the Gospel According to Matthew, rather than the more familiar version from Luke. The move was also designed to "crack down" on overly secularized interpretations of the Nativity, such as those built, and sold, in Naples, which often include figures from politics and popular culture, like Berlusconi or Elvis (Moore). This crackdown for authenticity appears to have been short-lived, however. In 2012 the Vatican's *presepe* left all locations in Palestine and even the ancient world entirely for early twentieth-century Matera, the capitol city of Basilicata, a region in Italy's south--the only time the Vatican's Nativity scene has been set outside the Holy Land [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square *presepe*, panorama

Designed by Franco Artese, a Basilicata artist, and given by the state to the Vatican, Artese's nativity scene was an elaborate *presepe* that imaginatively reconstructed Matera's *Sassi*, stone houses built against, and sometimes carved into, the city's rock cliffs and inhabited from Paleolithic times until the 1950s [Fig. 2].

At 150 square meters, the *presepe* housed over 100 terra cotta sculptures, most between ten inches and twelve inches tall (Redziocch). On a piazza surrounded by a reconstruction of *Sassi*, the figures, in mid twentieth-century costume, gestured to nativity symbolism while engaged in traditional pastimes: dining in a tavern (the rejecting inn), chatting around the public well (forecast of baptism)—though the women shaking out sheets behind were performing daily activities, with little overt religious significance. In an echo both of the Nativity and the flight into Egypt, a man led a woman riding on a donkey [Fig. 3].



Fig. 2: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square *presepe*, detail of *Sassi*



Fig. 3: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square *presepe*, detail of donkey

Behind him a shepherd carried a lamb, while two women collected water at a pump. On the scene's far right a grotto sheltered Mary, Joseph, the baby, the ox, the ass, and villagers [Fig. 4].

At close quarters two shepherds serenaded—and perhaps deafened-- the baby Jesus, on *zampogne*, or country bagpipes. *Zampogna* players are ubiquitous in Italian *presepi*, their presence gesturing to a lost world where the urban and the rural mixed daily. In Rome, shepherd pipers or *pifferi* would come to town in November, after they'd stabled their flocks for the winter, and then play their pipes and *zampogne* in front of street shrines to the Virgin, in homes, and in shops. The practice disappeared after the 1870s when their licenses weren't renewed, no doubt as part of general efforts, following the unification, to clean up and modernize the city.<sup>1</sup> In Artese's *presepe*, the pipers returned.

<sup>1</sup> From a description of a diorama in the Museum of Rome in Trastevere depicting shepherd pipers.



Fig. 4: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square *presepe*, detail of the Nativity

### ***Presepi* and the Soul of Place**

Why Matera? This essay examines Artese's *presepe*, with its dramatically recreated *Sassi*, as part of a broader reflection on Italian nativity scenes as imagined cultural landscapes, not just reconstructions of a founding moment in Christianity but theatrical forms of installation art: dreamed and remembered places that broker meditations on dwelling, community, and even social justice. Generally ignored by art historians, at least in the US, as a minor holiday art, kitsch, or naïve craft tied to the Christian liturgical calendar, the nativity scene, a form with many regional variations worldwide, may also have been dismissed from serious attention out of the belief that it is a culturally

regressive form. Susan Stewart, who speculates that the Italian nativity scene may be the precursor of the dollhouse, argues that the drive behind its miniaturized capture of life is a nostalgic desire to freeze conflict and override class difference in a silent and “uncontaminable miniature form.” The miniature—which includes the nativity scene—is, she writes, “a world of arrested time” (61, 66-67). No doubt the nativity scene, with its idealized nuclear family gathering around the first-born son and its rustic, straw-filled manger visited by friendly animals and peaceful peasants, looks back longingly to a simple, pre-industrial domestic moment. If that look is tinged with nostalgia, this may be because the idealized world the nativity scene looks back to was never ours, and perhaps never anyone's. In its seasonal reconstruction, the nativity scene is a communal fantasy. The word nostalgia is itself derived from either the Greek “nos” (home) or “nostos” (the return home), yet the essence of nostalgia, paradoxically, is the impossibility of return. As writers on nostalgia repeatedly observe, the home that we long for is lost or never-even-lived-in. Hence its imaginative allure. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is “a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (8). Or as Gaston Bachelard puts it, the nostalgic house “is far away, it is lost, we inhabit it no more; we are, alas, certain of inhabiting it never again.” (Vidler 65). Nostalgia, according to John Brenkman, “marks a yearning to return to where you never were” (Huffer 14).

