

# THE NATIVITY SCENE

IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS  
AND TRADITIONAL PUPPET THEATRE



Giotto, Nativity fresco in Padua

Proposal for an art installation in Bethlehem

15 December 2022 – 11 January 2023  
Live events on 8 – 11 January 2023

The tradition of the Nativity Scene (*Presepe* in Italian, *crèche* in French but also in English) celebrates in 2023 the 8<sup>th</sup> century of the first live representation of Baby Jesus' birth by Saint Francis in the little Italian village of Greccio. The inspiration to creating a live scene of Nativity takes its roots during the pilgrimage he made in the Holy Land and specifically in Bethlehem. At the return in Italy his devotion to the Nativity took the shape of a live representation with the active involvement of the believers, inviting us to focus on this first manifestation of the *crèche* as very close to the theatrical mystery play.

This art installation in Bethlehem intends to be a recall to this journey of Saint Francis and at the same time to focus to the proximity of the original devotional manifestation in the little village of Greccio to the traditional theatrical forms and art expressions. And in fact – aside the many still alive initiatives to recreate the live scenes of Nativity at Christmas time – the Nativity Scene still today maintain its place in the traditional forms of the Italian puppet theatre.

In the region of North Italy the bicentennial string puppets Compagnia Carlo Colla e Figli keeps in its theatrical repertory the old scenario with the title “*La capanna di Betlemme*” (The Bethlehem Stable). There are documents with the evidence that this scenario was staged in 19<sup>th</sup> century with live music until 1933 and recently in 2018 has been restaged again in the prestigious Piccolo Teatro of Milano. In the same time this theatrical reference it's evident in almost all the Renaissance paintings like film frames of live theatrical mise-en-scenes.

The artistic installation under the sky of Bethlehem shall be designed keeping the evoking shape of the Christmas star as narrated in the Gospel of Matthew. The comet star - pictured for the first time in the Scrovegni Chapel fresco by Giotto in Padua, usually connected to the sky appearance of the Halley Comet in 1301 – takes the shape of a visual contemporary installation made with floating silk panels reproducing the most famous masterpieces of Italian Renaissance.

The most beautiful paintings of Nativity – by Giotto and Filippo Lippi, Mantegna and Botticelli among others - will be magnified in the various silk draperies, like curtains to isolate a central “special creche” where a little stage will show the Nativity with a group of 25-30 historical puppets by the ancient Carlo Colla Company. Specific soundtrack of ancient holy music will surround Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the shepherds, angels and the three kings with their camels .

The installation will be mounted during two days prior to opening and it will remain available for visitors during two or three weeks with the simple assistance of a local guard. In the last 3 days before dismantling, the puppeteers of Carlo Colla Company will come to Bethlehem and step on stage every hour to animate just fifteen minutes of the traditional Nativity play, with live piano music accompaniment. Repeated every hour up to 8 or 10 times a day this short live play will permit to a large audience of visitors to appreciate and enjoy this historical testimony of the *Crèche* in the Italian puppet theatre, in the form that probably still preserves the original devotion of the event by St. Francis.



La Capanna di Betlemme by Carlo Colla Marionettes Company

## **PUPPET COMPANY CARLO COLLA E FIGLI**

The Puppet Company Carlo Colla e Figli (Carlo Colla & sons Marionette Company) of Milan is one of the oldest artistic protagonists in the marionettes theatre field. With over almost three centuries of history, it developed theatre and craftwork together to stage new performances; the specific techniques of this development are still used today in sculpting, woodworking, tailoring, set design, and hairdressing laboratories.

The Marionette theatre has been present in the cultural life of North Italy for at least three centuries. The information on the first marionette companies that worked in Milan date back to 1700, when the first stable marionette theatres were established just a few steps away from the Dome. Giuseppe Fiando was the first marionettist to have a stable theatre in Milan, at the end of the 18th century. The Colla family began working professionally as touring company after 1815 and it was a stable company from 1906 to 1957 at the historical Teatro Gerolamo of Milan, programming its presentations to aristocrats and the middle-class with a wide wide repertory collaborating with famous institutions such as the Teatro alla Scala and the Piccolo Teatro. The Colla performances saw a growing number of faithful and famous spectators, such as Gordon Craig, Igor Stravinsky, Simon Weil, Luchino Visconti and Manuel de Falla.

The developing legacy of the Company boasts more than 30,000 pieces counting marionettes, scenery, costumes, props, documents, scripts, music scores, accessories and wigs. The marionettes, about six hundred from the

historical repertory, and more than two thousand made during the last thirty years, vary in height from 30 to 80 centimetres; some fantasy and allegoric characters, however, are over one metre tall.

Over the last thirty years the Compagnia Carlo Colla e Figli has taken its presentations to more than 80 different international theatres in Europe, Asia, Oceania and America, often representing Italy in the most important festivals. The repertory ranges from opera (*Aida*, *Nabucco*, *Il Trovatore*, *Turandot*), to ballet (*Excelsior*, *Petrushka*, *Scheherazade*), to historical and popular fictions and fairy tales (*Around the world in eighty days*, *Puss in boots*, *Cinderella*).



Provisional visualizations of the installation.  
The final proposal will be submitted after decision about the available space.