



Sea Shells and Butterfly Wings

Marie Dočekalová has been collecting nativity scenes, making her own and holding public exhibitions every Christmas. How does one become a collector of such unusual items? And what curiosities has she encountered?

Meet a nativity scenes collector

When and why did you start collecting nativity scenes?

I've been collecting nativity scenes for 20 years. When I was a kid, we only had a nativity scene made of paper at home, and I longed for some with figurines, like those I saw in churches. I begged my mum to write to our distant relative in Vienna¹ to ask her to send me one, and she really did it. I was happy though the figurines were only 5 cm big.

Later, I made gingerbread nativity scenes for my children – with a barn², a church, a pond with fish, birds pecking³ poppy seeds⁴... After Christmas, all the gingerbread beauty ended up in the stove⁵.

Marie Dočekalová



One day I discovered a nativity scene in a jug⁶. I bought it and that is how my collection started to develop. When I was buying my 60th nativity scene, I promised myself that it was the last one. But you should not make promises which you cannot keep.

How many nativity scenes do you have in your collection?

About 300, maybe even more. They are from all around the world – various European countries, the USA, China, Peru, the Philippines, Colombia, Bolivia, Congo...

How do foreign nativity scenes differ from Czech ones?

Basically, they all depict⁷ the same thing so they don't differ that much. The biggest difference



Wooden nativity scene from Africa



Chinese nativity scene



Nativity scene from Argentina



Czech nativity scene painted on small logs

is in clothing – for every country, a specific clothing is typical. Even figurines in Moravian nativity scenes are dressed in different folk costumes than figurines in Bohemian nativity scenes. Also, the time period when the nativity scene was made or the time period the maker wanted to depict plays its role.

Which nativity scenes in your collection do you consider the most curious?

I have nativity scenes from all possible materials: butterfly wings, feathers, alabaster, crystal... For a long time, I longed for a nativity scene carved from ebony and finally I managed to obtain it. Ebony is very hard and

so it is difficult to carve it. I also have nativity scenes painted on logs and on stones, and one from India is painted on a **breadfruit tree**⁸ leaf. My husband brought me a nativity scene made from sea shells from Croatia, and I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that even Joseph's fingers were made of miniature shells.

The oldest nativity scene in my collection is from 1824. The smallest one is from Peru, measuring only 1.5 x 2 cm.

When making nativity scenes, I use various materials too – I have made nativity scenes from fish scales, cedar wood and an ostrich egg. They are often inspired by the village of Třebotov where I grew up and the people who lived there.

You can see exotic nativity scenes from Marie Dočekalová's collection at the exhibitions held every Christmas at Gymnázium Jana Keplera, Parléřova 2, Praha 6. More information at www.betlemy.eu.

TASK

In the text, many various materials from which nativity scenes can be made are mentioned. Match the English expressions with the Czech translations.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 1 gingerbread | A) cedrové dřevo |
| 2 butterfly wings | B) ebenové dřevo |
| 3 feathers | C) křišťál |
| 4 crystal | D) motýlí křídla |
| 5 ebony | E) mušle |
| 6 logs | F) perník |
| 7 sea shells | G) peří |
| 8 fish scales | H) polínka |
| 9 cedar wood | I) pštrosí vejce |
| 10 ostrich egg | J) rybí šupiny |

Solution: 1F, 2D, 3G, 4C, 5B, 6H, 7E, 8J, 9A, 10I

VOCABULARY

- ¹ distant relative in Vienna – vzdálené příbuzné do Vídně
- ² barn [ba:n] – stodola
- ³ to peck [pek] – zobat
- ⁴ poppy seeds – mák
- ⁵ stove [stəʊv] – kamna
- ⁶ jug [dʒʌg] – džbáněk
- ⁷ to depict [di'pɪkt] – zobrazit
- ⁸ breadfruit tree – chlebovník