

The Italian Club of St Louis and the Hill Business Association  
Sponsors of

November 24, 2007  
Through  
January 6, 2008

# The Hill Nativity Walk

## History of the Nativity

The origin of the nativity scene, which represents the birth of Jesus Christ, is found in the interpretation of the words of St. Luke, "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Many believe the "manger" to have been in a grotto, since at that time in Palestine, natural grottos served as refuges for travelers and as stables for animals. In the 300s it was actually St. Ambrose, after whom this neighborhood parish is named, who stated that the ox and donkey shared the stable with the Holy Family and kept them warm. In 494, St. Jerome described the actual location as a

grotto with the manger carved in rock and supported by wooden legs. The grotto may still be viewed in Bethlehem.

In 1223 St. Francis of Assisi created live nativity scenes spurring the popularity of this representation of the Christmas miracle. Permanent representations began to appear with great creativity in the use of materials as well as in the artistic interpretation of the nativity scene. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, intensely religious full size wooden statues typically placed against painted backgrounds were in most churches and convents. Wealthy patrons paid for Presepi for their homes that were elaborate works of art. Particularly in Genoa and Naples in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the nativity scene became a true art form in Italy.



Oldest surviving Neapolitan Presepio (1478) Life-sized figures, sculpted in wood, then plastered & polychromed, by Pietro & Giovanni Alemanno for the Church of San Giovanni a Carbonara (Museo di San Martino).

often used moulds.

The Presepio appeared in every home and community in Italy and today it remains the focus of decoration for the Christmas season there.

With the exception of the elaborate baroque Presepi primarily seen in Naples, Presepi in the next century grew to be more simple and historically accurate, with figures primarily in wood and terra cotta. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Presepi were a popular tradition with all social classes.

Elements of domestic life were added to the scene and inexpensive figures in clay, plaster or papier-mâché were produced to meet the demand of the general public; artists were replaced by artisans who

The long tradition of crèches in Italy exemplifies a rich artistic culture, and provides great insight into Italian religious and storytelling history.

*The Christmas season in Italy includes la festa di San Nicola that is celebrated on December 6 and la festa di Santa Lucia, also known as "The Festival of Lights," that is celebrated on December 13.*



## Representation of the Nativity

The first known representation of the Nativity is a fresco in the Catacombs of Rome, dating to about 100 AD, which depicts Mary holding baby Jesus. In the following centuries, the nativity was represented in paintings and bas reliefs, until 1223 when St. Francis of Assisi popularized the tradition by representing the nativity with live models in a natural cave in the town of Greccio in central Italy. With his re-creation of the nativity scene of Bethlehem, he told the biblical story by means of live performances.

Over time, with the encouragement of several religious orders, the creation of nativity scenes in permanent

materials such as wood, marble, and clay became popular.

During the 1600s the first landscapes in relief began to replace the previously used painted background. In addition to the statues of Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the donkey and ox, statues depicting many decorative elements were added: angels,



shepherds, sheep, the three wise men, and other animals. The number of characters in the Presepio continued to increase to include the whole village of peasants, shepherds, fishermen, craftsmen,

common people and nobles, found in their daily activities or in recreational moments, at the market, in their workshops, taverns, streets and squares, in a town or in the countryside.

Exhibits all over Italy during the Christmas season can be found today. Some with historically accurate representations of the Holy Family and their surroundings and some including the whole of the particular village, telling the story of the town and its people set in their own time and their own town.

collections of crèches in the world. One of the most visited is the Presepio built by the city's maintenance workers near St Peter's during Advent. It was visited every year by Pope John Paul II. The figures, 18th century larger than life, were made for Saint Vincent Pallotti and donated by the Pallottine Fathers to the Pope. To learn more about the many exhibits in Italy see [presepio.org](http://presepio.org)

### Special points of interest:

**Zampognari**, shepherds who play the bagpipes, come down from their mountain homes at Christmas time and perform in the market squares. The playing of bagpipes is popular in the regions of Calabria and Abruzzo, and in the piazzas of Rome. Traditional outfits of sheepskin vests, leather breeches, and a woolen cloak are worn. The tradition of bagpipes goes back to ancient Roman times. Legend says that the shepherds entertained the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. During the holiday season, the zampognari stop before every shrine to the Madonna and every Nativity scene on their journey.

**Tombola** is a favorite game at Christmas time for Italian families, who often play late into the night. It is a board game of numbers comparable to Bingo.

**La Befana** visits good children in Italy on January 6, feast of the Epiphany, which marks the end of the Christmas season, the day the Wise Men arrived at the manger of the Christ child. As the legend goes, the three Wise Men stopped at Befana's house when looking for the Christ child. They invited her to join them but she was too busy. She later regretted her decision and tried to catch up to them and to find the child Jesus. She stops at every house with a child to leave a gift as she continues to search.

