The Small Figures of the Nativity and the Sacro Monte

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Presepio (hand-carved Italian nativity figures) and Sacro Monte (small chapels containing frescoes and life-sized statues depicting scenes from the Life of Jesus Christ) both grew as a result of opposing religious reforms within the Catholic Church that occurred in the 16th century, with the Jesuit order of priests playing a leading role in the former and Franciscan priests in the latter.

From the Renaissance through to the 19th century the paintings and sculptures of Western Europe were characterized by a strong tendency toward the reproduction of reality. In this regard, the presepio and Sacro Monte followed the main trends in art, with the presepio being miniature reproductions of a realistic nativity scene that became increasingly familiar, and with the Sacro Monte displaying a popular sense of reality as if a theater stage scene had been frozen exactly as it was.

Despite this, the study of the history of art to date has not been able to evaluate these two forms. For the presepio, the reason is that as "Minor art" they were put into a category that has been held in low esteem by "Major art", such as paintings, sculptures and architecture. The Sacro Monte were not only a combination of paintings and sculptures that were exact replicas of scenes, but their realism, expressed sometimes through the use of real hair and clothing, made it difficult to put them into one category of art or another. However, it is possible that there is a more important reason, which is that both are extremely realistic forms of expression whereby they possessed the power to reproduce daily popular life in its most vivid and trivial forms. The subjects studied by art history, which was established in the middle of the 19th century, were not immune to discrimination based on aristocratic bourgeois culture and tastes. It may be said that the world represented by the presepio and Sacro Monte was the absolute antithesis of the highly elevated tastes of art lovers and their collection of expensive and rare objects and preference for refined things.

Viewed from the perspective of the subject of "tsukurimono" research, the presepio, which are Christmas decorations, fit into this category. A further point of interest is that they have become part of life again today. In contrast, the Sacro Monte do not possess even a passing "tsukurimono" quality. Nonetheless, as the most emphasized example from the early modern world, with their composition and sense of virtual reality reminiscent of a present-day amusement park, they are worthy of introduction in that they are compatible with the world of "tsukurimono".