Yet it is also possible to understand the arrested time of the St. Peter's 2012 *presepe*, and of many other nativity scenes as well, as a template for renewal, and to read nostalgia not just as a longing for return to the past but as desire for social and urban repair. As Boym also notes, while nostalgia may be backwards looking or “reflective,” it can also be restorative (41). The very fantasy and hyper-reality of nostalgic yearning can carry the potential for change, with the never-inhabited past glimpsed as back-to-the-future through its utopic potential. It is precisely what Stewart calls the miniature's “arrested life” and the closed circuit of its nostalgic return that allow it to provoke an uncanny dialogue with larger places and temporalities: “That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life—indeed, to reveal a set of actions and hence a narrativity and history outside the given field of perception—is a constant daydream that the miniature presents” (Stewart 54). The secret life of *presepe* reverie, in which the nativity story is created yet again behind a vitrine, may promise a world outside of time and history, yet the very hermetic enclosure of the dioramic miniature teases out stories that challenge boundaries of time and space.

When the design incorporates regional spatial markers and contemporary call-outs, as in many Italian *presepi*, the conversation with the world outside the literal box becomes even more spirited. Italian *presepi*, often-complex records of cultural memory, classically incorporate local geology and built designs for living, their revisionings of the Nativity playing with palimpsested time and

place to create idealized forms of dwelling and community. They are what Robert Bevan, in a study of architecture, war, and cultural preservation, might call “touchstones of identity” whose physical structures preserve the memory of place (16). While some *presepi* picture just the nativity scene with ox, ass, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Magi and angels, many others include the holy family as just one scene among many in a broad theatrical tableau. In this they differ markedly from nativity scenes displayed at holiday time in the US. The family nativity scene that I helped set up as part of Christmas decorating when I was a child is typical of the US form: Bakelite shepherds on the left, three kings on the right, palm trees next to the wooden manger, which my mother then placed on a bookcase so the dog wouldn’t knock it over with her tail. Italian *presepi*, by contrast, construct a home for the holy family in scenes that extend far beyond the manger, often in a quixotic mélange of times and places. Some recreate Palestine, complete with piled-up stone houses, desert sand, palm trees, camels and elephants. Others house the nativity in the old neighborhood of the owners, sheltered in the topography of home.

The best-known of these topographic *presepi* come from Naples, which since the seventeenth century has produced tableaux with backdrops that include regional geological features, such as the Bay of Naples and Mt. Vesuvius, and that mix time periods in polychronic overlay. While Mary and Joseph are conventionally costumed in biblical robes, the rest of the figures are dressed in contemporary fashion and engaged in local activities—dining in the tavern, washing laundry, chatting together on the street.<sup>2</sup> Many sculptures on display in collections today are the work of important eighteenth-century artists, with names including sculptor and court painter Francesco Celebrano and sculptor Giuseppe Sanmartino (Catello 15-16). The majority of Neapolitan sculptures, thousands of which have survived from eighteenth-century *presepi*, are designed for flexibility with a mix of materials including terracotta, wood, flax twine, and wire, along with glass eyes and fabric clothing. An angel displayed with the Carnegie Museum’s 2013 Neapolitan *presepe* illustrates how modeling techniques lend figurines extraordinary vivacity and mobility: the dress, in visual echo of angels in baroque painting, billows. Eyes catch the light. Arms and legs, wired to the straw torso, can take whatever pose the annual installer chooses [Fig. 5].

Other sculptural miniatures in the Carnegie’s *presepe* capture eighteenth-century street life: a market selling vegetables, an animated conversation group. Throughout the scene, which the Carnegie displays in its massive Hall of Architecture, worlds mingle in possibility, suggesting how sacred and secular can share the same footprint: the holy family gathers beneath ruined columns while town life goes on below

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<sup>2</sup> For the art of the Neapolitan *presepe* see Johnson; Dickerson et al; and Borrelli. For the historic development of the nativity scene worldwide, see Berliner.



Fig. 5: Nicola Ingaldi, angel body and costume, c. 1740. Carnegie Museum

and from the porches of an eighteenth-century house. In one of the Carnegie's most playful evocations of the coexistence of times and places—and scale—curator Rachel Delphia, in charge of the 2013 annual installation, suspended angels in front of the Hall of Architecture's plaster cast of the façade of the twelfth-century Abbey Church of St. Gilles du Gard. For the month or so that the *presepe* was up, baroque angelic grace and color fluttered against reproduced Romanesque stone [Fig. 6].<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Other seasonal displays of large Neapolitan *presepi* in the US can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Institute in Chicago. The Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, CT, has a permanent installation.



