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Wax Workshop

New in the Archives

The Wax Workshop

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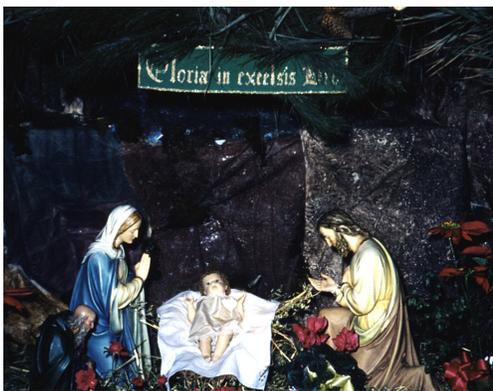
There was a time when each December, in every Sisters of Providence chapel and house, a wax infant Jesus figure would become the central focus of the nativity scene. Over the years, Providence Archives in Seattle has collected nearly 30 of these wax infant Jesus figures of varying sizes.

This issue of *Past Forward* focuses on this unique cottage industry within the religious community. Recent research undertaken by Archives staff reveals the methods that the sisters used, the extent of this enterprise,

and the sheer number of wax infants that were likely created throughout the religious community over the years. This article and a recently installed

exhibit, currently on display in the Providence Archives reference room, showcase several wax infant figures, wax devotional pieces, and artifacts relating to their manufacture.

Nearly as old as the Sisters of Providence community itself, the tradition of creating wax figures of the infant Jesus for nativity scenes dates back to at least 1852, when Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart is said to have created a handmade wax infant Jesus for John Charles Prince, who had just been named as Bishop



This Christmas crèche at Providence Hospital at Oakland, California in the 1950s features a wax figure of the infant Jesus.

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What's New in the Archives?

CONTENTdm New Features

Many of you have been using our online digital content database which we launched in summer 2010. We are pleased to announce that a new version of the software is now available that includes some exciting new features which we hope will make the user experience easier and more enjoyable. Note that the software requires Internet Explorer 8.0 or higher in order for all of the new features to function.

The URL for the database remains the same: <http://providencearchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm>. There are links

to the database on the Archives website and intranet site.

The database has an attractive new look, and users can scroll down the list of collections, each with a representative image. Click on any one of these and you will be brought to that collection's landing page, which includes a carousel of images for a quick look at the contents without executing a search.

While simple and advanced search functions remain similar to the previous version, the new software does a better job of orienting the user to where they are in their search using "bread crumbs," and also allows you to

narrow your search by subject, type of resource or creator. One-click links to popular queries have also been added under "Browse suggested topics" for a quick look at content without having to perform an advanced search.

Once you click on an item, you will notice a more smoothly-functioning viewport which shows the large image and allows you to magnify the image and pan around it just as in Google Maps, and also allows you to view the image in a full browser window. Three resolutions of the image are offered for download, but images are

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of the newly created diocese in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. Between 1848 and 1851 one of Mother Joseph's assigned duties was to craft works in wax. This likely included candles and other pieces, but also probably included making the wax infants. When Mother Joseph came to the West in 1856, she brought with her the skills and some tools she had acquired during her time in Montreal.

The wax workshop continued to develop at the Asile in Montreal. Mother Joseph's younger sister, Sister Martin, was the first directress of the workshop from 1857 to 1865. The tradition of crafting these wax figures by hand continued for over 100 years until the wax workshop closed its doors in

1966. It is impossible to say how many figures were created in this span of time, but in 1952, it was estimated that over 30,000 figures had been crafted and distributed to churches and

components of the process included melting, mixing and attaining the correct color in the wax; using molds to form the wax; adding details like glass eyes, painted facial features,

and actual curled hair; and sewing individual silk or linen outfits and accessories.

The workshop in Montreal produced other figures from wax besides the infant Jesus. Life-sized figures of saints were created for use in shrines and chapels. Another unique project undertaken was a large exhibit featuring life-sized wax figures that depicted the works of the Sisters of Providence over time. The panoramic image below shows the exhibit, which must have been a massive undertaking.

Though on a smaller scale, Sisters of Providence in the West also created their own unique figures. As mentioned

chapels throughout the United States and Canada.

