

# **XXII Congreso Internacional Un-Foe-Prae LXI Congreso Nacional Belenista**

**English  
version**



# Congress poster



It is well known that this XXII International Nativity Scene Congress and LXI National Congress are dedicated to commemorating the 800th anniversary of the first representation of San Francisco de Asís in the town of Greccio. Francisco was a man of great austerity, needing very little to live and be happy: "I need few things, and the few I need, I need them little." And in this way, it is portrayed in the poster we present. With a minimalist approach and few aesthetic elements, a significant message is conveyed.

The poster is divided into three main parts: on one side, the symbolism of the combination of San Francisco and the Nativity Scene, represented by the tau letter and the shooting star. On the other hand, the importance of the number 5 in this congress, as it will be held in 5 cities: Seville, Jerez, San Fernando, Mollina, and Córdoba. Five are also the continents of the world, giving an international character to the mentioned congresses. Likewise, there are 5 stigmata that San Francisco de Asís received in his two hands, two feet, and his side, just like Jesus Christ. That's why 5 colors were chosen to represent each city, forming the tau letter on one side and a pentagon made up of triangles that, when inverted, might remind us of a minimalist portal house, symbolizing the unity of these cities with a single purpose, the Nativity Scene.

What are these 5 colors and why these and not others? It all stems from an idea that Francisco Javier Álvarez Atarés, the creator and author of the congress logo, had. The idea was to use the Pantone color of the year to modify the logo's stripe as the years of the congress added up, until reaching 2023, where destiny would choose the final color for the congress. The first color chosen was the Pantone color of the year for 2019, "Living Coral," which represents the city of Seville. The color of the year 2020 was "Classic Blue," representing the city of Jerez de la Frontera. In 2021, something unusual happened, allowing for a total of 5 colors up to the moment of creating the poster. That year, instead of a single color, there were two Pantone colors of the year. "Illuminating Yellow" represented San Fernando, and "Ultimate Gray" represented Mollina. Finally, the last but not least important color, Pantone 2022, corresponding to the city of Córdoba, is "Very Peri," a vibrant and fun color that will surely represent the optional day spent with the people of Córdoba perfectly.

Finally, regarding the typography used, it is seen once again, just like in the logo, a more casual writing style, almost bordering on naïve. The poster and its motto seem to be crafted by a child, and that's not a mistake. José Ángel García, the author of the poster, wanted to bring out the child within all of us to live and enjoy the congress as if we were experiencing it for the first time, allowing ourselves to be surprised by what we might experience in this congress. This is how those who were fortunate enough to admire the first Nativity Scene in history back in 1223 must have felt. They probably enjoyed a unique moment filled with good feelings and positive emotions, all centered around the Baby Jesus.

As for some interesting details on the poster, there are several. If you look closely at the colors that make up the tau letter, you can see the initial letters of the cities hosting the congress. To add a more saintly character to the Franciscus 1223-2023 motto, an old golden frame in traditional style has been included, blending the new with the old and the classic. In addition to this frame, the original poster opens up to a new frame where you can see the word "belén" (Nativity Scene) and above it, the word "belenismo" (Nativity Scene artistry). On either side of this, you can see the congress motto in the colors of the congress cities. Below it, there is a multiple superimposition of the word "belén" in the official languages of the congress. As an interesting fact, each city has its own poster, in which the same concept is represented, but with the particular color for the tau letter specific to each city.



# Tradition and Passionate Dedication in Andalusian Nativity Scenes

12-13

Andalusia is a land that passionately celebrates its customs and festivals, welcoming visitors with sincere and overflowing enthusiasm. It opens its doors wide to showcase its culture and the values of a visible coexistence on its streets. It shares a sense of joy, innate in its inhabitants, and evident hope in a joyful present and an ever more positive future, all while holding onto its rich historical past, the millennial foundation of the Andalusian character.

The dedication to nativity scenes is deeply rooted in the society of this unique region. From the early learning in family homes, following the footsteps of parents and grandparents, to the voluntary participation in associations and groups of friends who share a love for nativity scenes, the reproduction of the Nativity of the Child Jesus is inherent in many households and public institutions during the Christmas season. As a result, the mentioned associations that span the entire Andalusian territory have grown substantially in recent decades. They ensure the preservation of the nativity scene tradition and serve as an ideal means of education for those who increasingly seek the knowledge needed to create the admirable displays we can see in private homes and collective organizations every Christmas.