Fig. 6: *Presepe* angels in the Hall of Architecture, Carnegie Museum

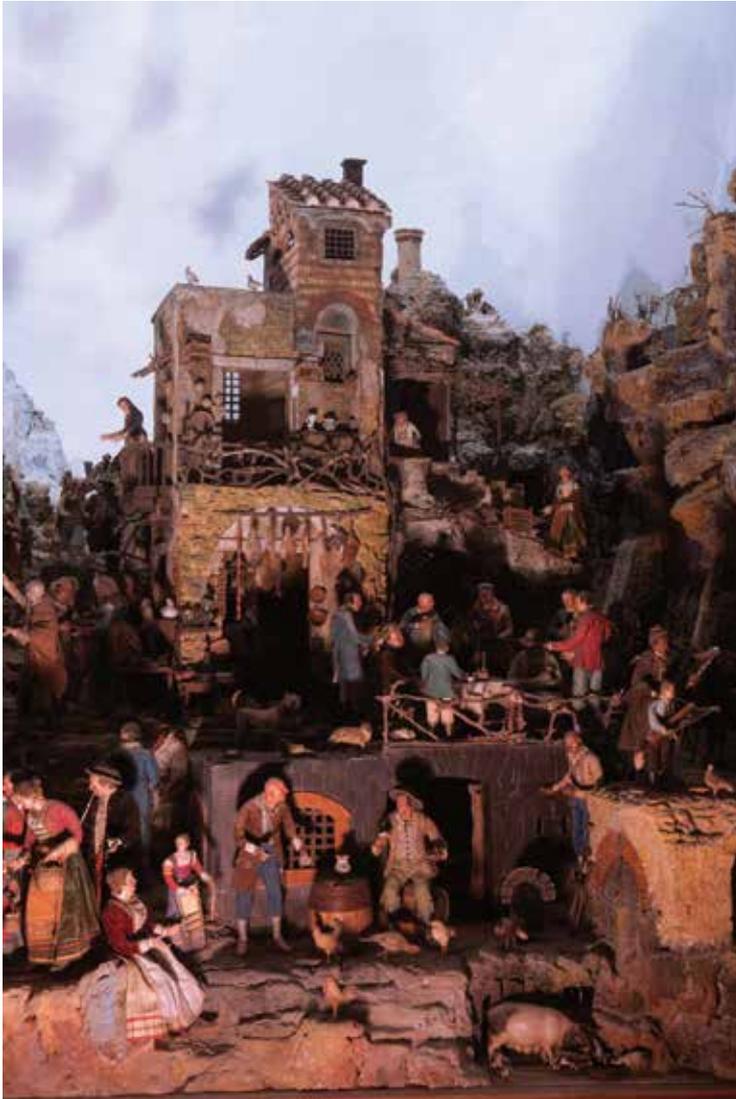
One of the most important examples of Neapolitan *presepe* art is the huge Cuciniello presepe, comprising over 700 individual objects displayed behind a wall-sized glass case in the San Martino Museum in Naples [Fig.7].

Donated in 1879 by playwright Michele Cuciniello, this *presepe* uses the form's Neapolitan legacy and its curious temporalities to picture revisionary social justice. Most of the sculptures are Neapolitan work dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and were bought by Cuciniello following the Unification when the great nativity ensembles, many of them owned by the nobility, were dismantled



Fig. 7: Cuciniello *presepe*. San Martino Museum

and sold cheaply. When he gave his collection to the museum, Cuciniello—aided by an architect and a set designer—built the scene and arranged the figures in the form in which they are displayed today. In many ways a classic example of the Neapolitan genre, the Cuciniello *presepe* has also become a template for *presepe* designs in museum installations throughout the world today (Creazzo 35). As in Artese's *presepe*, the Nativity is just one scene among many anecdotal moments—and even hard to locate, placed beneath a group of pillars. Rather than ancient Palestine the scene revisits the streets of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Naples, peopled by card players, visiting Moors and Turks, shepherds in from the hills, a whirlwind of angels descending from the sky, and Neapolitan men and women of all classes and types. Secular and sacred, past and present, cohabit and share the city in a mashup of conventional boundaries of time and place [Fig. 8].



