



MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM *of* ART  
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## **Mississippi Museum of Art Presents Bethlehem Tree**

### ***18<sup>th</sup>-Century Crèche Collection Highlights 2009 Holiday Season***

(Jackson, Miss.) . . . Each year, the children of New York City are awestruck by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's (Met) magnificent Angel Tree displayed annually during the holidays. Mississippi children enjoy the same experience of wonder when they visit the Mississippi Museum of Art to view the Younger Foundation Crèche Collection and Bethlehem Tree.

This inspiring display features a 16-foot-tall tree and more than 100 authentic 18<sup>th</sup>-century Neapolitan angel and Nativity figurines in an opulent Italian crèche setting. In addition to the traditional figures of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the Three Magi, the collection includes a host of angels and more than 75 townspeople from all walks of life.

Sponsored by Home-Land Title Real Estate Services, The Bethlehem Tree illuminates the Museum's Trustmark Grand Hall from November 27 through January 10, 2010. A formal lighting ceremony reminiscent of the one held each year at the Met is planned for December 1, 2009.

The collection was inspired by a 1985 trip to New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art by Mrs. Jewell Younger Graeber of Marks, Mississippi. There she first viewed the world-renowned Angel Tree exhibition and was so moved that she began her own collection of handcrafted Italian figurines through private venues and auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's.

The collection is curated by Mrs. Graeber's daughter, Gay Graeber Stubbs of Oxford. "This display was specifically collected and displayed for the children of Mississippi," says Stubbs. "When my mother and daddy viewed the breathtaking Metropolitan Museum of Art's Angel Tree, Mother watched the faces of small children light up with wonder at the scene. Her comment was, 'The children of New York are so fortunate to see this. The children of Mississippi would never have this experience.' After lots of thought, correspondence with the Howard family (the original owners of the collection presented annually at the Met), and through auction houses, she began collecting these 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Neapolitan figures for a display. She bought her first four figures in 1987. Ten years later the Younger Collection went on display at Delta State University. Afterwards, it was installed at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis for seven years."

"It is with great delight that we are able to share this treasure with the children of Mississippi in the capital city of our state," said Stubbs.

In Italy, these Nativity scenes are known as *crèches* or *presepi*. The word *crèche* (pronounced "kresh") is derived from the French word for manger, the trough used for livestock feed in which the infant Jesus was placed after His birth. Italians refer to the Nativity as "il presepe," from the Latin *praesaepe*, *prae* "in front," and *saepire*, "to enclose," together translated as manger.

Though the practice of re-creating the Nativity has long been common throughout Europe, the tradition is especially associated with Italy. St. Francis of Assisi is credited with reenacting the first Nativity in 1223 near the Italian town of Greccio. He prepared a straw-filled manger surrounded by figures of animals. After he celebrated Christmas Eve Mass, numerous claims of miracles followed, and recreating the Nativity became increasingly popular in European churches.

Like those on display at the Met, the figures in the Younger Collection are made of metal wrapped in hemp. Heads and shoulders are painted terra

cotta. Eyes are of glass. Feet and hands are wood. Each is dressed in a costume of minute detail.

Every one of the figures is a work of art, said Betsy Bradley, director of the Mississippi Museum of Art. “The Graeber family has been just wonderful to work with. They are devoted Mississippians who want to share their incredible collection with everyone. We are overwhelmed by their generosity.”

Each Sunday in December, the Museum will offer free cider and cookies to visitors from noon to 2 p.m.

The formal tree lighting ceremony coincides with the Museum’s monthly presentation of *Music in the City*, a partnership with St. Andrew’s Episcopal Cathedral offering live classical music performances. As a gift to the community, admission to both events on December 1 is free.

*For information about the Mississippi Museum of Art’s hours, admission fees, exhibitions, and programs, call 601.960.1515 or 1.866.VIEW ART, or visit the website at [www.msmuseumart.org](http://www.msmuseumart.org).*

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