Due to the strength of the nativity scene association movement, the Andalusian Nativity Scene Federation was founded in 2011. Initially, it included associations from Sevilla, "La Roldana" in Sevilla, "El Redentor" in San Fernando (Cádiz), "San Lucas" in Sanlúcar de Barrameda (Cádiz), "Camino de Belén" in Rota (Cádiz), "Ángel Martínez" in El Puerto de Santa María (Cádiz), "El Templo" in La Palma del Condado (Huelva), and "Oro, incienso y mirra" in Algeciras (Cádiz). Subsequently, other associations, including those from Vélez-Málaga (Málaga), "Caepionis" in Chipiona (Cádiz), "Cultural Belenista de Córdoba," Lebrija (Sevilla), Marbella (Málaga), "El Nacimiento" in Écija (Sevilla), "La Alcazaba" in Málaga, "Fundación Díaz Caballero" in Mollina (Málaga), "El Nacimiento" in Utrera (Sevilla), "María Auxiliadora" in Chiclana de la Frontera (Cádiz), "La Adoración" in Arcos de la Frontera (Cádiz), "Gaditana de Belenistas" in Cádiz, "Amigos del Belén" in Granada, "Amigos del Belén" in Vera (Almería), "La Fortaleza" in Vélez-Málaga (Málaga), and "Ángel Carlier" in Puerto Real (Cádiz), have joined the federation. Currently, it constitutes a thriving group that coordinates and projects the experiences and orientations among the participating members throughout Andalusia, representing the vibrant nativity scene culture of this distinct part of our country.

Andalusian nativity scene enthusiasts do not differ significantly from the rest of those who devote their time and leisure to keeping this age-old tradition alive. In each campaign, they incorporate new elements and techniques that bring them closer to the historical and geographical context, artistic representation of the places where the most important event for humanity occurred, or the identification of this event with local customs. While we are not very different, there are unique connotations based on our way of analyzing and experiencing everyday life, our boisterous and open society, and our inseparable religious perspective, as we are fully aware that we are displaying to others, those who are amazed by the perfection of our nativity scenes, whether simple or monumental, a reminder of the Birth of Jesus, the Son of God, God Himself, who becomes a man for our salvation, and does so from the womb of Mary, to whom Andalusians profess exceptional devotion. This can be seen through the numerous shrines and places of worship that abound throughout our region. This inseparable connection with popular religiosity is evident through the majority of nativity scene enthusiasts belonging to the brotherhoods in their localities, with permanent ties to them, whether through family tradition or personal choice. They often hold responsibilities in their management, following in the footsteps of their predecessors or making independent decisions. As an example, in the province of Sevilla alone, there are nearly 600 brotherhoods within the Archdiocese.



Precisely in the headquarters of these brotherhoods, in their churches, chapels, and brotherhood houses, nativity scenes are usually set up. These serve as true training grounds for younger generations and are an ideal opportunity to ensure the continuity of nativity scenes in Andalusia.

In this XXII International Congress, which takes place in various Andalusian localities, in a year filled with hope, now that we have almost entirely overcome the devastating pandemic, we want to show all those who have chosen to participate in this gathering, welcoming several hundred congress attendees from various countries, how passionately we, the people of Andalusia, embrace nativity scenes. We strive to continue what we have often inherited from our elders and to convey our intentions to the thousands of visitors to our ephemeral yet extraordinary Christmas displays. We aim to integrate ourselves into a society that may now, more than ever, require such expressions to avoid sidelining or minimizing our beliefs. We use this captivating "hobby" to openly and publicly proclaim our firm conviction in the reality of a Birth that forever changed humanity. In these days of intense activity and mobility across the various venues hosting the congress, we also want everyone to personally experience the immense and varied cultural richness of Andalusian towns, their customs, habits, festivals, exquisite and diverse cuisine, monumental heritage, and everything that makes this region a unique environment, a welcoming society shaped by the successive cultures that have influenced us throughout the centuries, shaping the contemporary Andalusian identity. In essence, we want all those who are our guests during these congress days to feel warmly welcomed, to fully enjoy their unforgettable stay in Andalusia, and to return to their places of origin, deeply moved and absorbed by what they have seen and experienced, by the emotions they have felt, as has happened in past National Congresses.

Furthermore, the presentations, possible debates, and interventions in the scheduled forums, the exchange of knowledge and perspectives on nativity scenes that unite and connect us, the multiple opportunities for sharing experiences and future proposals will complement the content of an International Congress for which the organizers have invested all their enthusiasm, effort, and necessary work, with the hope that it will be a resounding success, particularly through the warm reception and satisfaction of the congress attendees, who are the true protagonists of this exceptional event.

You are all welcome. PEACE AND GOOD.

**Juan José Morillas Rodríguez-Caso**

*Honorary President of the Nativity Scene Association of Seville*



Seville hosts the celebration of the XXII International Congress of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts "Franciscus 1223-2023," which commemorates the 800 years since the first Nativity scene was set up by Saint Francis of Assisi in the cave of Greccio. The capital city of Seville, along with other collaborating Andalusian venues, opens its doors to welcome hundreds of congress attendees from various countries. They come together to share knowledge and experiences in the ephemeral art of Christmas scenes, which occupies the leisure time of those who are passionately dedicated to this art and constitutes a true passion in their lives. It is also an exceptional opportunity to get to know the customs, art, and feelings of the cities to be visited, where nativity scene craftsmanship has been deeply rooted for decades and is closely associated with the Advent season, the Nativity, and the Epiphany.