It is also possible to understand the Cuciniello *presepe* as political theater that uses the traditional materials of the courtly *presepe* to imagine social transformation. When Cuciniello, who had been exiled to Paris in 1854 for his opposition to the Bourbon monarchy, donated his *presepe* a few years after the dismantling of the royal house, he was making an explicitly anti-courtly gift of an art that had long associations with royalty, according to some historians (Fittipaldi 14; Grillo 31). In the eighteenth century, the “golden age” of the *presepe*, the form had *haute couture* status as holiday installation art among the Neapolitan rich, with massive collections assembled by Bourbon royals and the aristocracy. *Presepe* extravagance is noted in a 1766 diary entry by grand tour Neapolitan visitor Samuel Sharp, a London surgeon (158-59):

Fig. 8: Cuciniello *presepe*, scene of the inn. San Martino Museum

A nobleman here had one, where so much silver, and so many beautiful scenes were admitted into the work, that it was valued at eight thousand pounds. This nobleman was expensive in other articles, besides that of his devotion, and was at last obliged to part with his silver *Presepio* to satisfy his creditors. All the poor people, if they are not already provided with a *Presepio*, purchase a cheap trumpery one at this season, which with care, and locking up the remainder of the year, will last them their lives.

In today's currency, the silver *presepe* would be worth more than 1.5 million dollars. As Sharp also observes, *presepe* art circulated on two very different social and economic planes, perhaps like gallery originals and museum reproductions today: originals for well-heeled collectors, reproductions for everyone else. Cuciniello's gift, more than a century after Sharp's account, gestured to this social divide and attempted to ameliorate it. In giving the people of Naples a *presepe* comprised of hundreds of figurines—many crafted by important Neapolitan sculptors—that had once belonged to the nobility, Cuciniello's gift would have come with potently legible economic and social symbolism. In effect he gave the court to the people, and in a form that reimagined Naples as a blend of high and low together, rather than high *to* low. As art historian Iliano Creazzo notes, Cuciniello placed beautiful and homely, the rich and the poor, side by side (37), a choice that may have reflected Cuciniello's post-Unification and revolutionary vision of democratic cohabiting [Fig. 9].

Other Italian design traditions draw their visual keywords for idealized dwelling from local architecture. In Rome a turn to the local has been shaping *presepe* designs since the 1950s, when the first Rome-based Nativity was constructed at the church of Santa Maria in Via. For its design, the *presepe* looked to nineteenth-century painter Ettore Roesler Franz, whose collection of 120 watercolors, *Roma Sparita (Vanished Rome)*, document Rome before the city's transformations following the Risorgimento, in an effort to preserve traditional culture and a vanishing cityscape (Tittoni 11). Others use Rome's ancient ruins as signs of Christian supersession and also of collective memory. The 2012 *presepe* in the Piazza Navona, for instance, built by the *Amici dei Presepi*, or *Friends of the Presepi*, a loosely-federated international group, was set in the Forum [Fig. 10].

The holy family huddled together on a pallet of broken marble; visitors arriving with their gifts stepped around a conspicuously fractured Corinthian column, while in the background the scene included a miniature Colosseum and reconstructions of other familiar Rome monuments—all framed, at the scene's front, by a theatrical proscenium arch of Roman brick [Fig. 11].

Ruin and renewal, as they are pictured in countless renaissance paintings of the Nativity, were evocatively counterpoised, with the Nativity situated credibly in the Roman Imperium but with its



Fig. 9: Cuciniello *presepe*, game of cards, San Martino Museum

buildings fallen into ruin, as they are today. Many of these Rome-based views are profoundly nostalgic, reaching to the past for a sense of lost community and simplicity. According to Enrico Genovese, chief designer and head of the *Amici dei Presepi* in Rome, “romanticism” is the key to scenes he builds, which are nearly always set in the eighteenth or nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> While Franz’s watercolors reacted to the urban imperatives following the Risorgimento to modernize Rome, the turn in the 1950s to nostalgic ruins and lost Rome as stage-set for Roman nativity scenes may have been a reflex to post-war devastation. Italy could work to reclaim its moral center by bringing the Nativity to *Roma Sparita*, lost Rome—a place where traditional values, these *presepi* seem to say, are still alive.

<sup>4</sup> Enrico Genovese, interview in June, 2013.



Fig. 10: 2012 *presepe* in Piazza Navona

### Artese's Memorial Miniatures

Franco Artese's scenic reconstruction of Matera's *Sassi*, and not a city in the Holy Land, in his *presepe* gestured to these Roman and Neapolitan cultural landscapes, also melding visual tropes from sacred history with remembered local life in a call out to the past as a reflection on idealized communities. Certainly his *presepe* tugged on nostalgic chords in a number of ways: his was a dream-like modern world free of gasoline engines, with mobility generously offered up by barnyard beasts. The Nativity occurred or rather, recurs, in a timeless, nearly-modern present. The woman at the center of Artese's scene carried a circlet of 100 candles on her head, with ribbons attached so that the candles



Fig. 11: *Presepe* interior, 2012 Piazza Navona

could be twirled, as a gift for the church, according to Artese—but doubtless many viewers would also have recognized her as a celebrant of St. Lucy’s day (December 13) [Fig. 12].

