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Nativity Sets From UD's Marian Library on Display at St. John Gallery at Bergamo

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DAYTON, Ohio — If your nativity scene is extremely colorful but set within an old, ruined temple or castle, you have a crèche influenced by the Neapolitan tradition. If the whole village is represented, teeming with life and love for the new Christ child, you've got a nativity set inspired by the Provençal tradition. If a fruit-filled apple tree is part of the crèche landscape and a monk waits nearby to record the tale of the birth of Jesus, your nativity scene is recreating German symbolism.

Whether it’s an heirloom-quality porcelain masterpiece displayed behind glass doors or sturdy, knock-about wooden figures that grace the top of the television set, a nativity scene can enhance the religious tradition of Christmas, according to the Rev. Johann G. Roten, S.M., director of the Marian Library-International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton.

The Marian Library, which contains the world’s largest and most comprehensive collection of printed materials on Mary, the mother of Jesus, is actively building its collection of nativity sets. More than 30 sets from the 800-plus crèche collection will be on display Dec. 6 through Jan. 10 at Mount St. John Gallery at Bergamo, 4400 Shakertown Road.

Gallery hours are Wednesdays from 1 to 8 p.m. and Thursdays through Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is $5 per person or $10 per family. The gallery will be closed Dec. 24, 25 and 31 and Jan. 1. Proceeds from the exhibit will benefit the Marian Library at UD.

The exhibit includes nativity scenes from around the world, including Austria and Africa’s Ivory Coast, Egypt and Eastern Germany, Slovakia and Sicily. All of them feature Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus, and the auxiliary characters range from the traditional camels, angels and wise men to backpackers, fishermen and an accordionist.

In addition to crèches made by individual artists, the exhibit will include samples of
collectible lines, such as nativity sets from the Franklin Mint and Enesco Fontanini.

While nativity sets hold great religious and emotional appeal for Catholics at Christmas, “In general, in Protestant traditions you don’t have this custom,” Roten says. “So a fair amount of members of Protestant denominations will not be too familiar with crèches.”

Each of the nativity scenes has been “landscaped” for the exhibit, whether the setting is a village, a stage or a mountainside. Some of the landscapes feature natural materials such as twigs and pebbles; others use cotton balls and cardboard to build a suitable setting for the crèche figures.

Many of the settings were designed and built by artist Michael Forest of Montreal, who spent a week in Dayton in October working on the exhibit. Additional landscape designers for the exhibit include Roten and Marian Library research assistant Marjorie Yefchak; and artists Brother Don Smith, S.M., Brother Brian Zampier, S.M., Brother Joe Barrish, S.M., Judy Potter and Cathy Nealon.

The core nativity figures from a commissioned 150-figure set piece by artist Kevin Hanna of Norwalk, Conn., will be included in the Mount St. John exhibit. When completed, the scene will represent the entire history of salvation, and it will be put on display on campus.

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For media interviews, call Father Johann Roten, S.M., at the Marian Library at (937) 229-4214.