

## Szopki

A long-time tradition in Poland during the Christmas season is the building of "Szopki", which are elaborate form of the Nativity scene. This tradition started back in the 13th century in Krakow, Poland, and remains an annual tradition



whereas major prizes are awarded for the most elaborately decorated and designed Szopki.

This is a miniature version of a Christmas Szopka. The Cracovian crèches sometimes reach six feet in height. Their construction is based on elements of Krakow's historic architecture including Gothic spires, Renaissance facades and Baroque-topped domes.

These are often translated as cribs, but the classic Cracovian szopka looks more like the kind of colored castle that you find in a Polish fairy tale. Nevertheless, the artists draw on distinctly local features for their inspiration - the towers of St. Mary's Church, the Barbican, Wawel Cathedral - all these are recurrent motifs.

In the olden days, nativity scenes provided a pleasant way of making a bit of extra cash for masons. When snow stalled construction projects, craftsmen would sell szopki to well-to-do Cracovian households. In more recent times, an annual competition was instated, partly as a means of keeping the tradition alive. This entered its 65<sup>th</sup> year in 2007.

The contest begins every year on the first Thursday of December, when the entrants (including everyone from youngsters to jovial old grandpas) bring their creations to the Mickiewicz statue on the Market Square. At midday, the bugle cry announces that the scenes should be whisked away to the Historical Museum, where judges will decide on the winner. The following weekend the winners are announced and the year's pickings are put on display.

Whilst in the past, szopki were often made of wood, a colored-foil finish has become the norm nowadays. On a bad example this can appear decidedly garish, but the better szopki are fantastic even if for their ingenuity alone. A decent szopka can take more than 600 hours to construct, and they're full of idiosyncratic details - some humorous and others straight from the heart.