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Pietro Lombardi ▼

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## For One Prized Italian Tradition, Covid-19 Deals Heartbreaking Blow

Artisans clustered along a Naples street have been crafting Nativity scenes for more than a century. But coronavirus restrictions and a dearth of tourists are threatening their survival.

Pandemic-control measures have heavily dented peak sales season on Via San Gregorio Armeno, the Naples street celebrated for its Nativity scenes. REUTERS/CIRO DE LUCA

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By *Pietro Lombardi*

Dec. 12, 2020 5:35 am ET



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NAPLES—For generations, the Christmas season has brought throngs of visitors to Via San Gregorio Armeno, a historic street in the heart of Naples where artisans have made the city’s famous handcrafted Nativity scenes since the 1800s.

In the run-up to the holiday, the narrow street usually becomes a kaleidoscope of colors, languages and elaborate figurines that mix religious references with modern-day touches



This year, Via San Gregorio Armeno is largely deserted, with just a trickle of shoppers browsing the scores of stalls.

“It’s heartbreaking to see the street in this condition,” said Lidia Zito, a longtime Neapolitan resident, as she walked by a shuttered store.

Naples’s rich tradition of making Nativity scenes risks falling victim to a pandemic that has dealt [an especially brutal blow to Italy’s artisan class](#) and its vast network of family-run shops, some of which have been handed down for generations and are now fighting to survive.



Sales in some of the artisans’ shops are down more than 70% this year.  
PHOTO: NAPOLIPRESS/ZUMA PRESS

Even among the ranks of Italian handcrafted goods, Neapolitan Nativity scenes have pride of place.

In the 18th century, wealthy Neapolitans commissioned artists to make the scenes, where religious figures made of clay, wood or stone were hand painted and dressed in fine fabrics. They were often set in 18th-century Naples. Today, some sets count dozens of figures and cost thousands of euros.

For many Neapolitans, the Nativity scene, or *presepe* in Italian, is more the symbol of Christmas than a tree.

The Nativity scene depicts “a miniature utopia, a city that is at peace with itself,” said Marino Niola, an anthropologist at Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples. “It is at the core of the Neapolitan idea of Christmas.”

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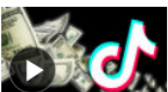

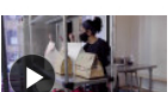
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*Will independent artists be able to withstand the economic pressures of the pandemic? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.*

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The pandemic, which has [hit Naples particularly hard this fall](#), has stretched into the two months—November and December—that account for roughly 70% of sales for most

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artisans. In mid-November, authorities ordered all nonessential shops in the region to close, including the artisans' stalls, and they only reopened last weekend.

"We're running on fumes, and I don't know for how long we'll be able to hang on," said Michele Buonincontro, a craftsman who runs a workshop on Via San Gregorio Armeno.

Many fear the pandemic could kill off this centuries-old tradition or leave enduring scars. Many Italian small businesses lack the financial buffers to see them through hard times.

"The risk that some historic shops may not survive is real," said Gabriele Casillo, the president of an association representing more than three dozen businesses on the street.

Shops across Naples sell Nativity scenes, but this narrow street is a key piece of the city's identity. Thanks to its ability to attract tourists from all over the world, it supports a range of businesses.

"If San Gregorio dies, many other businesses in this area will die," said Andrea Penta, who runs a pizzeria on the street.



A figurine of President-elect Joe Biden gives a topical twist to this scene in the workshop of Genny Di Virgilio.

PHOTO: CIRO FUSCO/SHUTTERSTOCK

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A vertical advertisement banner for WSJ+. The background is a light purple color. At the top, the text "WSJ+" is written in a large, bold, black font. Below it, the text "Don't Miss Exclusive Experiences Anytime, Anywhere" is written in a smaller, black font. In the center, there is a line drawing of a skier in a dynamic pose, wearing a helmet and goggles. At the bottom, there is a dark blue button with the text "EXPLORE MORE" in white. A small "X" icon is in the top right corner of the banner.





