

Press release

## Holy Night

### The Christmas Story and Its Imagery

12 October 2016 to 29 January 2017

Press preview: Tuesday, 11 October 2016, 11 am

Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung

(Frankfurt am Main, 1 September 2016) In the autumn and winter of 2016/17, the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung will illuminate one of the most well-known stories of Christian culture: the Christmas story. From 12 October 2016 to 29 January 2017, the comprehensive special exhibition “Holy Night. The Christmas Story and Its Imagery” will devote itself to the manifold events and multifaceted legends revolving around “Christmas Eve” with a focus on their depiction in sculpture, painting, printmaking and other media. It will present altogether some 100 precious objects from more than forty collections in many countries, for example the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the Paris Louvre or the Vatican Museums.

The temporal emphasis will be on the art of the Middle Ages – which will be supplemented, however, by selected Early Christian testimonies and a number of Baroque objects in an impressive demonstration of the surprising diversity of pictorial themes related to the Christmas story. In addition to well-known motifs such as the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Adoration of the Magi, many stories and images that have meanwhile all but fallen into oblivion await the visitor: episodes such as Joseph’s Doubt and the Circumcision or the miracles on the flight into Egypt. And finally, the Liebieghaus has succeeded in obtaining two large multi-figural – and highly significant – crib ensembles from Naples and Tyrol for presentation in the show.

The aim of this major special exhibition is to provide an experience of the Christmas story in its full thematic scope and contribute to a new understanding of the works’ imagery. The show will offer an entertaining, suspenseful, and often surprising look at medieval art – and a story well worth rediscovering.

The exhibition “Holy Night. The Christmas Story and Its Imagery” is being carried out with support from the Georg und Franziska Speyer’sche Hochschulstiftung.

Within the framework of the exhibition, on the third weekend of Advent, the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung will host the first Christmas market ever to take place in the Liebieghaus Garden. Entitled “Weihnachtszauber” (“Christmas Magic”), the market will feature a special Christmas light

display, stalls with select artisan craftwork and culinary specialities as well as a diverse educational and entertainment programme for all age groups.

## **The exhibition**

The exhibition at the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung will open up the entire narrative spectrum of the Christmas story in ten sections, proceeding chronologically from the Annunciation to the Return of the Holy Family from Egypt.

Everyone knows how the Biblical Christmas story begins in the Gospel of Luke: “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” In our consciousness, the text from Luke has become interwoven with motifs from the Gospel according to Matthew in a tale that recounts the events revolving around the birth of Jesus Christ, the son of the Christian god. Yet the Christmas story not only tells of how the divine son comes to the world in the flesh, but also of his adoration by simple shepherds and wise men – later called kings –, of danger, flight and even murder, and finally of a happy return home. Actually, however, the Gospels provide only a minimum of basic information and sketchy allusions, and nothing in the way of vivid narrative details or stringent narrative logic. Already back in ancient Christian times, this circumstance led to writings that – rich in detail and imagery – enhanced and expanded on the sparse information supplied by Luke and Matthew. Above all the so-called Apocrypha (from the ancient Greek *apokryphos*: hidden, dark), texts not recognized as valid by the official Church, were especially widespread. These many writings enriched the Biblical accounts and endowed them with life because they characterized the Biblical protagonists and described the anecdotes and wondrous episodes with a wealth of motifs. Gaps in the Christmas story were thus filled in, and Biblical occurrences and figures concretized in keeping with the need of the faithful for additional information and explanations of the events. This further development of the narrative was reflected throughout the range of pictorial production in Christian art, for example in devotional paintings, altarpieces, manuscript illuminations and stained-glass windows. The pictorial depictions in turn stimulated the believers’ imaginations and emotions and intensified their devotional practice.

Prominent objects in the show will convey the considerable degree to which the sparsely detailed Biblical accounts were already supplemented – in terms of motif and narrative details alike – in Early Christian times and over the course of the Middle Ages. Medieval people, for example, were soon no longer satisfied with the meagre information the Bible gave them about the wise men from the Orient who follow a star that signifies to them that a new king of the Jews has been born. Over time, the three wise magicians became the kings Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar we are familiar with today. Not only in the written tales, but also in the visual arts, the journey of these kings took on ever more detail and ever greater splendour, and interest in the dimensions and accoutrements of their entourage grew substantially. A large panel painting from Klosterneuburg presumably executed in Vienna around 1490 impressively demonstrates this development. Another example is the flight of the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Egypt. The majority of

depictions of this episode are content to concentrate on the core motifs and show Mary and the Christ Child on the donkey accompanied by Joseph. One of the qualitatively most superb artworks of this kind comes from the Dom- und Diözesanmuseum in Trier: a masterful Late Gothic limewood carving that originally belonged to the Welschnonnenkirche (Church of the French Nuns) there. Quite early on, however, wondrous incidents evolved to enhance the story of the Flight into Egypt – lavishly, as compared to the brief Biblical account. Several of these episodes came to enjoy great popularity in pictorial depiction. According to apocryphal accounts, many miracles occur on the journey: from the Miracle of the Wheatfield, thanks to which the Holy Family is able to shake off their pursuers, and the Taming of the Dragons to the Miracles of the Date-Palm and the Spring, with which Jesus helps the family to fruit and water, and the Shattering of the Idols in the Egyptian city of Sotinen when the Child arrives. Depictions of the Miracle of the Date-Palm are the most numerous: a small limewood relief in the Wiener Kunstkammer, for instance, recalls this legendary episode, as does a large-scale woodcut by Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) dated 1509.