In Artese’s Matera, work mingled comfortably with sociability in a community free of want or onerous labor and enlivened by music, ceremony, and multiple kinds of gifts. A *presepe* designer since the 1970s, with his installations featured all over the world, Artese almost always recreates Matera—or, occasionally, his nearby hometown of Grassano—as the backdrop. Always his *presepi* are set in mid-century and peopled with figures dressed in regional costume and engaged in traditional activities. In 2005 he built a huge nativity, now stored in a garage, set in Grassano—because, he says, as his



Fig. 12: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square *presepe* detail: woman bearing candles



Fig. 13: Franco Artese, Grassano *presepe*, detail

town he felt he had a claim to it.<sup>5</sup> The Grassano *presepe* took him six months to build and includes 45 figures. Beyond the holy family he has included no religious symbolism--just “neo-paese” peasant life in Basilicata, with sources for traditional labor and pastimes taken from old photos and books [Fig. 13].

In one anecdotal scene in his Grassano *presepe* a peasant rides into town on a donkey while his wife holds the donkey’s tail, an illustration, he noted, of local custom: men rode, women walked behind. Artese, who paints for six months of the year and builds *presepi* for the other six months, has

<sup>5</sup> Franco Artese, interview in June 2013. For Artese bio see [http://www.grassano.org/artese/biografia\\_del\\_maestro\\_Franco\\_Artese.htm](http://www.grassano.org/artese/biografia_del_maestro_Franco_Artese.htm).

included himself in this scene in the form of a terracotta artist at his easel, on a balcony just above the holy family. His figurine's beard is made from hair collected from his own daily shave--it is, he says, his DNA signature [Fig. 14].

Both the Grassano and the Vatican nativities are time capsules that tease out thought through their untimely melding of a moment in mid-century Basilicata with an event from the ancient holy land. Yet Artese's choice to set his Vatican installation in twentieth-century Matera may have been more strategically regional and potently *homely* than just a call-out to an ancient landscape in simpler times or a nostalgic recreation of pre-industrial Basilicata. The arrested life in this tableau also came with multiple, overlaid regional histories. Widely known for its cliff-side cave dwellings, Matera today is a romantic tourist destination that also trails a walk of shame, with a well-known public history tracking back to Carlo Levi's classic memoir, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Levi, one of Italy's best-known writers, tells the story of a year, 1935, he spent exiled as an anti-Fascist dissident in an impoverished village in the hills of Lucania, more commonly referred to today as Basilicata. Educated as a doctor in northern Turin, Levi finds himself in Italy's deep south in towns saturated in yellows, blacks and grays: yellow for the malarial skin-tone of the children, "pale and thin with big, sad black eyes, waxen faces, and swollen stomachs drawn tight like drums above their thin, crooked legs" (38); black for the dress of the inhabitants and especially the pennants, indicating a death in the family, framing most of the doors; and grey for the Tufa stone houses and ubiquitous clay, unrelieved by grass or flowers, from centuries of ecological degradation and land mismanagement—"a sea of chalk, monotonous and without trees" (5), with houses hanging from the clay slopes "like a landscape on the moon" (8). Even more Dantean is the nearby city of Matera, the regional capital, which Levi visits briefly but describes through the shocked eyes of his sister, who passes through Matera when she comes down by train for a three



Fig. 14: Franco Artese with sculpture of himself

day visit. Truly a city of caves carved into steep cliffs, Matera, she says, is “nothing but sun-baked earth and stones” in the shape of two half funnels, the “Sasso Caveoso and Sasso Barisano...like a schoolboy’s idea of Dante’s *Inferno*” (85). People in Matera live in these *Sassi*, or caves, in starvation and disease—dysentery, trachoma, malaria--“in dark holes with walls cut out of the earth” as if “in a city stricken by the plague” (87). The grimness of these dark holes was captured for all time in the stark black-and white of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s 1951 series on Matera: stone and baked earth.<sup>6</sup>

In the long shadow of Carlo Levi’s publicly galvanizing account of Matera’s horrifying poverty and prehistoric living conditions in the 1930s, the reconstruction of the *Sassi*, these caves of death, as the scenic backdrop for a monumental *presepe* installed at the heart of the Catholic world would seem an odd act of romanticizing. Embracing a broad piazza beneath a warm blue southern sky, Artese’s *Sassi* conjured a vision of Matera strikingly different from Levi’s [Fig. 15].