Masked statuettes have proliferated since the coronavirus took hold in Italy earlier this year.

PHOTO: CIRO DE LUCA/REUTERS

The tradition went through a rough patch in the 1970s and 1980s, according to Mr. Niola, but was able to reinvent itself by adding pop-culture figures to the Nativity scenes.

Diego Maradona, the Argentine soccer star revered for his time playing for the city's team in the 1980s, was among the first modern-day figures to be represented. (Since [his death last month](#), artisans have made new figurines of him, bearing wings.)

Over time, the contingent of soccer players, politicians and celebrities displayed on the street has grown steadily.

U.S. presidents have been among the most popular pieces in recent years, said Genny Di Virgilio, whose showroom already features President-elect [Joe Biden](#). Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is another favorite among customers.



“Mamma mia! We have sold countless Berlusconis,” Mr. Di Virgilio said as he sat at a desk covered with winged Maradona figurines.

New additions usually emerge from national and international events. When the pandemic swept through northern Italy early this year, masked statuettes denoting both



Figurines of Diego Maradona, a star of the city's soccer team in the 1980s, have taken on new significance since his recent death.

PHOTO: NAPOLIPRESS/ZUMA PRESS

statuettes, depicting both religious figures and front-line workers, began populating the street. When Vincenzo De Luca, governor of the Campania region that is home to Naples, [threatened to send police with flamethrowers](#) to break up rogue parties, statuettes of Mr. De Luca armed with a flamethrower quickly ensued.

Now, with sales in some shops down more than 70% this year, many jobs are on the line.

Mr. Casillo estimates that an average workshop directly supports four or five families, in addition to a supplier network. High-end statuettes can involve the work of up to a dozen people, according to artisan Marco Ferrigno.

Smaller shops like Mr. Buonincontro's are the most affected. Its annual turnover of around \$50,000 is enough to pay costs and sustain the family.

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"Making half as much this year would be a miracle," he said. And with costs approaching \$30,000, the artisan is burning through his reserves.

Even bigger names that can count on a strong brand and a larger base of existing customers haven't been spared. With sales down 75%, Mr. Ferrigno, who runs one of the most famous workshops, had to

furlough two of his four employees.

"If the situation doesn't improve, I'll have to cut some jobs," he said from a workshop adorned with pictures of popes, celebrities and soccer players holding clay versions of themselves.

Many artisans have tried to boost online sales, but with limited results.

People want to see the products, touch and compare them while wandering through the shops in a festive atmosphere, Mr. Ferrigno said.

"They want to live the experience of San Gregorio Armeno," he said. "E-commerce can't give that."

The artisans have asked authorities for support such as state grants or suspension of some taxes. After reopening, they are talking with local officials about a way to guarantee safe access to the area. The plan may include checkpoints to limit the number of visitors or a booking system to reserve entry in advance.

By making people feel safe, they hope to save at least December, which is now more important than ever, Mr. Buonincontro said.

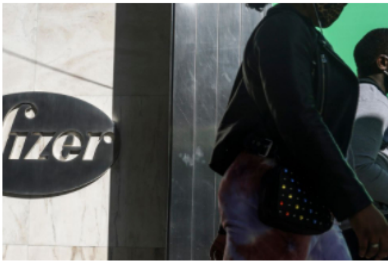
“I’m an optimist, and I want to believe that we’ll overcome this moment of crisis. However, even an optimist has to come to terms with reality,” he said.

“The coming months will be tough. Really tough.”

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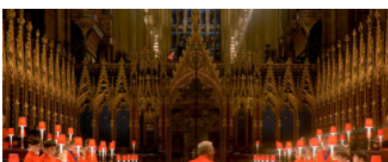
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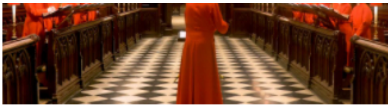


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