A warm and fraternal welcome to all participants in our city, the deeply Marian city of Seville, as indicated in its coat of arms. I wish that these days of camaraderie will be fruitful, with the fulfillment of the extensive program planned by the organizers, leaving an indelible and pleasant memory of these days of companionship and enrichment for all those dedicated to this captivating hobby.

Seville, and the entire region of Andalusia, is a land of profound and heartfelt popular religiosity, which is also evident in the artistic and commendable constructions that replicate the setting of the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ every year. This serves as an ideal teaching tool for the young and identification with the faith passed down and lived by our elders. For all these reasons, I welcome you and extend my blessing, which I will personally impart during the solemn Eucharist that we will celebrate on November 4th in the Holy Cathedral.

**José Ángel Saiz Maneses**  
*Archbishop of Seville*



This year holds extraordinary significance for the nativity scene community as we commemorate the enduring legacy left by Saint Francis of Assisi eight centuries ago. In 1223, this saint recreated the atmosphere of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem within a cave in Greccio, marking the beginning of a tradition that unites us as a large family.

The celebration of the 800th anniversary of the first nativity scene offers us a unique opportunity to live and share our love for nativity scenes. It's a chance to reflect on the cultural, historical, artistic, and heritage importance of this practice and to pay tribute to all nativity scene enthusiasts who have tirelessly contributed to the creation and promotion of nativity scenes worldwide. It also allows us to celebrate the diversity of nativity scenes and explore their various expressions over time.

Under the theme "Franciscus 1223-2023," we will celebrate this milestone in the beautiful Andalusian lands during the 61st National Nativity Scene Congress and the 12th International Un-Foe-Prae Congress. The selection of Sevilla, Jerez, Córdoba, San Fernando, and Molina as the host cities for this prestigious event is a recognition granted by the national entities associated with Un-Foe-Prae.

In 2017, the Spanish Nativity Scene Federation, the Catalan Nativity Scene Federation, the Barcelona Nativity Scene Association, and the Guipúzkoa Nativity Scene Association joined forces to present Spain's candidacy to Un-Foe-Prae, ensuring that our country would host this truly international congress. Over 16 countries come together at this event to celebrate and enrich the tradition of nativity scenes.

In this special year, let us continue to progress together towards a future that encompasses the practice, creativity, renewal, and preservation of our heritage. May this anniversary always keep us aware of our responsibility and commitment to preserve and promote nativity scenes. Let us continue to write the living history of this beautiful tradition together, leaving an enduring mark on the historical fabric of humanity.

From these lines, I extend a warm greeting to all the individuals who have made this gathering possible, to those actively participating during the congress, and to all those who will accompany us in some way.

***Maria Antonia Martorell Poveda***

*President Federación Española de Belenistas*



We are currently immersed in the XXII FRANCISCUS 2023 CONGRESS. First of all, we would like to express our gratitude to the four entities representing Un-Foe-Prae in Spain, Associació Pessebristes de Barcelona, Asociación Belenista de Guipuzcoa, Federació Catalana de Pessebristes, and Federación Española de Belenistas, for their dedication to organizing this congress. We would also like to thank the organizations that executed it on their behalf, namely, Asociación Belenistas de Sevilla and the sub-venues in Jerez, Córdoba, San Fernando, and Mollina. We are grateful to all of them for their efforts in organizing an event of such magnitude.

This is the 22nd CONGRESS organized since the distant one in Barcelona in 1952. More than 70 years have passed since the inception of Un-Foe-Prae, and the evolution of society has led us to a point where Nativity Scene Art faces significant challenges, arguably the most important challenges of recent times. On the one hand, we are celebrating the 800th anniversary of the first Nativity scene created in a cave in Greccio by Saint Francis of Assisi. On the other hand, Austria, Slovenia, and Spain have declared Nativity Scene Art as intangible cultural heritage in their countries, with other countries following suit in the coming months. Furthermore, Un-Foe-Prae is working on a joint submission for recognition by UNESCO.

800 years of the first Nativity scene. It's essential to see how different associations/federations contribute to keeping the Nativity scene tradition alive, organizing courses and various activities. Year after year, these organizations astonish us with true works of art that fill towns and cities. These groups are the ones who preserve the cultural and artistic diversity of the Nativity scene tradition worldwide.

In each congress, Un-Foe-Prae distinguishes these entities/people with a medal for their work in promoting Nativity Scene Art at the international level. My congratulations to the 5 individuals recognized in this congress.

What about the future of Nativity Scene Art? Will its form of expression change? Will there be other forms of expression coexisting with the traditional ones? Will there be a technological revolution? Will there be a form of expression that surpasses dioramas?

We must all contribute to answering these questions because we are all participants in this great passion that unites us, and we will continue to write the history of Nativity Scene Art as a collective decision. Let us continue working intensively.

Thank you to all of you who are participating in this congress.