### Nativity Displays

The nativity scene is the traditional Christmas decoration in Italy, and Italians spend much time and effort preparing their Presepio. In addition, community associations throughout Italy organize Nativity exhibits such as this one where artists compete. The most impressive exhibits are found in Milan, Rome

and Naples where treasure troves of crèche objects—true works of art in coral and gold—are displayed. You will find exhibitions with hundreds of crèches and mechanized figurines, and museums devoted solely to Presepio such as the Museo della Certosa di San Martino, which houses the largest



Life size Presepio at St. Peter's, Vatican City

# Italian Regional Traditions

Many of Italy's 20 regions are known for their distinctive Presepi. The style, setting and materials used are often characteristic of the region and times.

Artisans in **Puglia**, particularly in Lecce, distinguish themselves in the use of papier-mâché (cartapesta) draped over iron wire frame, while in **Trentino Alto-Adige** you will find mostly wood. In **Campania** terra cotta, often with cloth, is commonly used. Elaborate paper sets are found in Amalfi. Gesso (plaster) is particularly seen in Lombard. In Sicily Presepi are made of wax and terra cotta but you will also find such materials as coral, bone, ivory, mother-of-pearl, alabaster, shells and other materials from the sea.

A fundamental component of the 18th century Presepio in **Naples**, is the market with every imaginable ware, an explosion of color and shapes. There is always a market with fruit and vegetables, hams, fish, and every imaginable food. This very poor city invented a scene where hunger does not exist.

Creche art in **Liguria** developed in the Baroque age, later than in other parts of Italy. In this region, you will not find the wooden figures with head and limbs in terracotta

so popular in

Naples and elsewhere. The typical Baroque Presepio in Liguria, particularly in Genoa, has carved wooden figures, either gold-plated or painted.

In addition to regional distinctions in materials, you find regionally distinct settings. In **Rome** the Presepi are often sur-

rounded by a countryside of cypress, pine and olive trees, the ancient aqueducts and ruins. While

in Naples, the Presepi's many minor characters (with no connection to the biblical story),

stand on a rock possible set inside the ruins of a church surrounded by the village with the whole scene and inevitably in the shadows of Vesuvius.

To learn more about these regional traditions, visit: [www.presepi.it](http://www.presepi.it)



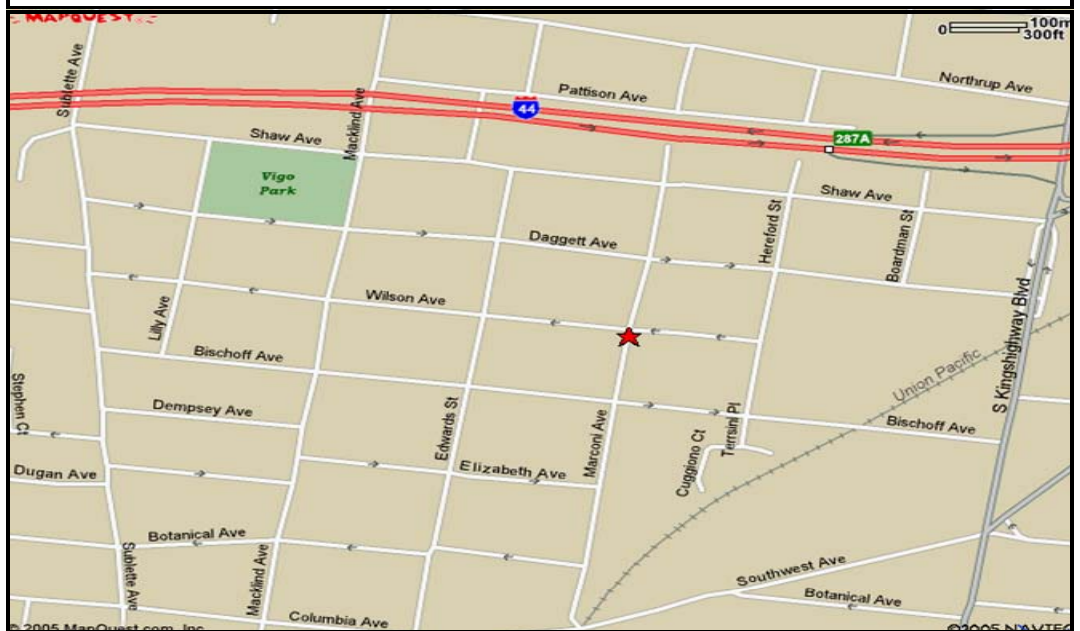
Paper Presepio as found in Amalfi



*There are two basic types of nativity scenes:*

1. *Historical, in which the architecture, clothing and environment depict Palestine at the time of the birth of Jesus.*
2. *Popular, in which the setting is liberally selected by the artist. The architecture, environment, clothing and additional statues may depict local settings and culture.*

Refer to the display locations on the reverse side to plan your route. Some locations may be reached easier out of order which will be evident by using this map. Perimeter displays may best be accessed by car. The star designates the location of St. Ambrose Church.





