

8-6-2020

## The Nativity Collection In The Marian Library

Sarah Burke Cahalan

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri\\_faculty\\_publications](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_faculty_publications)



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

### eCommons Citation

Sarah Burke Cahalan (2020). The Nativity Collection In The Marian Library. *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief.* , 529-531

[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri\\_faculty\\_publications/53](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_faculty_publications/53)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Marian Library at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

# The Nativity Collection in the Marian Library

Sarah Burke Cahalan  
Marian Library, University of Dayton  
Dayton, Ohio, Usa  
scahalan1@udayton.edu

The Marian Library was founded in 1943 by the Society of Mary, the Catholic religious order which also founded the University of Dayton in 1850. Those two dates are significant because the library was established to mark the centennial of the university's founding. With exemplary forethought, the Society of Mary allowed seven years to build a library collection so that it would be ready for the official centennial. This deliberate mindset and commitment to education is still apparent today, even as the decline in vocations means fewer Marianists and more laypeople filling the offices on campus. From the beginning, the mission of the Marian Library was "to make the Blessed Virgin Mary better known, loved, and served." This has meant that the library collects broadly, with collections representing both the "three Ds" (dogma, doctrine, and discipline) of Catholicism and also traditions that have more popular origins.

In the early years, the Marian Library focused on books, but its scope soon expanded to include visual materials and other ephemera. Today, the collections include archival materials such as holy cards, postcards, stamps, scrapbooks, photographs, and, in a more recent approach to collection development, archived websites of Marian shrines. The collection includes approximately 100,000 volumes of circulating books and about 12,000 non-circulating rare volumes dating back to the fifteenth century. There is devotional realia such as rosaries, medals, and even several relics. The art collection includes approximately 14,000 items, some of which are fine art (original prints from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and some of which fall more into the categories of kitsch or illustration (catechetical posters or framed replicas of original artwork). The best-known collection in the Marian Library is the nativity set collection, a subset of the art collection numbering around 3,600 sets.



Figure 1. Cut paper nativity. Unknown artist, in the style of paper cuttings by artists He Qi and He Huibing



Figure 2. Soda can nativity. Unknown Artist. Kenya, 20th century. Marian Library, University of Dayton.



Figure 3. Mariachi nativity. Unknown artist. Jalisco, Mexico, 2008. Marian Library, University of Dayton.

The nativity tradition is often associated with Saint Francis of Assisi. Historical records indicate that he was responsible for the creation of a living nativity scene in Greccio, Italy, in 1223, following a visit he made to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. But this living nativity built on other forms of popular devotion around the nativity. Even in the very early centuries of Christianity people painted, sculpted, and depicted in mosaic the nativity scene, using the Gospel stories of Luke and Matthew and adding creative details like the animals that would have been in the stable where Jesus was born. Santa Maria Maggiore, one of Rome's basilicas, is also known as Santa Maria ad Praesepe (or Saint Mary at the Manger) after relics of Christ's crib that were in the church by the fifth century and were enshrined in the main altar by 1170. Arnolfo di Cambio's sculpted nativity scene was installed in that church at the end of the thirteenth century. By the Renaissance, noble European families vied to outdo one another with the finest nativity set. Today, the tradition lives on in many Christian homes and churches, with sets ranging from luxury items to humble assemblages.

Alas, the Marian Library's nativity collection does not include any examples from the early centuries of Christianity, the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance! The earliest pieces in the collection date to the nineteenth century and the vast majority are twentieth-century pieces. What makes it special is the wide array of cultures and materials represented, including nativities not only from Europe and North America but also from China (Figure 1), Japan, Peru, Mexico, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, to name a few of the countries. There are nativities made from porcelain, terra cotta, tin, papier mache, wax, and even corn husks. One of my favorite pieces in the collection is a Kenyan nativity set made from recycled soda cans (Figure 2). Another favorite with visitors is the "mariachi nativity," from Mexico, in which a large band of musicians celebrates Christ's incarnation (Figure 3). The collection has grown primarily by donation over the decades. The largest donation, representing more than half of the current collection, was from Elisabeth van Mullekom-Cserép of Australia in 2007. Today, due to limitations of space and staffing, we are very judicious about accepting and accessioning new pieces and we prioritize items from cultures that are not already represented.

Since 1997, the Marian Library has displayed nativity sets around Christmastime. In the early years the Library simply displayed a handful of sets each year. Today, we use a dedicated exhibit space in the University Libraries building and we also lend sets to office spaces all over the University of Dayton campus. (We have also loaned nativity sets out to the Dayton community, though as of 2020 we are suspending that practice while we conduct a long-overdue assessment of the art collection, with the goal of improved intellectual control and streamlined processes.) The annual nativity exhibit is a beloved tradition on campus and in the broader Dayton community; families mark their calendars to return year after year, and we welcome a variety of groups from schools, elderly homes, and centers for adults with special needs. In a typical year we have over 5,000 visitors to the nativity exhibit.

Much of the work--packing and unpacking loans, docent-led tours--is done by a dedicated group of volunteers. Full-time staff select the theme of the exhibit, identify nativities, coordinate logistics for moving and installation, write exhibit text, promote the exhibit, and handle media requests. Of course, all of these full-time personnel also have other responsibilities in the Marian Library, so the annual exhibit can seem like quite an undertaking. Currently, we are investigating ways to make this commitment, which the community has come to love and expect, sustainable given our staffing levels and budget. The nativity collection at the Marian Library is a treasure. It is also elicits devotional, emotional, and sentimental impulses that even those of us who work closely with it need to keep in check; there is a tendency to want to do more every year, despite not having more people or resources. I am sure readers of *Material Religion* could name analogous collections in their institutions. It is

primarily a benefit, but occasionally a liability, that people connect with religious collections so passionately and profoundly.

**Note:** The annual nativity exhibit is suspended for 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

*Figure 1*

*Figure 2*

*Figure 3*