**Albert Català Pou**  
President Un-Foe-Prae





**The sounds  
of the night**



# A cry breaks the night

It is night. Young and old, adults and children; women and men throughout the centuries have suffered and yearned for a better life. The entire world groans, even now, and suffers as if in the pains of childbirth. The people await the liberator who will end all injustice and all forms of slavery. In the night, you can hear the cries of those who suffer but have not lost hope. The prophecy of Micah continues to resonate among the oppressed people: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son." But the line of Jesse remains dry, even though the small flame of hope that a shoot will spring forth from the family of David has always maintained a faint glimmer. It is night. It is cold in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph shiver in the silence and darkness. The bleating of a sheep can be heard, and the faint light barely illuminates the ox and the mule that keep them company and provide a little warmth. They also wait in silence, frightened as the moment of birth approaches. Only a barely audible moan escapes from Mary's lips while Joseph sighs, not quite sure what to do. Finally, around midnight, a cry full of life joins the silence. A full cry that inspires hope; the cry of the Child who has been given to us, the Child who has finally been born, filling creation with new hope.

Mary smiles, tired, and Joseph looks at the long-awaited one of all the people with tenderness, the glory of humanity that suffers and weeps but never loses hope. Even those who find no reason to hope today see a new star in the sky, opening up new paths to liberation. In Bethlehem of Judah, the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord has been born. The angels join their singing to the joy of the shepherds; the Magi set out on a journey, the journey that humanity will take to the manger. Hope has become a reality, a new shoot springs forth from the line of Jesse.

It is night. It has been 1,223 years since that night when a cry broke the night in Bethlehem. Francis, the "little poor man of Assisi," has known the poverty of Bethlehem. And upon returning to Italy, among his friars, he wanted to reenact the mystery of that Bethlehem night in Greccio. He wanted to make the entire suffering humanity present in that cave, and a God who, as a Child, wants to infuse women and men with infinite tenderness and profound love. And, in that small place in Rieti, a cry once again breaks the night. The Child once again fills the earth with the hope of the vigor of a cry filled with hope and the future. God fills a cave with warmth and light where, in appearance, nothing has happened. But there, among the straw and the smell of animals, where the rich attire of the nobility mingles with the worn habits of the first Franciscans, where nobility and the common people come together to celebrate the Christmas Eve Mass, there, God embraces humanity once again. It is night, and 800 years have passed since Francis of Assisi relived the mystery of the Nativity. Since then, on millions and millions of occasions, the Nativity scene has been made present to remind humanity of the great news it has received: God is not a God who abandons and neglects His children. Millions of Nativity scene enthusiasts, over eight centuries of history, have followed Francis's intuition and wanted to contribute their art, greater or lesser, to visually represent this profound mystery. They remind those who stand before the Nativity that God's tenderness continues to be present. Women and men, all of humanity, continue to cry and call for justice, solidarity, fraternity, freedom, and peace. People who suffer need a word of hope. Our earth cries out for this new shoot that will make a new humanity possible. And there, amid the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anguishes of the people of our time, especially the poor and the suffering, a Nativity scene enthusiast makes God's tenderness present in the Child of the manger. The Nativity scene family, encouraged by the example of St. Francis, wants to make the cry of suffering humanity present every year in its Nativity scenes, once again breaking the night with the hopeful cry of the God who became a Child.



It will be night. Unfortunately, it is very likely that men and women will continue to cry. It will be night, and humanity will remain deaf to the cry of the Child, to the roar of wars and hunger, to pain and suffering, to exploitation and death. It will be night, and we will continue to wait for the shoot of Jesse to bloom in a thousand colorful flowers. And, in the meantime, Nativity scene enthusiasts from around the world will continue to set up the cribs, hoping that, this year, the cry of the Child will truly break the night.

**Peace and Goodness**  
**Gloria et Pax**

***Alfonso Ruiz de Arcaute***  
*Federación Española de Belenistas*



# In that cave of Greccio

## THE EXPERIENCE OF ST. FRANCIS OF ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT OF 1223

The most remote origin of nativity scene representations or enactments can be traced back to the liturgical context of the Christmas Eve service organized by St. Francis of Assisi in one of the caves in the Italian town of Greccio, in the Rieti Valley. St. Francis, deeply influenced by his strong spiritual experience during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1220, and also profoundly moved by the beauty of the mosaics in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, which depicted the birth of the Messiah and were located near the place where, according to ancient tradition, the wood of the Bethlehem manger preserved by St. Jerome in Rome was displayed. St. Francis had recently seen these mosaics during his visit to Rome in connection with the audience granted by Pope Honorius III for the confirmation of the Rule of the Friars Minor on November 29, 1223.

Influenced by these experiences and while returning from Rome, St. Francis, while passing through the Rieti Valley, decided to stop in the town of Greccio. The caves and grottoes in this area evoked the landscape of the Holy Land for him. It was during this visit that St. Francis was inspired to give a tangible and artistic expression to the Incarnation of God by representing the birth of Jesus in one of the caves of Greccio within the context of a Eucharistic celebration, as Christ is born in every Eucharist.

