



Probably the most amazing nativity scene in Prague is in the Panny Marie Andělské church (**Capuchin monastery**¹³) on Loretánské square. Created in the 18th century, the life-size figurines are made of wood and straw¹⁴, and dressed in real clothes hardened by water with glue. Some sheep move their heads and make sounds. The scene fills a whole room and a real stream of water runs through it. It is open to the public every Christmas.

From Nutshells to Life-size Statues

The tradition of nativity scenes

You have surely seen them many times – models showing the birth of Jesus. Nativity scenes are displayed in churches, homes, shops, in the streets and even in museums and at special exhibitions. Some are ‘living’, with real people and animals, others are made of all possible materials. Where did this tradition come from?

The beginnings

At Christmas in 1223 Saint Francis of Assisi visited Greccio, a town some 80 km north of Rome. He prepared something special for the celebration – to commemorate the birth of Jesus, he set up a manger¹ with hay² in a cave near the town and brought an ox³ and a donkey⁴ to stand beside it. It can be considered the beginning of ‘living’ scenes, with real people and animals, and of nativity plays*.

Nativity scenes in Czech lands

The first mention of a nativity scene in Czech lands comes from 1562. Jesuits helped to spread the tradition, building nativity scenes intensively as a part of re-catholicization* efforts.

The tradition gradually spread outside churches, was adopted by the aristocracy, and later by townspeople and villagers. In 1780 the emperor Joseph II banned building nativity scenes in churches because he did not consider it **dignified**⁵ enough. Nativity scenes did not disappear, though – quite the opposite. People started enthusiastically exhibiting them in their homes, and making them has become an important part of folk art.

It’s interesting that in rich agricultural regions where other folk traditions were popular (dancing, folk costumes, etc.), making nativity scenes did not spread much. On the other hand, it became extremely popular in poorer regions, especially in the mountains, where people were used to doing crafts at home to make more money. It is said that in



The smallest Czech nativity scene fits inside a hazelnut shell.

the Krkonoše mountains there was not a single house without a nativity scene, and people even sold their creations abroad.

What makes a nativity scene?

The simplest nativity scenes show just the newborn baby Jesus with the Virgin Mary and Joseph. Often, however, more figures are added – a donkey and an ox warming the baby with their breath, the Magi (the three kings) bringing gifts, and the **shepherds**⁶ to whom an angel announced the news of Jesus' birth.

The basic scene cannot be changed, so it does not leave much space for creativity. But nativity-scene makers let their imagination run free when creating other figures and the scenery. Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem, you can see nativity scenes showing typical Czech countryside, covered with snow, or even a whole Czech village

or town, with **craftsmen**⁷ and tradesmen at work. Gift-givers often bring things connected with their trade – a baker brings bread, a miller brings flour, a butcher brings meat. Musicians coming to play to the newborn Jesus are also a popular part of Czech nativity scenes.

All shapes and sizes

Nativity scenes can be made of any material you can think of. If you find wood or paper too ordinary, there are nativity scenes made from **wax**⁸, bread, chocolate, sugar and even butter.

The Museum of Records and Curiosities in Pelhřimov exhibits the smallest Czech nativity scene – it fits inside a **hazelnut shell**⁹. But if you prefer something bigger, you can visit the village of Jiříkov, near Bruntál. Jiří Halouzka, a local **woodcarver**¹⁰, prides himself on having created the world's largest nativity scene with life-size figurines. There are



At the beginning of the 20th century Czech companies created nativity scenes advertising their products. You can, for example, see the gift-givers bringing baby Jesus heaps of soap produced by the then-famous Otta factory.



The prominent baroque sculptor Matyáš Bernard Braun (1684–1738) sculpted a nativity scene in **sandstone**¹⁵ in a forest near the town of Kuks. It shows the procession of the Magi coming to the baby Jesus, and it is surrounded by other sculptures of saints and biblical scenes. Although the area was damaged by **mining**¹⁶ in the late 18th century and the soft sandstone sculptures have suffered from weathering over the years, it is still an impressive place to visit.



The most famous Czech mechanical nativity scene is in Třebechovice pod Orebem. It measures 7 x 3 x 2 metres and shows biblical scenes as well as typical life in a 19th-century town. The woodcarver Josef Probošt started creating it in 1885 and continued for over 40 years, hoping to make the most beautiful nativity scene in the world, which even the emperor would come to see. The emperor did not come, but much later the nativity scene was exhibited at EXPO 67 in Montreal with great success.



Even politics has made its way into nativity scenes. In a scene created after the declaration of Czechoslovak independence, baby Jesus lies under Czech and Slovak **national emblems**¹⁷ and the date October 28, 1918. The museum of nativity scenes in Karlštejn exhibits a scene in which Czech rulers are coming to baby Jesus – for example Saint Václav, Charles IV and even the first Czech president Masaryk.

currently more than 150 wooden statues, and the whole scene weighs over 20 tonnes.