With stone houses and three handsome churches, Artese’s vision of the *Sassi* seemed neither crowded nor lonely, and hardly a place of disease and starvation. Yet the dissonance may have been precisely the point. However romanticized in Artese’s vision, that nostalgia came edged by troubled regional economics and politics. Matera, as a city with a deep hold on the national conscience, is an exceptionally resonant locale for a story about birth and urban renewal. Levi’s 1945 memoir—which has often been labeled a political tract—made Matera synonymous with state neglect and intractable southern poverty. In the 1950s Matera’s rock *Sassi* were evacuated, their inhabitants forcibly moved to nearby public housing, a relocation indebted largely to Levi’s exposé. As Levi says repeatedly in his memoir, Basilicata is a place forgotten by Rome and the North. Similarly inspired, at least in part, by Levi, Pier Paolo Pasolini shot parts of his 1964 film, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, in the *Sassi*, whose haunting cave dwellings have been likened to Palestine. Pasolini’s Marxist picture of a radical and even revolutionary Jesus repeatedly gestures to the history of tyranny and freedom on Italian soil—costuming, for instance, the Roman guards as 1940s Mussolini Fascists. For Pasolini’s Italian audiences Matera would have signified not just Palestine but exile, abjection and potential renewal on Italian ground, a complex mix that still resonates today. To use Matera as a setting for a nativity scene is to send a call-out to a national social conscience.

The *Sassi* are only part of the story. On a curtain surrounding the entire scene, the Matera *presepe* inscribed a further theatrical visual as part of its reconstruction of Matera’s cultural landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> Cartier-Bresson images:

[https://www.google.com/search?q=cartier+bresson+matera&client=firefox-a&hs=IMc&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&channel=sb&tbn=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=L10oU\\_2WO5PwkQfIkYgGgAw&ved=0CCYQsAQ&biw=1024&bih=624](https://www.google.com/search?q=cartier+bresson+matera&client=firefox-a&hs=IMc&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&channel=sb&tbn=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=L10oU_2WO5PwkQfIkYgGgAw&ved=0CCYQsAQ&biw=1024&bih=624)



Fig. 15: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square *presepe*, panorama

Artese's diorama of stone homes and cave dwellings was designed as a kind of grotto nestled inside another Basilicata cave, the *Cripa del Peccato Originale*, or "Crypt of Original Sin," a recently excavated rupestrian Benedictine monastic church just outside Matera.<sup>7</sup> The name "Crypt of Original Sin," was given in 2000 by the Zètema Foundation, the organization overseeing the cave's restoration and public access. For Artese's installation, frescoes from the church, some dating from as early as the ninth century, were copied through high-resolution digital transfer onto huge fabric panels that were then attached to all four sides of the *presepe*. The west side facing the Pope's balcony reproduced a fresco of three apostles. The south, the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael; on the north was the veneration of the Virgin [Fig. 16].

On the east and front, with parts cut away for the diorama of the *presepe* recessed within, was the creation story. Next to the tiny scene of the holy family inside the diorama on the right, a towering frescoed serpent curled around a tree while Eve held the apple to her lips and passed it to Adam [Fig. 17]

The only one of these digital transfers that most visitors, arriving at the front of the *presepe* after waiting in a line winding back and forth in front of the scene, would have been likely to notice

<sup>7</sup> For dating of the frescoes see Bertelli et al., 36-37. The landscape is similar to the Göreme Valley in Cappadocia, a World Heritage site, where rock-hewn Christian sanctuaries and houses were inhabited from the fourth century. In the post-Iconoclastic period (late ninth to the thirteenth century), walls of many of the churches, carved into the limestone, were elaborately painted in the Byzantine style.



