



The Nativity in Naples: an Interview

Swide interviewed Salvatore Anastasio, a young artisan who, as an hobby, makes beautiful Nativity structures in the Amalfi Coast, where the Nativity-making process was born.

#ITALIAN TRADITIONS

Salvatore Anastasio lives in Maiori town, located in one of the most beautiful places on Earth: the Amalfi Coast, in Salerno's province (Campania Region). His hobby is making beautiful, realistic Nativity, an hobby taken so much to heart that he joined the Neapolitan Nativity Association born in Naples in 2002 and that he exhibits his creations every year in Naples in Santa Maria Maggiore at Pietra Santa. This year he will exhibit in his town thanks to the collaboration of other Nativity artists too.

Here is what he told Swide, recounting why he took on this hobby and why Nativity scene is so important in Naples.

Stories for our readers, who may not know the history of the so-called Neapolitan crib of the 18th and 19th centuries: The how, when and why, and how it differs from your ordinary modern-day crib.

The tradition of the crib dates back a long way, and has been represented in many different ways over the centuries, with the Holy Family, surrounded by oxen, donkeys, angels and other shepherds awaiting the arrival of the Three Kings under a starry sky.

The sacred origin of the Christmas manger dates back to 1223, when St. Francis of Assisi set up for the first time, in Greccio, a live representation of the birth of Jesus. With the help of the nobleman, John Velita, Francis created the First Live Manger of the World. The following centuries saw the first illustrations of carved mangers, i.e. with figures carved out of various materials, ranging from simple wood to elegant marble. The first monumental crib was the one created by Arnolfo di Cambio between 1290 and 1292; the statues are now housed in the Museum of the Liberian Basilica of Santa Maria Maggi in Rome.

In 1500, however, there were the first signs of change: the basic structure remained the same but with the addition of new characters, new animals and scenery with glimpses of landscapes. The tradition evolved further with the custom of setting up mangers in churches in southern Italy, where the crib became a veritable art-form, especially in the Campania region.

Napoletano Crib

The most productive period for the art of the crib was the eighteenth century, when Charles III of Bourbon reigned in Naples. Nobles, families, craftsmen and goldsmiths all vied to create the best, most beautiful and gorgeous work in the various palaces. And it was typical during the century to prioritise the shepherds who, with their gestures and their expressive faces in terracotta paintings, gave an impression of the various scenes. In the case of the Neapolitan crib, there are three key scenes, which are: The Mystery or even the Miraculous birth of Jesus that can often be found among the remains of ancient temples or classic architectural structures, places to remember in the cities of Pompeii and Paestum; giving the event a sort of aura. Then there was The Announcement i.e. the angels' announcement to the shepherds who are portrayed as different characters, not just as simple shepherds or merchants, but also as a number of popular and well-known protagonists. Finally, there is The Adoration of the Magi, the kings arriving at the location of the birth to bring their gifts in classic Salvatore style. The Neapolitan crib of the 18th and 19th centuries has been handed down to this day allowing us to create even in our homes something truly ancient and extraordinary.



Can you tell me a bit about you, where you are from, how old you are, what work you do, your family ...

I'm Salvatore Anastasio. I am 32 years old and a young crib craftsman. I work in Maiori on the Amalfi Coast (Salerno), where I was born. I work as a tour operator at the port. There are five of us in my family, me, my parents and my two sisters.

Is your family fond of your cribs? What appeals to you so much about this art form, and when did you first develop this hobby?

My family do not share my passion, but has always supported me in my work. Where we live near Naples, the tradition of the crib is greatly respected and, for several generations, it has been a tradition of the inhabitants to build cribs in the various districts. I still remember the hustle and bustle of the tools, the expert voices of older people and the smell of glue and paint, which came from the workshop set up in my house.

For me, that workshop was a mysterious gift to be unwrapped. I did not know what was going to come out, something magical for sure, but I knew that I could not see it in its entirety until a few days before Christmas. And that's just the way my passion is: as a child I was one of those small and intrigued spectators who used to observe the great work, went home and with great humility tried to recreate what I had seen. Even as a "small artisan" I competed to build simple cribs with makeshift and recycled materials. With the passage of time I have improved my skills and this passion has grown more and more, to the extent that I can no longer do without it. I have devoted myself to this art for about six years now.

Tell us about the creative process. What do you start with? How do you proceed? How long does it take you to make a statue?

My work is not about the creation of figurines, but the scenery and small parts (miniature objects of the play) that surround it, and the sets and supporting compositions required during each stage of production. I first do a sketch of the project, then I create a wood structure that is completely covered with cork (for example: with rocks made of cork, bricks made of cork and rabbit skin, etc.) and then I create the details. I then do the grouting and finally the painting. As you may notice, my craft is accurate in every detail. In fact the time it takes to complete a project varies according to the size of the rock, which forms the basic structure, and especially the small components (chairs, crates, lamps, lanterns and so on) that are to be made.