In motion

Some nativity scenes include moving parts, so villagers cut wood, **blacksmiths**¹¹ bang their hammers, animals move here and there. “Křízový jesličky” in Jindřichův

Hradec is mentioned in the Guinness World Records as the biggest folk mechanical nativity scene in the world. **Stocking-maker**¹² Tomáš Krýza (1838–1918) worked on it for more than sixty years. His creation is 17 x 2 x 2 metres big and contains 1,389 figurines.

Zuzana Pernicová (CR)

Sea shells and butterfly wings

Marie Dočekalová has been collecting nativity scenes for 20 years, making her own ones and holding public exhibitions every Christmas.



fingers are made of miniature shells. The smallest nativity scene in my collection is from Peru, measuring only 1.5 x 2 cm.

When making nativity scenes, I use various

materials too – for example I’ve tried **fish scales**¹⁹ and an **ostrich**²⁰ egg.

You can see exotic nativity scenes from Marie Dočekalová’s collection at the annual exhibition at Gymnázium Jana Keplera, Parléřova 2, Praha 6, which is open daily from December 23 to January 1. More information at www.betlemy.eu.

How many nativity scenes do you have in your collection, and which of them do you consider the most curious?

About 300, maybe even more. They are from all around the world (various European countries, North and South America, Africa) and made of all possible materials: butterfly wings, feathers, alabaster, crystal... One from India is painted on a **breadfruit tree**¹⁸ leaf. I also got a nativity scene made of sea shells from Croatia, where even Joseph’s

Read the whole interview on the Bridge website.

GOOD OLD CHRISTMAS

What makes Czech Christmas Czech are the traditions and customs tied to Christmas Eve that go back to the 19th century and even before. Christmas Eve was thought to be a magical time, so people practiced different rituals to find out what would happen to them in the coming year. Marriage, illness or death?

Shoe throwing

The basic dilemma of single girls, “Will I get married or not?” was usually solved by throwing a shoe over the shoulder. If the toe faced towards the door, the girl would leave the house and get married. If not, she would stay at home.

Guessing your husband’s appearance from a log

Girls were also naturally curious about their future husbands’ appearance. In order to get some information about her man, a girl would pick a **small log**²¹ from a **pile**²², her eyes covered, and from the shape of the wood she would read what her future husband would look like.

Pouring lead

Another custom used to foretell a person’s destiny was pouring hot **lead**²³ into water. First the lead was heated over a fire and then poured into water. The various resulting shapes sent a message about the person’s future (e.g. straight lines meant a happy life, wavy lines confusion, a circle was for **inheritance**²⁴ and two circles meant a wedding). Well, depending what you chose to see in them.



Telling the future from an apple

A very common tradition practised nowadays is to cut an apple down the middle to predict a person’s future. A star in the apple core signifies happiness and health, while a cross is an **omen**²⁵ of death. If you come across a worm, you are likely to get sick the next year.

Zuzana Sklenková (CR)

VOCABULARY

- ¹ **manger** [ˈmeɪndʒə] – jesličky
- ² **hay** [heɪ] – seno
- ³ **ox** – vůl
- ⁴ **donkey** [ˈdɒŋki] – osel
- ⁵ **dignified** [ˈdɪɡnɪfaɪd] – důstojný
- ⁶ **shepherd** [ˈʃepəd] – pastýř
- ⁷ **craftsman** [ˈkrɑːftsmən] – řemeslník
- ⁸ **wax** [wæks] – vosk
- ⁹ **hazelnut shell** [ˈheɪz(ə)lnʌt] – skořápka lískového ořechu
- ¹⁰ **woodcarver** – řezbář
- ¹¹ **blacksmith** – kovář
- ¹² **stocking-maker** – punčochář

CAPTIONS

- ¹³ **Capuchin monastery** – kapucínský klášter
- ¹⁴ **straw** [strɔː] – sláma
- ¹⁵ **sandstone** – pískovec
- ¹⁶ **mining** [ˈmaɪnɪŋ] – těžba
- ¹⁷ **national emblem** [ˈembləm] – státní znak

INTERVIEW

- ¹⁸ **breadfruit tree** – chlebovník (druh stromu)
- ¹⁹ **fish scales** [skeɪlz] – rybí šupiny
- ²⁰ **ostrich** [ˈɒstrɪtʃ] – pštros, pštrosí

GOOD OLD CHRISTMAS

- ²¹ **small log** – polínko
- ²² **pile** – hromada
- ²³ **lead** [led] – olovo
- ²⁴ **inheritance** – dědictví
- ²⁵ **omen** [ˈəʊmən] – předzvěst

LANGUAGE POINT

We use the expression **made of** when the material used for creating something keeps its form (e.g. *a nativity scene was made of wood, a house was made of bricks* – the material still remains wood and bricks, it has not changed). We use **made from** when the material changes its form during the process (e.g. *paper was made from trees* – the trees are not trees any longer).

GLOSSARY*

nativity play – a play that tells the story of Jesus Christ’s birth; sometimes performed by school children at Christmas time

re-catholicization – re-establishing the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church after the defeat of protestants at the Battle of White Mountain (1620)