The sisters who worked in the workshop were true artists, each figure they created one-of-a-kind. While the workshop was in operation, the procedure for creating the wax infants remained largely the same. Key



One example of a creche scene as displayed in Montreal. Courtesy of Providence Archives Montreal.



This crucified hand of Christ is one example of another type of waxwork created by the Sisters of Providence. This hand is one of a pair thought to have been displayed at Providence Academy in Vancouver, Wash. Very little information is known about its origins. Do you recognize it?

earlier, Mother Joseph brought the know-how and talent with her when she came West. Records show that she relied on the workshop in Montreal for supplies and advice.

Correspondence between Mother Joseph and her sister, Sister Martin, indicates that the sisters shared a talent of working with wax. They also shared the wax recipes, tips, and supplies. In a letter from 1857, Sister Martin wrote: "I have been looking in vain for the book of recipes for wax figures. If you have it, would you kindly send me a few recipes, for I greatly need them. I received the molds from Mr. Pare, and they are very beautiful. Meanwhile, do not grease your molds for the statues of the Infant Jesus. Do the same as for the fruit."

Mother Joseph was still actively making wax infants as late as 1894. In a letter from Sister Claire of Jesus to her father that year, she wrote: "Our good Mother Joseph is making the

most beautiful wax Infant Jesus. When she has them finished, she brings them to my bed-side for me to see. They are really lovely. I wish the children could

who used her talents to prepare the nativity each year at St. Claire Hospital in Fort Benton, Montana. Three wax infants that are believed to have been

made by her are part of the archives large collection of wax figures. Two of the figures made by Sister Mary Amadee are on display now as part of our latest exhibit titled "The Craft and Tradition of the Wax Infant Jesus."

A majority of the exhibit focuses on the creation of the wax infants, but like the wax workshop in Montreal, other wax figures were molded. One example is a life-sized rendering of Saint Lucien that was placed beneath one of the side altars at Providence Academy.

Smaller pieces like the crucified hand pictured at the left were also created. The exhibit shows a variety of artifacts and photographs from our collections that have been preserved as evidence of this unique Sisters of Providence craft. ☪



Notre kiosque à l'Exposition religieuse du Congrès Marial, Ottawa, juin 1947

Image reproduced from the Little Journal of Providence in 1947 of the exhibit mounted at the Marian Congress in Ottawa, Canada of that same year. The exhibit chronicled the works of the Sisters of Providence over the years using a series of life-sized wax figures that were created at the wax workshop at the Asile in Montreal.



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still watermarked, so you will need to contact Peter Schmid (peter.schmid@providence.org) for a “clean” version of the item.

Users can now share an item with email or to social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter. As in the previous version, you can

always simply request the reference URL which is supplied in a small pop-up window. In addition, tags, comments, and ratings may be added to an item by any user.

There have been some changes to content as well. Previously, images of our artifacts stood as a separate collection. Now, they are integrated with

the ministry they are related to, so if you browse the Providence Academy (Vancouver) collection, you will see artifacts, images, or any other digitized content related to that institution in one place.

We hope you enjoy the new look and features of our digital content database – let us know if you have questions or any suggestions! ☞

Brass Plaques on Artwork

Adorning the walls at St. Joseph Residence, Seattle, and Mount St. Joseph, Spokane, are statues and precious works of art in different media. To fully appreciate the history and beauty of these pieces, brass identification plaques have been made for selected items. The art could be from a ministry, created by a Sister of Providence, or a gift to the religious community to commemorate a special

event, say ‘thank you’, or simply to be enjoyed. When at these residences, explore the halls to learn new community history. And, if you know something about a piece without a plaque, please inform the archives so one can be made. ☞

New Exhibit Now on Display

The most recent archives exhibit features the manufacture of wax figures by the Sisters of Providence in the West. This is now on display in the Archives reference room in West Seattle. Also on display: “15 cows, one steer and one bull”: *The growth and development of the Farm and Dairy at Mary Immaculate School, DeSmet, Idaho* at the Hawley Conference Center at Valley Office Park in Renton; and at Mount St. Joseph in Spokane *The 10th Anniversary of Emilie Gamelin’s Beatification*. ☞

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