



Please Join Us!

THE FANCIFUL KRAKOW CHRISTMAS CRIB:

AN EXHIBITION & CREATIVE COMPETITION

*Co-sponsored by the
Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University
and the Polish Arts Club of Buffalo, Inc.*



Exhibition:

December 7, 1997 - January 11, 1998

Reception and Award Ceremony:

Sunday, December 14, 1997

2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

All events at the
Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University.

Please call 286-8200 for information.



CHRISTMAS MANGER IN POLAND

Franciscan friars from Italy are credited with bringing the idea of the Christmas manger to Poland in the late 13th century. Traditionally, Christmas mangers were displayed only in churches and were linked with the performance of nativity plays—reenactments of the biblical account of Jesus Christ's birth.

Over time, often comic or political, themes and characters were added to the plays. Legends and folktales were sometimes woven into performances or included during interludes. In the 14th and 15th centuries nativity plays were being performed in puppet theater as well as in churches. In the 17th century street performances of the plays were introduced. Because the plays became increasingly secular, even rowdy, religious authorities banned their performance in Polish churches in 1736. As a result, this decree led to a period of increased vitality for puppet plays as they became a widespread form of improvised theater.

THE DISTINCTIVE KRAKOW CRIB

The Krakow Crib is a relatively recent type of Christmas manger developed by bricklayers from the outlying areas of Krakow during the mid-19th century. The cribs provided a source of income during the fall and winter months when the bricklayers could not work at their trade. To create their cribs, the artisans borrowed and combined architectural design elements from Krakow's most famous historic buildings. Krakow Cribs are generally modeled after St. Mary's Church, a famous symbol of the city. Elements from Wawel Castle, home to Polish kings when Krakow was the capital of Poland, and parts of the surviving medieval fortifications of the city, like the Barbican, are also included. Krakow Cribs have traditionally been made from simple, often recycled, materials including paper, cardboard, sequins, beads and gleaming, brilliantly colored foil.

Krakow's inventive bricklayers produced several types of cribs: small ones meant to be displayed in the home, larger portable cribs that were carried by carolers and cribs up to nine feet tall that were built as puppet theaters for performances of nativity plays. The cribs were sold each December in Krakow's Market Square. Often, crib makers saved their best work for their own caroling activities. Wealthy Krakovians invited groups of carolers into their homes and rewarded them for entertaining performances with money and holiday foods.

Krakow's folk nativity plays flourished as an important vehicle for political satire, social criticism and expression of national spirit despite restrictions under foreign occupations of Poland. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Krakow's literati were particularly active in improvising comic, satirical puppet performances based on current events and personalities. The stylistic elements and structure of these plays influenced the development of modern Polish theater.

The Krakow Christmas Crib gained special attention as a visual folk art form during the period of Poland's independence between the two World Wars. In 1937, Krakow's City Council and several leading citizens organized the first Krakow Crib building competition. Crib competitions could not be held during World War II. Following the war, the Krakow Historical Museum assumed sponsorship of the current crib building competition which continues annually on the first Thursday of December.

In recent years, the Krakow Crib has become an increasingly sophisticated folk art form. Some include moving figures and many have electrical wiring that allows them to be illuminated from inside, showing vivid miniature stained glass windows to good advantage. Many of today's best crib builders are bricklayers, as this group of artisans has passed their skills on from one generation to the next. The current crib making competition includes categories for professional artists and architects, as well as non-professional adults and children. Each year the Krakow Historical Museum purchases the crib competition's outstanding entries and exhibits them through February.

KRAKOW CRIB ARTISTS

Our Krakow Crib project here in Western New York would not have been possible without the efforts of two local enthusiasts of Polish folk art. Barbara Frackiewicz was twelve years old when her Polish-born aunt, Dr. Eleonora Korzeniowska, made her family a special Christmas gift: a Krakow Crib puppet stage and the puppet characters needed to present a traditional Polish nativity play for friends and neighbors. The home performances were so well received that the family continued to present puppet nativity plays at a variety of locations in their Massachusetts community during the next several years.

Dr. Korzeniowska, who taught Polish language and literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo and Buffalo State College from 1967 to 1988, also used adaptations of Krakow Crib stages for holiday presentations of Polish nativity plays, puppet performances and caroling. A presentation in 1972, a year when the New York State University system faced severe budget cuts, is particularly memorable. In keeping with the Krakow Crib's history as a focal point for social satire, it included an actor wearing an academic gown and heavy chains who was dragged across the stage by a medieval executioner carrying an ax and a placard proclaiming "BUDGET CUTS."



After moving to Buffalo, Ms. Frackiewicz helped her aunt with several nativity play performances. Ms. Frackiewicz became more interested in the Krakow Crib as a visual folk art after being introduced to the work of master crib builder Stanislaw Paczynski during a trip to Poland in 1993. During that same trip Judith Krauza began an on-going documentation of Paczynski including detailed slides of the artist demonstrating his work. This documentation has helped Ms. Frackiewicz further develop her techniques for constructing Krakow Cribbs.

THE KRAKOW CHRISTMAS CRIB PROJECT

This exhibition and competition are part of a two year project to research and document a folk art unique to the city of Krakow, Poland and little known in the United States. The project developed out of an earlier exhibition curated by folk arts consultant Judith Krauza and the suggestion, made by Dr. Peter Gessner, president of the Polish Arts Club of Buffalo, that the Museum might organize a Krakow Crib building competition like the one held annually in Poland. While the idea for a festive holiday competition was appealing, it soon became clear that the event's success depended on first familiarizing local audiences with the history and traditions of the Krakow Crib.



In addition, in this first year of our Western New York competition, the decision was made to concentrate on sharing information through teachers in our local school districts.

Kate Koperski, the Museum's Folk Arts Curator, worked with Judith Krauza and artist Barbara Frackiewicz to create printed materials that include a 30 page teacher resource binder, a 12 page illustrated how-to guide for students and a summary of Krakow Crib traditions for the general public. As there are very few educational materials on Polish and Polish-American culture available, the printed materials produced for the Krakow Crib project are a valuable and lasting resource for teachers.

Like all folk art, the Krakow Crib was created by and for a particular group of people and is a reflection of their history and culture. Consequently, the Krakow Crib provides an excellent opportunity for interdisciplinary study. While our current resource materials focus mainly on the art and architecture of the Krakow Crib we hope to continue to work with teachers to develop sample curricula and lesson plans in additional subject areas.

Special thanks to all the teachers who attended our training workshops, offered excellent suggestions for making the resource materials more useful to them, took the time to teach their students about the Krakow Crib and entered our first annual competition.

Project Coordinators:

Barbara Frackiewicz
Kate Koperski
Judith Krauza

Krakow Crib Credits

Front Cover: Arthur Werner. Buffalo, New York, 1996.
Right Panel: Artist Unknown. Krakow, Poland, 1987.
Left Panel: Barbara Frackiewicz. Buffalo, New York, 1996.

Photography by Biff Henrich

Many thanks to project advisor Dr. Eleonora Korzeniowska; Polish Arts Club liaisons Cynthia and Ralph Baumgartner; Piotr Pienkowski for designing the project's webpages and posting them on the U.B. Polish Academic Information Center's website; and Barnes & Noble Booksellers for their book fair fundraiser on our behalf.



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