Dormitorio
Grecco, 1223

According to tradition, the presepe (plural: presemi) dates from a theatrical Christmas Eve mass performed by St. Francis in 1223, which included straw for the manger as well as a live ox and ass. Each Christmas season visitors arrive in Grecco by busloads to view a reenactment of the first presepe. The monastery, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is built above the site of St. Francis's mass.

Center oval: St. Francis is believed to have slept in the cell carved into the rock.
Institution of the Crib at Creccio, c. 1296
Giotto di Bondone (attributed)
Fresco
Upper Church of St. Francis at Assisi
Photo: Web Gallery of Art

Adoration of the Magi, c. 1290
Arnolfo di Cambio
Carrara marble
Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome
Commissioned by Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV for the Chapel of the Presepe in Santa Maria Maggiore; it is thought to be one of the earliest presepi. The Madonna and Child are late sixteenth-century replacements.
Puerpera Virgin (Virgin has given birth), 14th century
Polychrome wood, life-size
Originally from the Chiesa di Santa Chiara, Naples
Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Naples

The postpartum Virgin, painted to depict a 14th-century gentlewoman, may have originally been accompanied by other nativity figures.

OPPOSITE
Joseph, c. 1600
Polychrome wood with articulated limbs
Restoration workshop of Carlo Iacoletti and Sergio Catello, Naples

It was in the seventeenth century that Neapolitan artists began to articulate the limbs of presepe figures.