A slow walk (passeggiata) through churches and piazzas to view the drama of this most Italian tradition.

The Italian presepe season runs from early December to the arrival of the Three Kings on Epiphany (January 6). During this time the churches and piazzas throughout Rome display unique presepi that tell not only the story of the Nativity, but also of Rome’s storied development from the Empire to the Renaissance to the Baroque and to the contemporary era.

**RIGHT**
Santa Maria in Via Presepe, 2013
(Detail of the Inn)

**LEFT**
Piazza Navona
Over the Christmas season Piazza Navona transforms into a presepe market.
Santo Bambino
Wood, 24”
Cappella Del Santissimo Bambino
Basilica di Santa Maria d’Aracoeli

Santo Bambino, said to be carved from the wood of an olive tree found in the Garden of Gethsemane, is ornately dressed in gold and wears a cross both on his crown and necklace. On Christmas Eve the Santo Bambino is paraded to the Presepe Chapel where it remains until Epiphany on January 6. At that time, the statue is taken to the top of the Aracoeli steps for a benediction to the city of Rome, and it is here that Romans come to give Santo Bambino the traditional Epiphany kiss. In the past the statue was believed to be truly miraculous and was brought to the houses of the sick. Stolen in 1994, the present Bambino is a 2002 copy.

(research by Helen Tucceri, ’15)

OPPOSITE
Santa Maria d’Aracoeli Presepe, Christmas Day, 2012
Cappella del Presepio
Basilica di Santa Maria d’Aracoeli, Rome

The life-size Mary and Joseph are attributed to Neapolitan sculptor Giacomo Colombo (b. 1663). The carved shepherds are by Luigi Ceccon, c. 1838. The three-dimensional Gloria in the background, created in 1828 by Franciscan Father Francis Codogno, follows in the tradition of the Baroque Glorias, where painting and sculpture unite. The most famous is Bernini’s 1676 Gloria in the Apse of St. Peter’s.
Tempio di Saturno
Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778)
Etching
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Santa Maria in Via Presepe. 2013 (detail of the Nativity)
The 2013 presepe in Santa Maria in Via includes the traditional Holy Family, lambs, and pipers, but fits them into a vibrant nineteenth-century neighborhood of old Rome, complete with a musket-armed soldier. Because this photo was taken before Christmas, the statue of Jesus hadn’t yet been placed in the manger, as tradition in Italy dictates. In the 1950s artisans began setting presepi in eighteenth and nineteenth Rome rather than ancient Palestine. For this design Enrico Genovese, head of the Santa Maria in Via chapter, drew on Piranesi’s etching, Tempio di Saturno.
Shepherd, 18th century
Polychrome wood, life-size
Basilica di San Francesco a Ripa, Trastevere

OPPOSITE
Chiesa di San Marcello Presepe, 2013,
Rome

The presepe is set on a nineteenth-century Roman street.
Campo Vaccino Presepe, 2012
Piazza Navona, Rome

Each Christmas the Amici del Presepio create a new presepe for Piazza Navona. In 2012 it was designed by Alberto Finizio, who took inspiration from Piranesi’s etching, *Veduta di Campo Vaccino*, 1756.
Presepe Market
Piazza Navona, Rome
Piazza Navona becomes a month-long Christmas market, with stalls from the Fontana del Neptune to the Fontana del Moro selling presepe home décor.
Pantheon, Rome
An ancient Roman temple, it was consecrated
Santa Maria dei Martiri in 609 CE.
Each year a presepe is set up at the base of
the monolithic columns.
100 Presepi Exhibition, 2012
Piazza del Popolo, Rome
Presepe exhibitions occur all over Italy at Christmas. The exhibit at Piazza Popolo is one of the largest, featuring entries from school children as well as accomplished artists. The pasta presepe was contributed by primary school students in Lazio. The modernist design by artist Nicola Calabrese utilizes the tools of a mason.
La Cripta del Peccato Originale
(Crypt of Original Sin)
Located in the Picciano Ravine outside of Matera, the cave is known as the “Sistine Chapel” of rupestrian art. In 2012 the Vatican surrounded its Sassi presepe in San Pietro with high-resolution image transfers of the Cripta’s frescoes. The Cripta’s story of the Fall, which looms over the nativity grotto in the Vatican’s presepe, is on the right.

Used for years by shepherds as a shelter, the Benedictine-Langobard monastic church was only recently re-discovered and opened to the public. Its wall paintings, some dating from as early as the ninth century, are among the finest in the Mediterranean basin. The hillside across the ravine from the Cripta is pockmarked with caves awaiting exploration.