

The Spencer Museum's Presepio Figures

Presepio, or Nativity Scenes, are a traditional part of the celebration of Christmas. As early as the 7th century a re-enactment of the birth of Jesus Christ took place in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and was indicative of the growing importance of the cult of the Holy Family. Later, St. Francis of Assisi helped to popularize the custom by using a *Presepio* to instruct the young. The Franciscans and other religious orders introduced nativity scenes in their churches and in this way they came to be produced throughout Europe.

The Spencer Museum is fortunate to possess a *Presepio* tableau that retains its original architectural setting. It was created in 1770 for the Massimo family through whom it was passed down to Prince Fabrizio Massimo. In 1911, Prince Massimo exhibited his extensive familial collection, including this *Presepio* of exceptional quality. In 1914, Sally Casey Thayer of Kansas City acquired the piece. She purchased additional *Presepio* figures in Rome and Venice, all of which were given to the university art museum in 1917 along with the rest of Sally Thayer's collection. It is from this group of individual figures that Cynthia Schira and Ann Hamilton made their selection, which were displayed in the 2013 exhibition, *An Errant Line*.

Costly silks and velvets were used for the *Presepio* figures' clothing, while the elaborately embroidered costumes for the shepherds and peasants reflected an early interest in folk art. In recent years, the number of Neapolitans creating these groups has greatly diminished and this centuries-old art form is in danger of extinction.

Mrs. Thayer's donation of this work and many others formed the basis of the original art collection at the University of Kansas, housed today at the Spencer Museum of Art.