

# Book Reviews

## Comptes rendus de livres

### *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse*

### *Krakovian Szopka: From the Collection of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow*

### *Krakows Julkrubbor*

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*Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse*. Cracovie: Maison d'édition Karpaty – Andrzej Laczynski, 1993. 1 vol., 100 illus., ISBN 83-85204-10-5.

*Krakovian Szopka: From the Collection of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow*. Chicago: The Polish Museum of America, 1994. 1 vol., 6 illus.

*Krakows Julkrubbor*. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum; Krakow: Wydawnictwo Karpaty – Andrzej Laczynski, 1996. 1 vol., 87 illus., ISBN 91-7209-033-2.

The Cracow creche (*Szopka krakowska* 'Shop-ka kra-'coughs-ka) is a phenomenon little known outside Poland, yet it is an important living element of the material culture of Christmas. One of the best examples of the folk art that represents Christmas customs and activities typical to the Polish household, the Cracow creche has been rarely studied by scholars outside Poland. It represents, however, the characteristic values of folk art that can be readily translated into other cultures and understood by people living in a different social and historical context.

The three reviewed volumes are arguably the only sources of information on this subject that a non-Polish speaking scholar of material history can find. Both Henry Glassie and Gerald Pocius have made published references to the Cracow creche, however their coverage of the subject is strictly limited.<sup>1</sup>

Two of the publications under review are exhibition catalogues, while the third, *Cracovie*

*ville belle et merveilleuse*, is essentially a photo album focusing on the comparison of Cracow architecture and details of creche constructions. The reviewed publications were produced by three different museums. *Krakovian Szopka: From the Collection of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow* is a catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Krakovian Szopka*, presented by the Polish Museum of America between November 1995 and February 1996. Located in Chicago, The Polish Museum of America is a small institution with a limited budget, committed to promoting Polish culture in the United States. *Krakows Julkrubbor* is a catalogue from an exhibit organized by the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm from 28 November 1996 to 2 February 1997. The exhibit was accompanied by a festival of Polish folklore. *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* was produced in co-operation with the Historical Museum of the City of Cracow, the main supporter of folk activities in the Cracow region.

The Polish text in all three volumes was written by Anna Szalapak. Mrs Szalapak is a curator at the Historical Museum of the City of Cracow and a juror in the annual contest for the most interesting Cracow creche. She is an expert on the topic and writes in a beautiful style. Her text, although very interesting, is only intended as a general introduction to the subject and a complement to the photographs. *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* includes English and French translations of Mrs Szalapak's text. Photo captions are also translated into both languages. The English text of the *Krakovian*

*Szopka* was written by Dennis Kolinski, a program officer at the Illinois Humanities Council. It is unfortunate that *Krakows Julkrubbor* is not translated into English, as the Swedish and Polish texts contain the most interesting facts for students of material history.

The explanatory texts of all three volumes are written for the general reader — these publications present the Cracow creche mainly through photographs. Introductions to the three volumes, very similar in style, are short but useful sources of information for a scholar of material culture. These texts explain the most important elements of the presented artifacts, mainly the ability of an art object to express the cultural and historical reality of a community, a phenomenon that can be easily appreciated and understood. The explanatory texts give a short description of the history and the original use of Cracow creches. All three volumes focus on the social changes that enhanced the evolution of the traditional creche, and emphasize the important social support provided by the Cracow intelligentsia together with the city's middle and upper class, support that ultimately made it possible for the custom to survive.

The tradition of Cracow creches emerged from the medieval custom of nativity plays and the worship of the Bethlehem crib brought to Poland by the Franciscans in the thirteenth century. The folk form of the nativity plays, *Jaselka*, became especially popular toward the end of the seventeenth century. A creche was the central element of the play but *Jaselka* became a profane theatrical presentation, a humorous performance with elements of folk culture too secular for a religious audience. As a result, *Jaselka* were banned from churches in 1736 and replaced with static cribs.

Without the support of the Church the tradition slowly disappeared from other parts of the country, becoming an exclusively Cracovian custom. Cracow was historically an intellectual and artistic centre of Poland and during the partition of the country (1772–1918), enjoyed more autonomy than other Polish cities. In this period, the Jagiellonian University and the Academy of the Fine Arts remained the only centres providing education in Polish. This special status made both institutions attractive to students from rural areas, who brought with them an acute appreciation of folk art.

