



Historic Nativity Scenes Self-Guided Tour

Start your tour with Scene #1 located just north of the R. Jack Mercer Community Bandstand at “C” street and Euclid Avenue. Walking north the scenes are in order to “F” Street where you turn to walk south and continue the tour.

History - There are twelve crèche scenes depicting the Nativity and life of Jesus. The crèches made their first appearance on the Euclid Avenue median in 1959 and have been displayed every year since. The crèches are the result of efforts by religious and community leaders who formed the *Christmas on Euclid Avenue Committee* in 1958. Ontario resident Frank Chaffee had the idea to use Nativity scenes on the median, picturing them as plywood cutouts. But the *Christmas on Euclid Avenue Committee* had something else in mind. Chaffee and Councilman C.E. Petersen visited a series of Nativity-themed tableaux in San Diego and were impressed. The artist was Rudolph Vargas, a native of Mexico. Born in 1904 the state of Michoacán, Vargas showed his talent early. As a 5-year-old, he carved faces in avocado pits, and at age 11 he went to the Academy of Fine Arts in Mexico City. By the time he was 18, he had his own studio and was creating sculptures for churches, libraries and other institutions.

In 1926 at the age of 24, Vargas immigrated to Los Angeles and established a studio. He specialized in religious scenes but also worked for major movie studios to create statues for movie sets. He sculpted the carousel in *Mary Poppins* and worked with Walt Disney and Disney Imagineering to create the children in *It's a Small World* ride and the pirates in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride at Disneyland. He also created wooden mannequins for department stores and created busts of famous actors like Tony Martin, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and Ginger Rogers.

Though he used his commercial work to make a living, Vargas became famous for his religious sculpture. He once had a meeting with Pope Paul XXIII and presented him with one of his wooden sculptures. His work is on display at the Vatican Gallery of Art and in the Santa Teresita Hospital in Duarte.

Vargas had made a commitment to keep Ontario's display unique and continued the commitment throughout his life by refusing to create similar displays for other cities. Only San Diego and San Jose have similar displays, both created before Ontario's. San Diego has only five scenes and San Jose has a complete set of 12. Vargas died in 1986 at the age of 82.

Each crèches consist of three parts:

- The wooden housing
- The scenery murals that serve as backdrops
- The statues of the Holy Family, other figures and some animals

The statues consist of wood carvings, resin and plaster molds of woodcarving. The garments are draped muslin of different weights, stiffened with resin. One statue was originally a mannequin. The interior of the statues are fiberglass with steel reinforcement. Some of the statue bases are wood. The backdrops were originally painted on canvas.

Crèche 1 (Nativity): The Annunciation

Luke 2:11 – For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

The Annunciation is the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. According to Luke 1:26, the Annunciation occurred in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist (*i.e.*, in the month of March). The Annunciation is a key topic in Christian art in general, and particularly during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Crèche 2 (Nativity): No Room at the Inn

Luke 2:7 – And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

This scene depicts Joseph's search to find lodging in Bethlehem. The most common understanding is that Joseph and Mary arrived in the middle of the night while Mary was in labor. There is another

interpretation that is more compatible with usual practices at the time. It is likely that Joseph and Mary arrived ahead of the impending birth. As was tradition, they would have stayed with family members living in Bethlehem. But since Bethlehem was crowded with visitors arriving for the census, it is possible that all the rooms in the main house of Joseph's relatives already had occupants. So rather than being turned away from a hotel (inn), Joseph and Mary likely had to accept humble accommodations in the lower level of the house – a place that often housed animals in ancient Israel.

Crèche 3 (Nativity): Shepherd's Vision

Luke 2:14 – Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

In ancient Israel, sheep farmers were at the lower end of the social hierarchy – the very definition of “humble”. The sheep they bred would have been used as sacrificial animals in temples, such as the one at Jerusalem. In this display, a group of shepherds are tending their sheep when an angel appeared to announce the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. The annunciation to the shepherds is a distinct subject in Christian art and is often combined with the Adoration of the Magi (the appearance of the Wise Men).

Several women's groups and churches cooperated to raise money for Shepherd's Vision.

Crèche 4 (Nativity): Shepherd's Adoration

Luke 2:18 – And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

After the angel told the shepherds of Jesus's birth, a crowd of angels appeared – one of only two times in the Bible that more than one angel appears to people. This signifies that the message of the angel is very important. After the annunciation, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem to verify the birth and visit Jesus. Upon returning to their fields and flocks of sheep, the shepherds told people they met on the road what they had heard and seen. They also spread the word to friends and relatives and to people they met at the temple when they took their sheep to be sold.