Cribs are unrivalled in their ability to illustrate the Christmas-related events of salvation, thanks to their freely arrangeable figures that developed over the course of the sixteenth century into the forms we are well familiar with today. On public display in the churches of the parishes and religious orders, these ensembles – often vast in size and integrated in entire landscapes – were extremely popular. Soon the nobility discovered the crib as a prestigious religious collector's item. Finally, in the latter part of the eighteenth century – that is, in the context of the Enlightenment – they were banned (temporarily) from churches in our part of the world and made their way into the households of the bourgeoisie, where their nineteenth and twentieth-century success story began. Two large-scale multi-figural crib ensembles from Naples and Tyrol will bring the exhibition to a striking atmospheric close.

The “digitorial”, a free digital educational format, offers interested visitors a means of acquainting themselves with the exhibition contents before their visit to the museum. The digitorial on the exhibition “Holy Night. The Christmas Story and Its Imagery” will be available at [heiligenacht.liebieghaus.de](http://heiligenacht.liebieghaus.de) starting 24 September 2016.

### **The Christmas market during the exhibition**

On the occasion of the exhibition “Holy Night”, the Liebieghaus will host the “Weihnachtszauber” (“Christmas Magic”) market for the first time: on the third weekend of Advent, the Liebieghaus Garden will transform into an amazing sea of Christmas lights that will lure visitors to come and browse. The decorated stalls will offer select artisanal craftwork and culinary specialities. For children and adults alike, there will be a diverse accompanying programme designed especially for the exhibition, with creative workshops, a “real” St Nick, a Christmas puppet theatre, a reading for families and many other surprises. “Weihnachtszauber” will open on Thursday afternoon, 8 December 2016 with a concert for wind instruments, and go until Sunday, 11 December 2016.

## **Holy Night. The Christmas Story and Its Imagery**

**Exhibition dates:** 12 October 2016 to 29 January 2017

**Press preview:** Tuesday, 11 October 2016, 11 am

**Curator:** Dr Stefan Roller (Head of the Medieval Department, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung)

**Guided tour service and information:** [www.liebieghaus.de](http://www.liebieghaus.de), [info@liebieghaus.de](mailto:info@liebieghaus.de),  
[buchungen@liebieghaus.de](mailto:buchungen@liebieghaus.de), telephone: +49(0)69-605098-200, fax: +49(0)69-605098-112

**Questions and suggestions:** +49(0)69-605098-232

**Location:** Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Schaumainkai 71, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

**Opening hours:** Tue, Wed, Fri–Sun 10 am – 6 pm, Thu 10 am – 9 pm, closed Mondays

**Special opening hours:** Sat, 24 Dec. 2016 closed; Sun, 25 Dec. and Mon, 26 Dec. 2016, 10 am – 6 pm;

Sat, 31 Dec. 2016, closed; Sun, 1 Jan. 2017, 11 am – 6 pm; Mon, 2 Jan. 2017, 10 am – 6 pm

**Admission:** 10 euros, reduced 8 euros, family ticket 18 euros, admission free for children to the age of 12

**Advance ticket sales:** [tickets.liebieghaus.de](http://tickets.liebieghaus.de)

**Accompanying programme:** “Weihnachtszauber” / “Christmas Magic” Christmas market: Thu, 8 Dec. 2016 (afternoon), to Sun, 11 Dec. 2016

Christmas reading with Michael Quast: Fri, 16 Dec. 2016, 7 pm, doors open at 6:30 pm, Städel Museum, online advance ticket sale price: 10 euros

For further information and programme, see [www.liebieghaus.de](http://www.liebieghaus.de)

**Catalogue:** The exhibition will be accompanied by an extensive catalogue published by the Hirmer Verlag, edited by Stefan Roller, with contributions by Stefan Roller and Fabian Wolf. German, 280 pages, museum edition 34.90 euros

**Audio guide:** An audio guide in German will be available. The price for one audio guide is 4 euros, for two audio guides 7 euros. An audio guide in German designed especially for children will be available free of charge.

**Public guided tours of the exhibition:** Thu 6:30 pm, Sat 4 pm, Sun 3 pm, Mon, 26 Dec. 2016 4 pm.  
Fee: 4 euros per person

**Digitorial:** The digitorial is being made possible by the Aventis Foundation. Available for downloading free of charge starting 24 Sep. 2016 at [heiligenacht.liebieghaus.de](http://heiligenacht.liebieghaus.de)

**Social Media:** The Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung is communicating the exhibition on the social media with the hashtags #HeiligeNacht and #Liebieghaus.

**With support from:** Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung

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