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Creches from Down Under

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Christmas is over, but the University of Dayton's Marian Library is unwrapping a big gift — not from the East via three men on camels, but from Down Under via container ship and freight trucks.

The University of Dayton's Marian Library, home to one of the largest collections of Nativity scenes in the U.S., is unpacking a container full of Christmas scenes and related materials, the gift of an Australian woman who spent more than 30 years amassing the collection.

It's the largest single gift ever received by the library, which already has more than 1,600 Nativities, also called crèches, and is recognized as the world's largest and most comprehensive collection of printed materials on Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., director of the Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute, said that Elisabeth Van Mullekom-Cserep has donated more than 2,300 items, valued at more than $150,000 to the library.

"It is really a most generous gift and we are honored that when she was ready to part with this precious collection, that she entrusted it to the library," Roten said.

The shipment of 165 large boxes arrived Thursday, Jan. 8 after a journey from Sydney, Australia that crossed the Pacific Ocean and took several months. Library officials said it will take at least two weeks for library staff and volunteers to unpack all the boxes, and months more to catalogue all of the items.

The gift will add about 600 three-dimensional Nativity scenes from over 60 countries to the library's collection, utilizing materials that include silk, gold, embroidery, terracotta and turtle shell, Roten said. The collection also includes two-dimensional items such as prints, posters, artwork and even stamps depicting the Nativity, he said.

"The collection was exhibited every year in a special house built by her husband," Roten said. "They welcomed the public during the Christmas season as well as schools, clubs and tourist groups to come in and see the collection."

Roten said Van Mullekom-Cserep started collecting the scenes in 1977 when her family lived in Holland and continued when they emigrated to Australia in 1983.

Roten had encountered Van Mullekom-Cserep, is a widely recognized collector, at several international Nativity scene conferences.

The collection was shipped across the Pacific Ocean and landed in Tacoma, Wash. before making its overland journey to the library.

Roten said the staff and volunteers at the library will begin immediately the mammoth task of unpacking and cataloguing the new acquisitions.

To celebrate the gift and showcase items from the Australian collection, the library plans to mount a major show in November, 2009, for the start of the Christmas season.

For more information, contact Cilla Shindell, director of media relations, at 937-229-3257 or shindell@udayton.edu (url: mailto:shindell@udayton.edu).