The Italian Club of St. Louis  
and The Hill Business  
Association



Our gratitude to Southwest Bank  
for their support of this project.

We are pleased to bring  
a bit of this Italian  
tradition to the Hill  
with Presepi exhibits in  
the windows of the  
following merchants:

**MARCONI AVE  
(WEST SIDE TO SHAW)**

1. **Shield Systems, Inc**  
5205 Bischoff Avenue  
*The Children's Window*

"O dolce Bambino Gesù"  
Made by Sr. Felicetta Cola,  
compliments of Marianne

O Bambino Divino"  
By Marianne Peri-Sack

2. **Just Be**  
2133 Marconi Avenue  
"Silent Night"  
By Tom & Anita Blubaugh

3. **Salono Milano**  
2123 Marconi Avenue  
"Wise Men Seek Him Still"  
By Kathy Thomson

4. **Joe Campise's Produce  
Market**, 2105 Marconi Avenue  
"O Little Town of Bethlehem"  
By The Italian Club St. Louis

5. **Girasole Gifts and Imports**  
2103 Marconi Avenue  
"La Natività e la storia della  
montagna," Toscana  
By Marie Cuccia-Brand  
and Debbie Torpea Monolo  
"Bambino Gesù," Lombardia  
By Joe Monolo

6. **Silver Bear Jewelry**  
2103 Marconi Avenue  
"Italian Village Welcomes the  
Holy Family" By 8th Grade  
Girls, St. Ambrose School  
*Wilson Window*  
"Natale intorno al mondo"

7. **DiGregorio's Italian Foods**  
5200 Daggett Avenue  
"In Memory of  
Sam DiGregorio"  
By The DiGregorio Family

"Presepi di carta"  
By The Tarantella Dancers\*

8. **Bertarelli Cutlery**  
1927 Marconi Avenue  
"La Sacra Famiglia"  
By Gloria Griffero

9. **Marconi Bakery**  
1913 Marconi Avenue  
"Pace in terra"  
By Jack and Carolyn Stelzer

10. **John Viviano & Sons**  
5139 Shaw Avenue  
"Gloria a Dio"  
By The Viviano Family



*Additional information about the Presepi will be found at each display location*

**PERIMETER LOCATIONS**

17. **Guido's Pizzeria & Tapas**  
5046 Shaw Avenue  
"La stella di Bethlehem"  
By Gloria Griffero

18. **Standard Refrigeration**  
5218 Shaw Avenue  
"Tre Presepi in memoria di  
Charles & Blanche Ponciroli"  
By The Ponciroli Family

19. **John Volpi & Co.**  
5250 Daggett Avenue  
"Tu scendi dalle stelle"  
By The Mariani Family

20. **Gioia's Deli**  
1934 Macklind Avenue  
"Viene Signore Gesù"  
By Cathy Donley

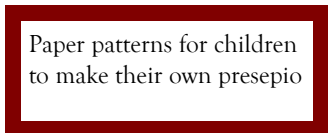
21. **Anthonino's Taverna**  
2225 Macklind Avenue  
"Natività" Made by  
The Staff of Anthonino's

22. **Urzi's Italian Market**  
5430 Southwest Avenue  
"Luce di luci"  
By The Urzi Family

**NEAR THE HILL**

23. **Chris' Pancake & Dining**  
5980 Southwest Avenue  
"Osanna"  
By Marie and Richard Brand

24. **Hillside Animal Hospital**  
5325 Manchester Avenue  
"O dolce Bambino Gesù"  
By the Migneco Family



Paper patterns for children  
to make their own presepio

**MARCONI AVENUE  
(EAST SIDE)**

11. **Wolfgang & Assoc, Inc.**  
1900 Marconi Avenue  
"Mama's natale bianco"  
By Giuseppina Peri

12. **Nicholas Riggio  
Law Offices**  
5149 Daggett (at Marconi)  
"Imagine! A Nativity"  
By Southwest Bank

13. **SKIF (inside)**  
2008 Marconi Avenue  
"Oggi e nato Gesù"  
By Nina Ganci

14. **Amighetti's Bakery**  
5141 Wilson Avenue  
**West Window:**  
"The New Era"  
By Judy Mann

**East Window:**  
"From the workshop of  
Angela Tripi," Sicilia  
By the National Italian American  
Foundation, www.niaf.com

15. **St. Ambrose Church**  
2100 Marconi Avenue  
(Inside after 12/23)  
"Venite adoremus"  
By St. Ambrose Church

16. **Vitale's Bakery**  
2130 Marconi Avenue  
"Nei ruderi romani"  
By The Italian Club  
of St. Louis



*Buon Natale  
E  
Felice Anno Nuovo*