The Franciscan sources provide detailed accounts of what happened on Christmas night in Greccio in 1223, and they describe the event as the world's first "living" nativity scene. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of St. Francis, explains that fifteen days before Christmas, St. Francis called upon a local man named John and asked for his assistance in fulfilling a special request:

"I wish to celebrate the memory of the Child who was born in Bethlehem and somehow see with my own eyes the infant's suffering, how He was placed in the manger, and how He was laid on hay between the ox and the donkey" (Vita Prima, 84-86).

Without delay, a good and faithful man living in the Rieti Valley, named John Velita, meticulously prepared everything in the place indicated by the saint. Throughout December 24, 1223, Christmas Eve, some Franciscan friars from various communities and local men and women from the nearby farms came to Greccio, carrying torches to illuminate the holy night. When St. Francis arrived, he found the nativity scene already prepared with straw and hay, the ox and the donkey. Those who came to the celebration, in the presence of the first living nativity scene, expressed indescribable joy as had never been experienced before.

The priest solemnly celebrated the Christmas Eve Mass as the most beautiful expression of the connection between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. During the ceremony, St. Francis served as a deacon since he had taken care to obtain ecclesiastical permission for the celebration, as emphasized by St. Bonaventure. At that time, it was very rare to be granted the privilege of celebrating the Holy Mass at a portable altar. Furthermore, obtaining this ecclesiastical authorization was a prudent measure because St. Francis was likely aware of the prohibition of theatrical games (*ludi teatrales*) by a decretal of Pope Innocent III in the year 1207.



San Buenaventura writes: "Three years before his death, he decided to celebrate with the greatest possible solemnity the memory of the birth of the child Jesus in the town of Greccio, in order to arouse the devotion of the faithful. But to ensure that this celebration could not be considered a strange novelty, he obtained permission from the Supreme Pontiff. After receiving it, he arranged for a manger to be prepared with the hay it needed and had an ox and a donkey brought to the place" (Legenda Maior, 10.7).

In the cave in Greccio where the Christmas Eve Mass was celebrated, a chapel was later built. This chapel features an expressive fresco, of unknown authorship, depicting the memorable Christmas scene that took place on December 24, 1223. It is a medieval painting that serves as an iconographic document of great value, surpassing representations of the same scene by the famous painters Ambrosio de Bondone, known as "Giotto," and Benozzo Gozzoli in the Franciscan churches of Assisi and Montefalco.

At that time, in Greccio on Christmas Eve of 1223, there were no nativity figures as we know them today. It was a live nativity scene that was intensely experienced by all present, becoming the first living nativity scene in history. According to Tomás de Celano, something marvelous happened there, witnessed by one of the attendees, Juan Velita, who saw the very Baby Jesus placed in the straw of the manger.

In 1957, on the occasion of the impact of the nativity scene enactment in Greccio, during the III International Nativity Scene Congress held in the city of Barcelona, the Franciscan friar Ladislao Guim gave a lecture at the hall of the Higher Council for Scientific Research. He stated that: "Historians, when recounting the nativity scene enactment of Greccio outside the temple, in the midst of the forest, in a real cave with the presence of the mule and the ox... the nativity scene spread everywhere, and it is the Franciscan families that, following in the footsteps of their Founder, set up artistic nativity scenes in all their convents and sponsor competitions" (Francis of Assisi, precursor of nativity scenes, 27-28).

Year after year, Christian tradition liturgically commemorates the feast of the Nativity of Christ. Beyond the strictly liturgical celebrations, thanks to the enduring spiritual impact of St. Francis's experience in Greccio, many households construct a family nativity scene, before which, after festive meals with their own cuisine, traditional Christmas carols are sung to the nativity figures. After eight centuries since the Christmas in Greccio, the annual construction of a family nativity scene has undeniably become an integral part of our tradition and identity.