In 1959, the Christmas on Euclid Avenue Committee commissioned Vargas to produce two scenes for Ontario, paid for by the Soroptimist and Kiwanis service clubs – Shepherd's Adoration (now crèche 4) and The Nativity (now crèche 5). The cost in 1959 was \$1300 and almost \$1500 respectively. In his Whittier studio, Vargas, with help from his wife, made wooden cutouts to plan for each display, then made the life-sized figures from wood and resin. The canvas backdrops, said to have an almost three-dimensional effect, were painted by Leslie Sandford and Jose De Soto, two

Hollywood scenic artists. De Soto had painted scenes for The Robe and other MGM films. Wooden display cases were built by the California Youth Authority.

A November 30, 1959 ad in the local newspaper announced, “A new concept of the Christmas holidays observance in this area, inaugurating a permanent tradition”. Shepherd’s Adoration and The Nativity were erected on December 4, 1959 with Vargas taking a personal interest in setting up the first displays. According to the Daily Report newspaper, the displays had to be taken down the next day due to “lashing winds”. They were later put up again.

Crèche 5 (Nativity): The Nativity

Luke 2:16 – And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

The artistic depiction of the Nativity has been a major subject of Christian artists since the 4th century. Beginning in the 13th century, the Nativity scene was based on the mystical vision of Saint Bridget of Sweden. In her vision, Joseph waited outside the stable. Mary knelt, turned her back to the manger, and in the midst of a rapturous prayer gave birth to Jesus in a burst of light. The naked, radiant baby caused Mary to recognize his divine nature. She turned and immediately knelt to worship him. Thus, images of Mary and Joseph kneeling, hands clasped, and heads bowed before Jesus, came to be the standard presentation of the Holy Family, as shown in this scene.

Both the Nativity scenes and Christmas on Euclid Avenue grew in subsequent years. In 1960 three more scenes were added; two more in 1961 and one each in 1962, 1963 and 1965 for a total of 10. Altogether the Kiwanians raised the funds for three scenes; the Downtown Merchants Association, one; the Christmas on Euclid Avenue Committee, five; and the Soroptimists, one.

Crèche 6 (Nativity): Arrival of the Wise Men

Matthew 2:1, 11 – Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, . . . And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Despite the depiction of the Wise Men (magi) as being present at the birth of Jesus, it is much more likely that they arrived when He was one or two years old, as depicted in this scene. After the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary continued to live in Jerusalem in a house. The scripture refers to “the house” and refers to Jesus as a “young child”. There is also no indication in scripture of how many wise men

arrived. The gifts they presented – gold, frankincense and myrrh – may seem odd for a young child. However, they are very symbolic.

- Gold was a gift for royalty, symbolizing Jesus as King of Kings;
- Frankincense, an incense, was intimately connected with the priesthood and temple sacrifices, symbolizing the ministry of Jesus; and
- Myrrh, a perfuming agent, was used when wrapping a dead body to help cover the smell, symbolizing the suffering and death of Jesus.

Crèche 7 (Life of Jesus): The Presentation

Luke 2:22, 28, 29 – And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; . . . Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, . . . Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

In accordance with Jewish tradition, when Jesus was 40 days old, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple in Jerusalem for two reasons: to complete Mary's ritual purification after childbirth, and to have Jesus circumcised. Upon entering the temple, Mary and Joseph encounter Simeon (shown here holding Jesus), who had been promised that he would not die before he had seen Jesus. Simeon utters a prayer – the *Nunc Dimittis* or Cantic of Simeon, which prophesied the redemption of the world by Jesus:

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace; according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people: to be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of Thy people Israel ([Luke 2:29–32](#)).

Crèche 8 (Life of Jesus): Flight into Egypt

Matthew 2:14 – When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

Jerusalem, where Mary and Joseph lived, was part of the Roman Empire and was ruled by King Herod. Herod was old and ill when Jesus was born, suffering from a delusional paranoia that caused him to believe many people threatened his rule. In response, he killed anyone he perceived as a threat – including some of his own sons. News of Jesus's birth as King of the Jews, coupled with the failure of the Wise Men to report where Herod could find Jesus, caused Herod to make a new plan.

He ordered all boys under two years of age in Bethlehem and the surround areas to be killed. Jesus was spared because an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, warned him of the impending slaughter, and told Joseph to flee with Mary and Jesus into Egypt. This was a logical refuge, as there was a coastal road linking Egypt and Palestine and Egypt was outside the dominion of King Herod. The flight into Egypt is frequently depicted in art and is the final episode of the Nativity.

Several local churches together raised money for Flight into Egypt.

Crèche 9 (Life of Jesus): The Holy Family

Luke 2:52 – And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

This scene provides a view of Jesus as a child. The word *stature* signifies *age*, so this can be interpreted as Jesus's gaining wisdom and knowledge in both natural and spiritual subjects as he grows older. The English divine and scholar Dean Edward Hayes Plumptre wrote,

The Boy grew into youth, and the young Man into manhood, and his purity and lowliness and unselfish sympathy drew even then the hearts of all men. In that highest instance, as in all lower analogies, men admired holiness till it became aggressive, and then it roused them to an antagonism bitter in proportion to their previous admiration."