Fig. 16: 2012 St. Peter's Square *presepe*; *Cripta* transfers, south side

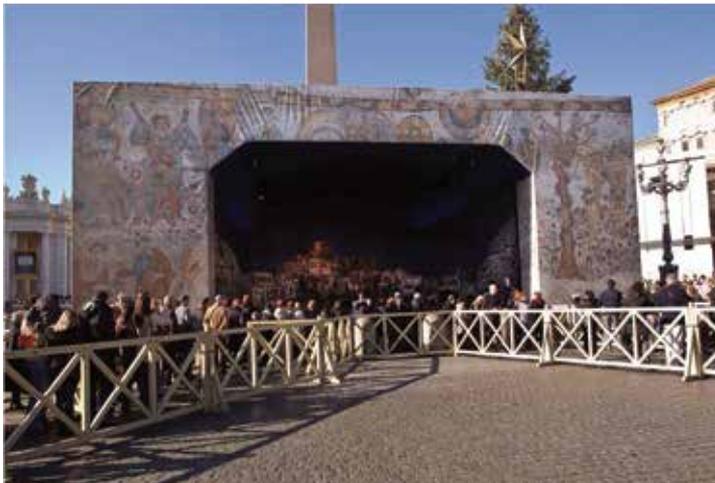


Fig. 17: 2012 St. Peter's Square *presepe*; *Cripta* transfers, front



Fig. 18: 2012 St. Peter's Square *presepe*; *Cripta* transfers, Adam and Eve

was also the most recognizable: the serpent in the tree, Eve's grasp of the forbidden fruit [Fig. 18].

Eva to Ave. Look inside the Nativity diorama to a birthing scene where Mary makes good on Eve's sin, the frescoed Eve seemed to direct its viewers. Dangers outside were also literally larger than life. In their Byzantine, medieval alterity, the *Cripta* frescoes helped frame and idealize the dreamy timelessness of the scene inside. Unlike the surrounding "Crypt of Original Sin," a cave of primal—and medieval—error, the imagined community in the *Sassi* was designed, however paradoxically, to seem a place of safety and salvation.

And money, clearly, was part of the story as well. Economics were also complexly enmeshed with this nativity scene's strategic appeals to nostalgia through call-outs to Matera and the *Cripta*. In recent years the Vatican has come under criticism for the exorbitant costs associated with its annual *presepe*. As revealed by an exposé in *Vatileaks*, the 2009 *presepe* cost the Vatican 550,000 euros, a case of "spese folli," or lunatic spending (*Speciale*). Spending in 2010 and 2011 was more modest but still significant, with costs for the 2010 *presepe* at 300,000 euros. The 2012 *presepe*, in contrast, represented no spending at all. It came as a gift to Pope Benedict from Basilicata, whose total expenditures were only 120,000 euros—prompting *Vatican Insider* to call it "a crib made with an eye to costs" in a time of fiscal crisis (*Speciale*). Basilicata's gift gestured to Matera's well-known history of poverty while also commenting on Italy's current economic situation. It was hardly a purely altruistic gesture, however. One gift expects another. Its Materan Nativity wrapped in reproductions of its frescoes, Basilicata's present to the world was packaged remarkably like a Christmas gift. If the historically poorer South gifts the rich Vatican with a theatrical reconstruction of its land and its soul, it may also hope for some return. This was a bid from the South for recognition through appeals to a national conscience, blending calls to apostolic mission with shrewd regional demands.

Among these demands, no doubt, were tourist dollars. Praised for thrift and humility, Artese's *presepe* also made a bid for visitors. Since Carlo Levi's 1945 memoir, Matera has undergone a dramatic renaissance [Fig. 19].

In 1993 Matera's *Sassi* were designated as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Press from Basilicata surrounding the gift of the 2012 *presepe* to Pope Benedict repeatedly pointed to Matera's candidacy for the 2019 "World Capitol of Culture." In recent years many of Matera's abandoned and picturesque *Sassi* have been renovated as hotels, some of them sumptuous: At the Sextantio le Grotte della Civita you can spend 400 euros a night for the privilege of sleeping in a cave. For between 1,600 and 3,600 euros you can spend two nights at Palazzo Margherita, Francis Ford Coppola's recently-opened nearby hotel, a price that includes cooking lessons. The *Cripta del Peccato Originale*, similarly, is on its way to becoming a major tourist attraction, or at least that is the goal of several regional interests. In 2011 the People's Bank of Mezzogiorno committed 20,000 euros over three years to develop the *Cripta*. At a press conference announcing the bank's commitment, presidents of both the bank and the Zètema Foundation echoed each other in underscoring the importance of the *Cripta* to regional economics: this is a chance for the development of southern culture, a chance for the South to renew itself and rise up



Fig. 19: Matera's *Sassi* today

and reclaim its heritage (“Understanding”). 700 years after Giotto, frescoes from 500 years before the Tuscan painter are now about to get their own. In some ways like Carlo Levi’s memoir about Matera, the history of the *Cripta*, discovered in 1963 but only open to the public in 2005, has encapsulated northern prejudices about the country’s South: how could Basilicata possibly house important early art? As publicity from the *Cripta* puts it today in a not-so-subtle moved to trump Assisi, these frescoes were painted 500 years before Giotto. And to equal Rome: the Foundation’s alternative name for the site is the Sistine Chapel of the Mezzogiorno—the Sistine Chapel of the South [Fig. 20].