***Fr. Valentí Serra de Manresa, O.F.M. Cap.***



# About the Hay Between the Ox and the Donkey

## THE SPANISH FRANCISCAN NATIVITY SCENES

Hagiographic sources reveal the fervor that Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) felt towards the Nativity of the Lord and how he celebrated the Christmas holiday more than any other, desiring to relive the birth of Jesus and see with his own eyes, as Celano wrote, "what he suffered in his baby weakness, how he was laid in the manger, and how he was placed on the hay between the ox and the donkey." With this purpose, on Christmas Eve in the year 1223, he staged the birth of Jesus in a cave in Greccio, setting the mass with a manger filled with hay, on which the Eucharist was celebrated, and two live animals, a donkey and an ox: "To make a more natural memory of that divine Child and the discomforts he suffered when laid in a manger and placed on damp straw next to an ox and a donkey, I would like to take charge of it in a palpable way, as if I were witnessing it with my own eyes" [fig. 1]. Friars from many places were called, and people gathered in the woods, deeply moved by the emotion and truth of the reenactment. During the service, a local knight, Juan de Greccio, saw "in the manger, reclining and sleeping, an extremely beautiful Child, whom blessed Francis took into his arms, as if he wanted to gently awaken him from his sleep." This miracle of the materialization of the infant Jesus on the manger's hay was spread by the Franciscan Order, awakening a new sensitivity to the humanity of the Son of God, which was crucial for the development of the cult of the Child Jesus, interpreting it as a manifestation of Christ's desire to be adored through symbolic images. However, it should be emphasized that the presence of the Child Jesus in the Greccio manger should not be equated with a sculptural image, as has been wrongly repeated since San Francisco did not place a figure of the Child Jesus in the manger; in fact, the Eucharistic sacrifice was celebrated on it. In the same way, it has been repeated that this miracle was the origin of the tradition of nativity scenes in the Catholic Church and their spread throughout the Church through the Franciscans and Clarisses. To be truthful, San Francisco did not create a nativity scene as we understand it today, nor did he stage a liturgical drama or a living nativity, as there were no actors or a script to interpret. In this sense, it is necessary to remember that none of the ancient chroniclers of the Franciscan Order attributes the creation of the nativity scene to him. It was not until 1581 when the Spanish Franciscan Juan Francisco Nuño, who lived in the Convent of Araceli in Rome, wrote after mentioning Greccio: "This miracle gained so much fame that in Italy, the nativity scene is represented not only in our convents but also in the other churches of the secular clergy, and especially here in Rome, it is represented in this convent of Santa Maria de Araceli, the most important convent in Italy." The real contribution of the celebration of Christmas Eve in Greccio in 1223 by San Francisco was to "translate in a plastic, simple, and realistic form, to the eyes of all, the actualization of the mystery of the historical birth into the sacramental Eucharistic mystery." In Greccio, for the first time, the mystery of the birth of Jesus was celebrated with the sacramental rite of the Eucharist.

Regarding the spread of the nativity tradition in Spain through the Franciscans, the Nativity of Jesus (around 1480) from the Convent of Our Lady of the Angels in Palma (Mallorca), a work by the workshop of Pietro and Giovanni Alamanno, is considered the oldest nativity scene in our country still in use. It remained in this convent from 1536 until its confiscation in 1836 when it was transferred to the Church of the Annunciation of the Provincial Hospital in Palma (Mallorca), where it has been since 1843 [fig. 2].



In 2003, it was declared a Cultural Heritage by the Consell de Mallorca, "both for its intrinsic value and for the influence it had on the Mallorcan nativity scene tradition." In Mallorca, Franciscan convents such as San Buenaventura in Lluçmajor and San Bernardino in Petra had nativity chapels since the 17th century, following the model of the Nativity of Jesus. In the convents of San Antonio de Padua in Artà, San Francisco in Inca, as well as those in Alcúdia and Soller, there were also nativity chapels, but they all disappeared after the suppression in 1836. In Menorca, the churches of the Convent of San Diego in Alaior and the Convent of the Annunciation of Jesus in Mahón also had chapels for the nativity scene. This placement in the temples was due to the devotional and catechetical function of the nativity scene in Franciscan convents, thus showing the humanity of Christ. This was also the purpose of the nativity altar (18th century) with life-sized figures, a work by the circle of Luisa Ignacia Roldán Villavicencio (1652-1706) from the Convent Casa Grande of San Francisco in Sevilla. The suppression of the convent caused it to be transferred to the Convent of Santa Clara in 1842 and, after its extinction in 1998, to the Convent of Santa María de Jesús [fig. 3]. The effects of the suppression in male convents were very damaging to their heritage. The movable assets of many convents disappeared when their communities were disbanded, making it difficult, in the absence of documentary research, to know if they had nativity scenes.

Following the Franciscan legacy, the Clarisses played a fundamental role in the spread of nativity scenes. The miracle of Greccio had its counterpart for Saint Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) on Christmas Eve in 1252 when, while she was sick and bedridden in her cell at San Damiano, thanks to the intercession of the Child Jesus, she could hear the celebration of Christmas Eve in the Basilica of San Francisco in Assisi, with the same clarity as if she were in the church, and "see the Lord's manger."

The Clarisses have preserved a significant collection of nativity scenes in Spain, through which they contemplated God made a child, without which the history of nativity scenes in our country would not be understood. Within the convent cloister, there are two types of nativity scenes: fixed and mobile. Although nativity scenes were, by definition, a manifestation of an ephemeral and cyclical nature that returned each year for Christmas, fixed reenactments were common in female monastic communities, displayed in rooms, cabinets, or cupboards. Despite being fixed, the communities only used them during Advent and Christmas, keeping them closed the rest of the year, closing the door to the room or their own doors, as in the nativity scene (18th century) in the workroom of the Monastery of Santa María de Jesús in Sevilla [fig. 4]. This is a fascinating nativity scene inside a large cabinet, in which characters from the Gospel narrative coexist with numerous animals, such as all kinds of reptiles, monkeys, parrots, etc., whose presence has a symbolic function. Many of these animals symbolized the resurrection, in other words, Jesus's triumph over death, the triumph of good over evil, and Christ himself. Fixed inside but movable within the convent are the nativity scenes that take the form of small showcases or display cases, such as the showcase with the nativity scene (18th century) from the Monastery of Santa Clara in Montilla (Córdoba) and the display case with the nativity scene (19th century) with Murcian figures from the extinct Monastery of Santa Clara in Fitero (Navarra). On the other hand, we call "mobile" those nativity scenes that were assembled each year at the beginning of Advent in the spaces where community life took place, and before which prayers and carols were sung. In the convents, it was common for there not to be just one nativity scene but several arranged in different rooms or halls, as exemplified by the interesting sets in the Convent of Santa Clara in Palma (Mallorca) and the Monastery of Our Lady of the Visitation in Madrid.