In the early nineteenth century creche-making became a supplementary profession for construction workers who required an alternative source of income during the slow winter months. By the end of the nineteenth century

the first guild of creche-makers had been created in Cracow. Its members manufactured two kinds of creches. Small, static models were produced for commercial purposes and sold as Christmas decorations. Larger creches with moving figures were used as accessories by carolers' groups in Poland. These carolers waited in the market area to be hired by middle- and upper-class families to perform at Christmas parties, a local tradition enthusiastically supported by the Cracow intelligentsia who promoted the custom as an important element of folk culture. In the nineteenth century, folklore, widely declared as "the soul of the nation," became a very important part of the Polish national style.

This fact reflected the evolving social structure of the country in which peasants were gaining political influence. In 1846, on the eve of a national uprising, the Austrian administration incited the Polish peasantry of Galicia to rise up against the middle and upper class. This brutal riot made it clear that independence was impossible without the co-operation and participation of all Poles. Promoting folk art and customs therefore became one of the many ways in which the Polish intelligentsia attempted to integrate the lower class into the national culture.

Since the early 1920s museum professionals have played an increasingly important role in supporting a guild of creche-makers. Curators of the Cracow Museum of Industry helped organize the first annual creche-making competition, which became an inseparable element of the Cracow cultural landscape. The event prompted the development of the modern type of creche, a form made primarily for the contest. The Historical Museum of the City of Cracow continues this tradition today. The competition, held in the morning of the first Thursday in December, never fails to bring crowds of admirers and buyers.

The contest takes place in the market, the centre of Old Cracow. From the early morning till noon, creche-makers can register for the competition and present their creations. Creches are judged in several categories, including a separate class for artifacts created by youngsters, often the children and grandchildren of creche-makers.

The jury consists of the elite of Cracow intellectuals: professors from the Jagiellonian University and the Academy of the Fine Arts; ethnologists, museums professionals, architects and art critics. In the afternoon, the winning creches are transferred to the Historical Museum

of the City of Cracow and displayed in an exhibit that opens on the following Sunday. The Historical Museum has the right of first refusal in purchasing creches produced for this annual event.

Creche-makers devote months to the creation of a single item. Generally speaking, it takes approximately four hundred hours to manufacture a 40-centimetre creche. In the list of exhibited works, *Krakovian Szopka* provides some information about the artists, for example, age and social background. Artists' professions vary and have included waiters, locksmiths, several electricians and mechanics, architects, engineers and students. Most of the listed artists are men. Only seven photographs out of the 129 published in all three publications present creches made by females.

It is surprising that neither *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* nor *Krakovian Szopka* stresses the important role played by the museum in supporting and sustaining the tradition. The potential that a museum has in promoting folklore festivals is certainly worth advertising. By recognizing and celebrating the creche as an artistic and cultural artifact, the Historical Museum of the City of Cracow has done much to foster this custom.

The introductory text of the *Krakows Julkrubbor* explains the interesting context in which creches are created. It describes the history and the original use of the creche and explains the purpose of the modern creches made mostly for the annual contest. The criteria used by judges to select the most interesting creche are described in considerable detail.

A creche is expected to be a synthesis of Cracow historic architecture, although architectural structure is only a background element used to tell the story of Christmas. The position of the actual manger and the Holy Family is especially significant. It must symbolize the transcendent nature of the nativity. A creche is furthermore a miniature theatre with moving figures and puppets. The variety of scenes played out on this imaginary stage increase the aesthetic value of a creche. The more original the stories and legends, the more interesting the artifact becomes.

*Krakows Julkrubbor* also includes a short bibliography of the subject and a list of exhibited works. One of the most interesting features of this volume is a profile of the creche-maker Roman Wozniak. Mr Wozniak, an artist and poet, a pickpocket and a thief, was in fact released from the Cracow prison on a short parole in order to participate in the opening of

the Stockholm exhibit. For the event, he created an extraordinary creche that combines typical components of the Cracow creche with notable Swedish accents. Beautiful photographs reproduced in the catalogue portray the Swedish Royal Family and politicians as well as identifiable details of Stockholm architecture.

All three volumes under review recognize the visual impact of the artifact. Photographs in all three publications effectively present the unique structure of the Cracow creche, although they focus on different components. Each creche is a construction of three elements: civic, legendary and religious. By combining these elements, creches express the most important aspects of Polish folk culture: an integration of the romantic vision of tradition and Catholicism.

*Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* contains one hundred photographs showing rich details of creches. The book focuses on the components of the creche mainly represented in the civic images. Photographs show clearly the most popular elements: flags of Poland and Cracow, regional costumes re-created in the smallest details, soldiers wearing historic uniforms. A commonly used element is the Kosciuszko soldier, an important figure in the history of Cracow. Each creche is also decorated with the ensign of Poland, an eagle. Interestingly, even creches created before 1989 present an eagle in the crown, a symbol banned by communists from public places. Often, the emblem of Cracow — an ornamental letter K — can be found, and more recently even the logos of sponsoring companies. Unfortunately, this latter detail is not shown in any of the publications under review, but is, nonetheless, an interesting example of the influence of the current social and political changes in Poland and the effect they have on the creche-making profession.

Some photographs in the *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* present entire creches, while others focus on civic components: architecture, figures, costumes. Enlargements show materials used to make a creche: wood, cardboard, candy wrappers and staniol — coloured tinfoil. Again, the architectural details of these creches are inspired by Cracow buildings. The most frequently included structures are the gothic and renaissance elements of churches, and the style of Wawel Castle. None of the creches imitates one particular building but rather incorporates and blends interesting details of Cracow architecture into one form. *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* presents creches

alongside photographs of actual elements of Cracow monuments, historic paintings and original regional costumes re-created by creche-makers. In this way, readers can examine and appreciate the skills of the creche-makers.

*Krakovian Szopka* contains six photographs of creches against dark backgrounds. These images emphasize the aesthetic value of the artifacts. Rich colours and lights create an impression that the presented artifacts are part of a fairy tale. Creche-makers combine candlelight and the imitation of stained-glass windows to transform the object into a legendary castle. A Wawel Dragon, *Lajkonik* and the Wizard *Twardowski* are the most popular figures also appearing in folk stories. Still, it may be difficult for someone who has never visited Cracow and does not know Polish history to understand the symbolism of the creches presented in *Krakovian Szopka*, and the catalogue would benefit from better explanatory and descriptive text. The publication was clearly intended for the Polish-American public.

*Krakows Julkrubbor*, even without English translation, is the most interesting of the three publications. Through photographs, it explains the three principal aspects of a creche and illustrates the historical context in which creches were made. The first category of photographs shows the influence of Cracow architecture on the construction of creches, with details of artifacts presented opposite

images of the actual Cracow buildings. Here, the quality of the photographs is good enough to demonstrate the smallest elements re-created by the artists. The catalogue also acknowledges the influence of other artifacts on creches: a medieval altar from St Mary's Church, a painting from the nineteenth century, an interior of an antique restaurant and puppets from a prominent cabaret are reproduced in the finest detail by creche-makers.

The legendary aspect of these creches is also examined. The catalogue analyzes one of the most often used figures, *Lajkonik*. *Lajkonik* is a metaphor, from a centuries-old legend of Tartar warriors, who invaded the city in 1287. The myth is replayed every year in a folk festival on the streets of Cracow. Civic and legendary images used in Cracow creches thus form a background for the story of the birth of Christ. The Holy Family is always presented in the centre of a creche and emphasized by light. Other religious figures such as apostles, angels and saints are often featured.

A Cracow creche possesses all the qualities of a great folk artifact: uniqueness and authenticity, aesthetic power and moral symbols presented in a broad cultural context. It would be very interesting to see an English translation of a scholarly publication on this subject. Until this happens, *Krakovian Szopka*, *Cracovie ville belle et merveilleuse* and *Krakows Julkrubbor* are the best introductions to the subject.

#### NOTES

1. Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Museum of New Mexico, 1989), and Gerald Pocius, "Material

Culture Research: Authentic Things, Authentic Values," *Material History Review* 45 (Spring 1997): 5-15.

## Maureen Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences: American Household Plumbing, 1840-1890*

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Ogle, Maureen. *All the Modern Conveniences: American Household Plumbing, 1840-1890*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

If you want to know how old toilets work, this is the book. Maureen Ogle's *All the Modern*

*Conveniences: American Household Plumbing, 1840-1890* traces the evolution of our hardest-working domestic fixture, as well as sinks, showers, and sewers, through its first half century in the United States. Using patent records, trade catalogues, municipal documents, architectural plans and pattern books,