Why did you choose not to create figurines?

The shepherds in my works are those of sculptress Anna Need, with whom I began collaborating about three years ago. We met during a show in Naples and she was standing with her work for some time. I asked if we could do something together: that I worked on the scene and other details while she created her shepherds. So we began to collaborate, because our styles complemented each other well. Shepherds are made entirely out of terra cotta and hand painted with great skill. She, for the most part, makes shepherds 4cm, 7cm and 13cm tall.

In fact, I never tried my hand at figurines, because I have always preferred working on the scenery and the details, but maybe in the future I will try to make shepherds out of clay. I'll let you know how successful I am.

What is the hardest project / object you have ever done?

No project is easier or harder in reality, but I always take each one on with enthusiasm and every time I create something new, starting with the basic, raw materials, it is always a new challenge for me. In practice, the charm of this art form draws me in like a film where, thanks to the gift that God has given me, I can always create something wonderful and overcome any difficulties. The opera "The Magical Clay Event" this year was a challenge for me, because the main feature is an ornate fountain and ornaments in the Baroque style, and I had to, therefore, commit myself and take great care over every detail.



And what do you feel the most proud of?

All my new work makes me proud. Whenever I start a new project I am always a bit unsure as to what the end result will be, but once it is completed I'm really proud of what I have made with my own hands and mind. The work "Napoli com'era" is very dear to me because it recreates a popular scene from real life. In fact it is a glimpse of ancient Naples where the architectural periods overlap in a harmony of styles, reminiscent of the history and culture that the city has experienced.



In this work the details and miniature objects are many, and vary from the wicker chairs to the baskets, cages, barrels sold by merchants in the streets. The balcony is full of everyday objects.



How important do you think this tradition is in your region and in your country, and why? How do you think you can protect it?

The tradition of the crib in my region is very sensitive, especially in the city of Naples which is known throughout the world for its artisans and their works. The love for the crib is also present in the area where I live, Maiori. Here, larger or smaller cribs can be found in various streets and neighbourhoods and in almost all the churches. For this reason I and other artisans decided to create a Crib Association (in the town of Maiori) which annually showcases the works of different artists. Everything has been done to enable new generations to learn about a fascinating and ancient art that distinguishes our land and that can be a real asset for tourism and development, and needs to be protected and not forgotten.

Is there any craftsman or artist (or a painter) who inspires you to create your artworks?

The inspiration can come from any art form. Being a completely self-taught sculptor, I am often fascinated and inspired by the Baroque style, so rich in decorative friezes. I really like the works of Gian Lorenzo Bernini. But as for the art of the crib, I admire the truly outstanding works of Matthew Troiano, a famous Neapolitan craftsman, whose creations have inspired me and encouraged me to undertake this form of art.

Elisa della Barba



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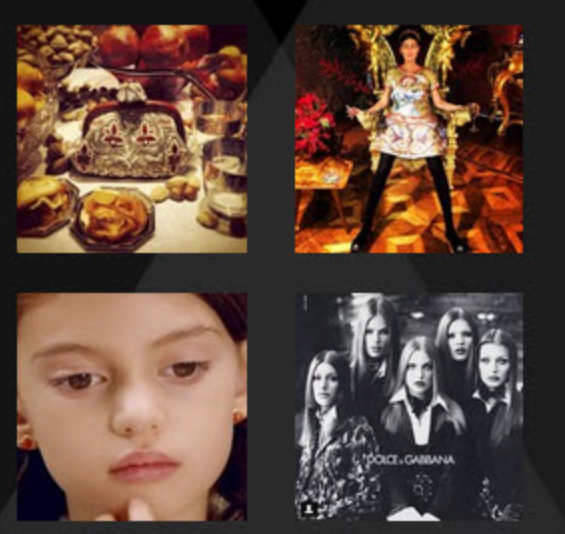
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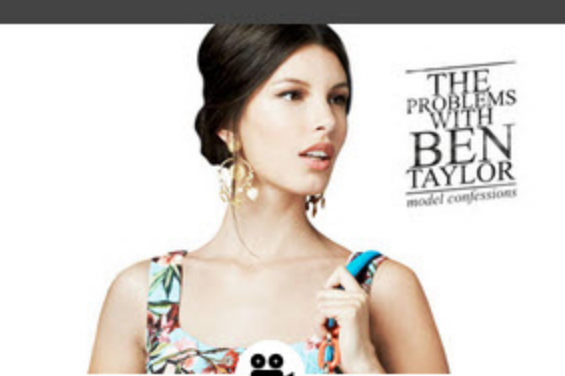
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