Over the years, time, wear and tear, vandalism and the elements took their toll. After 1968, sculptor Vargas was called back several times to make repairs and replace missing or damaged figures. In 1980, citizens and organizations donated funds to have Vargas cover each of the figures in a plastic-type finish "to protect them for a lifetime". In the mid-1990s all the figures were sanded down and recarved, leaving little of the original scenes. The backdrops were replaced at least once.

Crèche 10 (Life of Jesus): Jesus in the Temple

Luke 2:49 – And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

This scene is also from Jesus's youth and continues the idea that He was an extraordinary child imbued with wisdom beyond his years. Joseph, Mary and Jesus had traveled to Jerusalem for a feast day. After a week, Joseph and Mary left with a group of people to travel home. Thinking Jesus was among the group, they did not notice he was missing until they were a day's journey from Jerusalem. They immediately returned and found Jesus in the temple holding his own with religious

scholars. Mary and Joseph expressed their concern for his absence, asking why Jesus had not joined them in the journey home. The scripture is his answer – that he was doing God’s work.

In 1998, Ontario resident Patrick Greene, an atheist, challenged the tableaux as a violation of church-state separation under the California constitution. Proponents of the crèches talked about religious freedom and the artistic merit of the sculptures. Critics talked about their constitutional right not to be confronted with what one called “majoritarian” religious views. A proposed compromise, which led to withdrawal of the pending lawsuit, was to declare the works of art an historical landmark in 1999. Subsequently, private organizations began funding the storage and labor involved in the set-up and maintenance of the scenery in its entirety.

Crèche 11 (Life of Jesus): Come Unto Me

Matthew 19:14 – But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

This is a scene from the ministry of Jesus, which began when He was 30 years old. His disciples wished to protect Jesus from intrusion, annoyance, and anything else that might cause Him to be distracted from the affairs of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus regarded this as officious interference and ordered that children be brought to him. He explained that the Kingdom of Heaven is composed of individuals who are childlike in the nature – including simplicity and humility.

The final two scenes depicting Jesus as an adult – Come Unto Me and Light of the World – debuted in 1968. It had taken ten years, but the series of 12 was complete. (The date of completion is sometimes given as 1976, but this is incorrect.) The total cost of all 12 crèches was more than \$16,000.

By 2013 the crèches were showing their age and the effects of the 1990 restoration. In 2014 the Greater Ontario Convention & Visitors Bureau created a non-profit organization and worked with a citizens group known as the NOEL (Nativity on Euclid Landmark) Committee to raise funds for repair, restoration and conservation, this time to restore the statues and backdrops to their original condition. Artist Kim Pretti was hired to oversee repair and restoration. Pretti found the statues to be in very poor condition. After removing coats of paint, layers of plaster and Bondo, she found that much of Vargas’s work was still intact. Actual restoration work was done by artists Andy Doherty and Walt Wilkey with Pretti doing the painting and art directing.

Crèche 12 (Life of Jesus): Light of the World

John 14:12: Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.

The Gospel of John is a witness to Jesus, written so that people would believe and receive life in relationship to God. Earlier in this Gospel (John 8:12), Jesus declares *I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* This is the second of seven *I am* declarations by Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John. Jesus uses the phrase to describe himself and his disciples.

In 2014 a long-time Ontario business owner anonymously donated \$100,000 to the restoration effort. This enabled work to be completed on the back drops as well as the statues. The original canvas backdrops were retrieved from storage at the Ontario Museum of History and Art, photographed, and the resulting digital files color corrected and enhanced to match the originals as closely as possible. Two original backdrops that had been lost were repainted from photographs by Ontario resident and artist Rick Caughman and converted to digital format. The digital format will allow backdrops to be reprinted as needed. The newly-restored figures and backdrops were first used during the 2014 Christmas season.

End of Tour

This concludes the tour of the twelve crèches, which have been a part of Ontario's Christmas celebration since 1959 – a community tradition. New crèches were built in 2018. Even though our weather is generally mild, the statues are not protected from dew, wind or blowing rain. Santa Ana winds have caused damage and the crèches are vulnerable to vandalism by mischief makers and damage from well-meaning visitors who enter the tableaux for a closer look. Over the years, the crèches have been tagged, moved and some of the statues have been stolen. The original figures of Saint Simeon (from Crèche 9) and the original Baby Jesus were stolen and eventually found in a gully in the San Gabriel Mountains, rotting and damaged beyond repair.

We are proud that Ontario is one of the few cities in the area to have a religious display during the Christmas holiday. We hope this tour has helped you gain a better appreciation for their value as art, and that you will help us maintain and conserve these precious treasures. You can help by donating to Christmas on Euclid at www.GOCvb.org or call 909.937.3000 for more information.