The first creche in James Govan's now-extensive collection was a sentimental purchase, bought in the early 1960s in his wife's native Italy shortly after the two married.

During the next few decades, Govan, who worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development, and his wife, Emilia, continued to purchase Nativity scenes while on vacation and traveling for business. Eventually the couple's collection would number more than 500.

After Emilia's death in 2000, Govan began to wonder what he would do with all of their beloved purchases until a propitious meeting with Pamela Ambrose, director of cultural affairs for Chicago's Loyola University Museum of Art.

As a result of that encounter, Loyola's art museum started putting some 100 of the three-dimensional creches on display for the holiday season. Now in its fourth year, "Art and Faith of the Creche" brings back a few favorites along with ones that have never been displayed before in Chicago.
"The creche tells a Christian story of a husband and wife who are facing adversity," Ambrose said. "They are on a journey, a child is on the way and they are without shelter. But I think it has a great appeal for people of all faiths."

The handcrafted creches come from more than 75 countries throughout the world, ranging from Argentina to Zimbabwe. Though the story remains the same and Mary, Joseph and Jesus are always present, the artists and artisans portray the event in a wide variety of styles.

In an Italian creche from 2005, a multitude of realistic-looking characters including dancers, musicians and villagers joins in a celebration of the Holy Family while Pope John Paul II watches over the festivities. Others are more abstract. A creche from Iceland consists of simplistic carved wooden shapes nestled together like pieces in a toddler's puzzle.

But the creches are also diverse in other ways. The artists often create their works out of simple, local materials. The members of the Holy Family in a Belarus creche are woven out of straw. In a creche from Tennessee, they are similar to locally made corn-husk dolls. The slender figures in a creche from Tonga are made out of wire and banana leaves.

The creches also are inspired by the country and the culture where they are made in other ways. The artists dress the figures in traditional clothing, ranging from sarongs to fur hats. Mangers are inspired by the local architecture, such as a tentlike yurt for a Mongolian creche. Gifts for the infant Jesus often represent objects that are of value in different parts of the world. In an Argentine creche, Jesus is given a blanket, a sheep and a large vase, while the Magi in a scene from Tonga offer pearls.

Domestic animals are often part of the scene, but in a dazzling Zimbabwe creche, created with minuscule, colorful, glistening glass beads, the Holy Family is visited by a hippo, a rhino, a zebra, a pink flamingo and other creatures of the wild.

During the holiday season the art museum is also presenting "The Hanukkah Lamp: Modernist Style and the Jewish Experience," a display of more than 70 lamps made between the 1930s and 1950s.

"The lamps were made by artists who were among the refugees coming out of Eastern Europe after World War II to what was then the British mandate Palestine," Ambrose said.

Both the creches and the Hanukkah lamps celebrate holidays that fall during the darkest days of the year.

"If all of the Hanukkah lamps were lit here we would have a beautiful light coming out of the gallery, which is metaphorical light for the world," Ambrose said, "and the creches bring a different kind of light, a light to the human spirit."