Throughout *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Carlo Levi mounts an increasingly sharp critique of Rome for its embodiment of state interests that are blind to the realities of village and peasant life in Basilicata.



Fig. 20: Crypt of Original Sin, wall paintings, Basilicata

For a story to illustrate public neglect, Levi points to an edict from Rome putting a tax on goats. Goats, wandering the countryside, damage crops: hence Rome's decision to protect agricultural interests by taxing goats, uninvited eaters of crops. In Basilicata, however, where there was little agriculture but robust goat husbandry, the tax on goats meant starvation and financial ruin for many by forcing shepherds to slaughter their herds to avoid paying the tax (47). Artese's *presepe*, nearly a century later, seemed to recall this and other examples of Rome's high-handed neglect by making a rapprochement of sorts, one even obliquely voiced from the Vatican itself. Praising Artese's recreation of Matera, Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums, commented that Artese created a recognizable Matera that's "an extraordinary collage of emotions, persons, animals that you'll find in the heart of the Piazza, which represents the baroque glories of Rome" ("Il Presepe").<sup>8</sup> Artese's diorama, Paolucci suggests, brings Basilicata, Vatican City, and Rome together. And, perhaps, the *presepe* may even make good on the title of Levi's memoir. Levi named his book after a common saying in Basilicata, which was that Christ made it no further than Eboli, a town just inland from Naples. Desperately impoverished Basilicata, that is, was a region forgotten by Christ, as it also was by Italy's statesmen and leaders: "Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason nor history. Christ never came, just as the Romans never came, content to garrison the highways without penetrating the mountains and forests, nor the Greeks..." (4). Setting the Nativity in Matera, then, made a statement of recognition—a fact no doubt also part of Pasolini's vision when he chose to set part of his film of Christ's life in the *Sassi*. Not stopping in Eboli, Christ penetrates the mountains and actually makes it to Basilicata.

In Artese's *presepe*, which placed the Nativity in Matera as well as in St. Peter's Square, we can see, and hear, some of those same demands to belong and to thrive. Artese's *presepe* made a strategically crafted bid not just for Christian status, but also for full citizenship today. Thriving is generative living. The annual rebuilding of the nativity scene anywhere is an act of recreating a familiar shelter in the form of a miniature home that pictures nurturance of family as well as community. However humble the shelter, it houses a thriving world. In his recent book, *Dwelling in Possibility: Searching for the Soul of Shelter*, Howard Mansfield explores the mystery of meaningful structures for dwelling: why is it, he asks, that some houses feel powerfully like home—when so many, in today's world, fail so utterly? One answer Mansfield offers is that successful shelters echo familiar patterns linking them with the landscape, the culture, and the broader city or town. Citing architect Christopher

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<sup>8</sup> "Ha riprodotto molto bene, in polistirolo dipinto, monumenti che chi conosce Matera, come io la conosco, ritrova: per esempio, i pezzi della chiesa di San Nicola dei Greci, del campanile di Barisano, sono stati montati da lui in questo straordinario collage di luoghi, di emozioni, di persone, di animali, che si trovano nel cuore della Piazza, che rappresenta la gloria barocca di Roma."

Alexander's classic design manifesto, *A Pattern Language*, he argues that the act of building must also be one of repair. Buildings may call out to us through nostalgia, but the act of building should use that nostalgia to remake, transform, and mend networks to link the new to what is already there. According to Alexander, "a fundamental view of the world... says that when you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole" (Alexander, in Mansfield 74). Artese's presepe, however brief its appearance in the public eye, performed or at least offered a template for such a repair, with its networks reaching across Italy and across time [Fig. 21].

Through its nested enclosures, with the *Sassi* inside the *Cripta* and both inside St. Peter's Square, Artese's installation offered a design for thriving, a moment from sacred history remade through pattern language: Basilicata reborn in St. Peter's Square and reaching out to the world.



Fig. 21: Franco Artese, St. Peter's Square 2012

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### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Photo illustrations are ©Margot Balboni, except as otherwise noted. This essay is part of our collaborative project on Italian *presepi* as installation art. Thanks to Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Sarah Luria, and Virginia Raguin for their helpful comments on the essay, and to Holy Cross students Olivia Vanni, '13, Mario Leiva, '14, and Helen Tucceri, '15 for help in the field and assistance with Italian sources.

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