Without intending to provide an exhaustive list of nativity scenes in Spanish Clarisse communities, due to limitations of space, we will mention some of the most relevant and lesser-known ones. The oldest is the Mystery exhibited in the Museu-Monestir de Pedralbes in Barcelona, a round alabaster sculpture dating from the second half of the 14th century attributed to the Barcelona sculptor and master builder Bernat Roca. In Clarisse convent nativity scenes, it was common for them to be heterogeneous sets with figures of different styles, sizes, and periods, and even works created by the sisters themselves, as seen in the nativity scene (16th-19th centuries) from the Convent of Our Lady of the Assumption in Valladolid, the nativity scene (16th-18th centuries) from the Royal Monastery of Santa Clara in Carrión de los Condes (Palencia), the nativity scene (16th-19th centuries) from the Convent of Corpus Christi in Zamora, some of whose figures are the work of Sister Beatriz de la Concepción (1594-1646), the nativity scene (17th-19th centuries) from the Monastery of the Immaculate Conception in Salamanca, and the nativity scene (18th-19th centuries) from the Convent of Santa Clara in Borja (Zaragoza), and the nativity scene (18th-19th centuries) from the Convent of San Juan Bautista in La Laguna (Tenerife), among others. In several cases, only a few figures remain from what were once significant sets, such as the Three Wise Men (18th century) from the Museum of Santa Clara in Murcia. As living works, these nativity scenes were modified and transformed by the nuns over the centuries. In many monasteries, there were "belén" sisters from the 17th century whose responsibilities included caring for, safeguarding, and assembling the nativity scene.

Alongside the Spanish nativity scenes, there were others that came primarily from Italy. In the Museum of Santa Clara in Gandía (Valencia), an Italian nativity scene (c. 1550) is displayed, which San Francisco de Borja (1510-1572) brought from Rome to present to his daughter, Sister Dorotea (1538-1552). From the same century is the coral nativity scene (16th century), a Trápani work, from the Monastery of Our Lady of the Visitation in Madrid, the Descalzas Reales, in which the figure of San Francisco de Asís is sculpted from a large piece of coral. Neapolitan is the nativity scene in the Museum of Sacred Art of the Convent of Santa Clara in Monforte de Lemos (Lugo), acquired by Sister Catalina María de la Concepción, daughter of the 9th Count of Lemos, Francisco Fernández de Castro Andrade (1613-1662). Its fourteen pieces and scenography, a "piece of fallen antiquity," were made between 1689 and 1690 and may be the work of Nicola Fumo (1647-1725) or Gaetano Patalano (1655-after 1700) [fig. 5]. It is an extremely important work, as there are very few 17th-century Neapolitan wooden nativity scenes that survive today. More well-known is the Neapolitan nativity scene, consisting of thirty-four figures, which in 1730, the 11th Duchess of Béjar, María Ana Antonia Luisa de Borja-Centelles Fernández de Córdoba (1676-1748), donated to the Monastery of Our Lady of the Visitation in Madrid. This nativity scene was inherited from her aunt, the 11th Countess of Alba de Liste, Isabel Josefa de Borja Centelles y Ponce de León (†1729), with the condition that it would pass to Mother Jesualda de Borja-Centelles Fernández de Córdoba, sister of the donor and a nun in the mentioned monastery. However, the duchess did not wait until her death for the figures to be transferred to the Descalzas Reales, depositing them one year after inheriting them.

The Capuchins also played a relevant role in the spread of nativity scenes in Spain. An example of this is Venerable Francisca Inés de la Concepción (1551-1620) from the Convent of Our Lady of Bethlehem in Cifuentes (Guadalajara), who not only set up the nativity scene but also "advised that everyone should set it up in their own homes." Of great importance is the nativity scene (1710-1712) from the Monastery of the Immaculate Conception in Palma (Mallorca), not only for the nativity scene itself



but for all the devotional practices of the Christmas liturgical cycle associated with it, which led to it being declared a Cultural Heritage by the Consell de Mallorca in 2003. This nativity scene was also deeply devotional and was in the Monastery of the Exaltation of the Most Holy Sacrament in Murcia, a 17th-century nativity scene that disappeared during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and was permanently set up in the workroom, where the entire Capuchin Clarisse community came during the Christmas season, "the spare time between choir attendance and necessary duties."

