



The Spectacle of the Nativity in Valenti Angelo's Art

Laura E. Ruberto (December 21, 2013)



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The children's book author and illustrator Valenti Angelo highlights Italian American Christmas Celebrations in his works.

Valenti Angelo—author, illustrator, painter—was once asked about the presence of Christmas in so many of his books: “Christmas appears in many of your books as a happy holiday, sometimes as the climax of the story.”

His response:

In some of my books I have found some holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, essential to enhance the spirit of joy and family reunions. I feel that Christmas is an important factor in the yearly rounds of human events. It does have a purifying effect on people, mainly because of a world so infested with consumerism and lack of communion and the spirit of faith. Amen.

I have [blogged about Angelo before](#) [3] and am familiar with his style, especially his emphasis on religious iconography. When pressed on this issue by Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun ([who interviewed him between 1977-1979](#) [4] for the [Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley](#) [5]) he responded:

During my brief period in school in Italy, where children were taught by the Franciscan monks, a considerable amount of religion became a part of my studies. Some of it remains to this day. I would say I am informally a religious man.

This past fall I read a few of his books to my six-year-old daughter. We read [The Marble Fountain](#) [6] (a literary treat set in post-WWII Italy) and [The Bells of Bleecker Street](#) [7] (also a post-WWII story, set on the streets of New York City's Little Italy).



From The Bells of Bleecker Street, Valenti Angelo, 1949

The Bells of Bleecker Street is primarily a Christmas story, centered in part around a marionette performance a group of Italian American children stage retelling the story of the Nativity. Set in 1945, the novel describes Italian American families preparing for the holidays while some expectantly await soldiers' return from overseas. Angelo vividly recounts an era of war while also characterizing a community steeped in religion, craft, labor, and a broad sense of family.



From The Bells of Bleecker Street, Valenti Angelo, 1949

Like many of Angelo's children's novels, creativity and everyday cultural expressions are central in the narrative. Take the character of Professor Dante: one minute Angelo describes him thoughtfully picking a tiny fig from a lonely tree he finds along the Hudson River, the next teaching kids basic musical instrumentation, or building sets for the Christmas -themed puppet show.



From The Bells of Bleecker Street, Valenti Angelo, 1949

The show itself is all Italian American spectacle:

Sprinkled here and there, small electric bulbs sparkled like many-colored stars. A huge four-pointed star hung suspended from the center of the proscenium. Its luminous glow stood sentinel over the smaller lights. Along the walls hung large wreaths, framing bright-colored scenes from the story of the nativity, interlaced with festoons of red and green bunting. (169)

Professor Dante describes the entire scene as “a thing of beauty” (170). (And note the poetic cleverness of Angelo’s emphasis of the star in a work by a character named Dante.) It is a sentiment about the decorative aspect of the sacred echoed by other Valenti Angelo literary characters.

In *The Marble Fountain* a sculpture of Saint Francis is discovered buried in someone’s front yard; unearthing it turns the yard into a sacred space: “Uncle Gigi’s yard had become a place of worship” (pg. 111), and at Easter the children adorn the saint with garlands of cut flowers. Similarly, the young war orphan, Piccolo, takes in his Italian village’s preparation for Christmas this way:

Piccolo marveled at the many Virgin Marys that stood in recessed windowsills. The bakeshop window had in it a scene of the nativity, one of the finest Piccolo had ever seen. (pg. 207)

The grand presepi found in cathedrals and churches—as well as the crèches, from the most humble to the most complex, in people’s homes—all speak in varying ways beyond the religious story they represent. As Joseph Sciorra’s work on Italian American Nativity scenes in New York City teaches us:

the presepio is not a static objet d’art admired solely for its formal aesthetic attributes, but an ephemera assemblage enlivened by narrative and performance in the service of Christian pedagogy, autobiography, and family history. ([Ethnologie française, XLIII, 2013, 1, pg. 109-121](#) [8])

For the last eight years, since my son was three years old he and I, and later along with his younger sister, have built our own Nativity scene each December. It is not done in the name of religious doctrine but instead a cultural tradition, adapted for our family. The children decide on the concept and I help them execute it ([click here to see a slide shot of these presepi](#) [9]).



Although there are abundant references to Christmas in his writing, I have yet to come across a description of a domestic Nativity scene in Angelo's oeuvre. And indeed while my children's notions of their presepi may look nothing like Angelo's woodcuts, they are in the spirit of his own re-imagined Italian American Christmas expressions.

From The Bells of Bleecker Street, Valenti Angelo, 1949

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