Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NATIVITY DOLLS FROM GERMANY G178

The four dolls in this box come from Germany and date from the 1930s. They are handmade and their faces are hand painted. Look at the detailed stitching on the hands and feet to make the individual fingers and toes. They have been made very carefully so that the limbs can be bent and moved into different positions. Some parts of the dolls have needed to be repaired over the years look for the areas with extra stitches.

These dolls were made as part of a Christmas nativity scene. Such scenes are popular in many Christian areas around the world, including Germany. The picture on the right shows a German nativity scene carved from wood.



The nativity scene represents the birth of Jesus and usually shows Mary, Joseph, three kings, some shepherds, a donkey and other animals gathered around the baby in a manger.

Drawings and paintings of the nativity existed long before models were made. Some examples are shown below. The painting on the left is from the early thirteenth century and the stone carving is Roman and dates from the fourth century.





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St Francis of Assisi (pictured on the right) is thought to have created the first three-dimensional scene in 1223, when he filled a manger with straw and put it between a real donkey and ox. Some people believe that he used real people or statues, although this is not mentioned in any sources and so is probably a myth retold over the years. In fact, St Francis' biographers, Thomas of Celano and St Bonaventure, report that the occasion was simple and humble. People gathered around with candles, sung hymns and prayed. According to the biographers, St. Francis wanted to bring the scene to life so that people could experience the birth of Jesus in a more direct way and think about what it meant to them.

The idea spread across Europe and over the centuries figures have been added. Some nativity scenes can be very elaborate and include model cattle, sheep, a donkey and angels alongside the central figures.

The figures in this box are not wearing rich clothes and so are unlikely to represent the three kings. They are not labelled, but it is probable that they represent Mary, Joseph and the shepherds.

