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Paper Crèches

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Paper Crèches

Date of Exhibit October 18 - November 12, 2004

During this season and for several months to come The Marian Library has on display nativity scenes made of paper, paper maché, tinfoil, and other soft and pliable materials such as wax, felt, fibers, husk, leather, and, of course, wood. Most of the artifacts displayed are so-called paper crèches.

The Crèche of the Poor

The paper crèche has a special place in the Nativity tradition. It was, at one time, the crèche of the poor. When, in 1782, Joseph II, Austrian emperor, placed a ban on crèches, the nativity set moved from churches, palaces and public places to families and their homes. Crèches, crafted from paper, became the Nativity representation for the poor, for the common people. This is not to say that there were no paper nativities before the Austrian emperor's ban. Influenced by Baroque theater tradition, nobility and wealthy townspeople in Italy and Austria commissioned artists to paint Bible figures on paper, wood and tin as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Famous names of this early history of the "paper nativity" were Martin Engelbrecht (1684-1756) and Albrecht Schmidt (1667-1744). Paper nativities of that period were produced as cut-out figures, based on woodcuts and engravings, and the coloring was done by women and children.

A Popular Endeavor

The heydays of the paper crèche began in the mid-1800s; they coincide with the development of lithography—a new printing process. The number of crèches available increased, and so did the centers of production. Among the more famous ones were Weissenburg (Alsatia), Neuruppin (Brandenburg), Mainz and Augsburg. From 1835 through 1900 Gustav Kühn of Neuruppin, created 175 different crèche motifs on paper. Scholz Publisher of Mainz offered thirty-five different models in 1912. Weissenburg's C. Burckhardt made forty-two models available in 1907. Especially noted and cherished were the J. F. Schreiber crèches (Esslingen, since 1878). The Austrian tradition was represented with the brothers Trentsenky (~1790-1890). Bohemia and Moravia of today's Czech Republic have long been famous for their highly creative paper crèches introducing a great variety of characters to the Christmas theme. Chimney sweep and apothecary, carpenter and cobbler are all part of the scene which frequently includes streets and squares, castle and houses of Bohemian towns.

The Baker Collection

Small wonders of lithography and paper construction, sometimes with up to twenty-seven levels, paper crèches are no longer the crèches of the poor. Antique fold-out crèches in good condition are difficult to come by. Thus, we are delighted to present more than one hundred fold-out nativities from the Bill and Annie Baker Collection. Whether this small sampler is the appetizer which entices you to visit The Marian Library for a first-hand look or if this page is as close as you will get, please enjoy your visit.

With few exceptions, these paper scenes are of German provenance, and dated circa 1890-1940, the golden age of the fold-open Nativity. In mint condition, of fine printing, and intricate color scheme mellowed by age into soft luminosity, the Baker Collection of paper nativities is a telling witness to love of the crèche, its meaning, artistic expression, and humble beauty. From the 1888 Nativity picture book by J. F. Schreiber to the Vojtěch Kubasta pop-up books during the 1950-1960, the Baker paper crèches are a key to yesterday's world of children. And why not also to that of today and always? Indeed, didn't Kubasta explore new themes with his fold-out crèches teaching children about ships, airplanes, and even outer space? A child's magic may become the adult's treasure trove of sacred memories. Take, for example, this circa 1907 fold-out Nativity mounted in a shadow box and enshrined for posterity. Not to forget the multi-level Crèche on the back of which, for many years, the family recorded the weather conditions on Christmas Eve.

Fragile but Enduring

Whether English (Raphael Tuck, London) in origin, Czech or German, a classical nativity scene or the unusual combination of Christ Child and Father Christmas—there exists a colorful variety in the presentation of this age-old but never outdated theme. Cardboard and paper are delicate and fragile; so is the right understanding of the Incarnation. However, paper nativities are like "moveable feasts." With similar ease, the message of Christmas travels the world.