All of these nativity scenes, both those preserved to the present day and those for which only documentary evidence remains, are part of the cultural heritage of nativity scenes in our country, "imprinted in the hearts of those eager for truth."

**Ángel Peña Martín**  
Doctor in Art History

- **Fig. 1.** Ángel Muñoz Alique. *Miracle of the Greccio Night (relief from the pedestal of the Monument to Saint Francis of Assisi). 1987. León, San Francisco Garden. Photograph: Ángel Peña Martín.*
- **Fig. 2.** Pietro and Giovanni Alamanno. *Nativity of Jesus. Around 1480. Palma, Provincial Hospital. Church of the Annunciation. From the Convent of Our Lady of the Angels. Photograph: Ángel Peña Martín.*
- **Fig. 3.** Luisa Ignacia Roldán Villavicencio, circle of. *Nativity. Seville, Convent of Santa Maria de Jesús. From the Casa Grande de San Francisco Convent. Photograph: Ángel Peña Martín.*
- **Fig. 4.** Luisa Ignacia Roldán Villavicencio (Mystery) and others. *Nativity. 18th century. Seville, Monastery of Santa Maria de Jesús. Photograph: Ángel Peña Martín.*
- **Fig. 5.** Neapolitan Anonymous. *Nativity. 1689-1690. Monforte de Lemos (Lugo), Museum of Sacred Art of the Convent of Santa Clara. Photograph: Ángel Peña Martín.*





# Following in the footsteps of Saint Francis

## BETHLEHEM, THE HOUSE OF BREAD

The bread that fell from heaven and provided for the people of Israel in the desert was not the greatest provision given freely. The manna satisfied the physical needs of the people of Israel for forty years every day (Exodus 16:35), but Jesus satisfies our spiritual needs forever (John 6:57-58). Could His arrival as a Man in Bethlehem be the necessary provision, the divine nourishment that fixes our famished human condition, giving it the only food that restores?

It is God Himself manifested in His Son Jesus, the bread we need to stay alive. Is it not the key to our adjustment at the spiritual levels, the Word of God coming in Bethlehem, which shapes us?

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to implore, to ask: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). When explaining to His disciples how to pray, He indicated the need for a believer to ask the Lord for daily bread; this bread is not so much material, although it is, as much as it is He Himself.

Jesus defines Himself as the Bread of Life, also as living water and the true way. He does not present Himself as just another source of salvation but as the only path to salvation. Without Him, without the bread of life, there is no hope for salvation. There is no "math" that can reconcile the accounts, no solution to the chaos of the universe, no restoration of the spiritual temple. The solution has come from heaven.

Jesus also requires, above all, the embrace of each individual's heart to begin His "mission," to become "bread in the bakery of every home," at that particular Bethlehem portal.

The name Bethlehem evokes prophecy, the cradle of King David's dynasty, from which the Messiah would be born. The "Anointed One of the nations" would be born. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah..."

For birth to happen, there needs to be labor, the pains of uncertainty, and the solitude of deprivation. The vessel should be made of clay so that the emphasis is on the content, not the strength, like the leaven that leavens the dough, and glory begins its song.

The figurative scenes of the birth of Christ have, throughout history, evolved into what is called "Belenismo," a plastic culture. But how can we relate to these figures? The Magi teach us that you can start from afar to reach Christ. They are not scandalized by the poverty of the surroundings; they kneel and adore Him without hesitation. Before Him, they understand that God, just as He governs the course of the stars with supreme wisdom, also guides the course of history, humbling the mighty and exalting the humble. When they return to their own country, they will have shared this remarkable encounter with the Messiah, inaugurating the journey of the Gospel among the people.



When looking at the nativity scene, our minds are transported to when we were still children and eagerly awaited the moment to start building it. These resources help us become aware again of the great gift we have been given by passing on the faith. It also makes us feel the urgency and joy of passing on the same experience to our children and grandchildren. How the nativity scene is prepared can remain the same every year or change, with some details evolving as people themselves grow and develop. But what's important is that it speaks to our lives about the mysteries of our faith.

In any place and in any way, the nativity scene speaks of the love of God. God, who became a child to show us how close He is to every human being, regardless of their condition. He wants to be the bread, and the process has already started, which will culminate in the Upper Room as the announcement of the eternal and definitive birth in the Eucharist.

In the 7th century, Pope Theodore I had the remains of Jesus' manger brought from Bethlehem and placed them in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Religious plays, small scenic representations of various Bible episodes, were also quite common in the Middle Ages, including the plays of the Wise Men, which might have had a similar set to the nativity scenes. However, the nativity scene as we know it today should be attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi. Deeply moved after returning from the city of Bethlehem, he wanted to celebrate a special Nativity in Greccio that could involve the entire community.

It was on the night of Christmas in 1223 when he first represented the Nativity with a living nativity scene. Now, 800 years later, we have the opportunity to continue celebrating and remembering that Christmas night, in which, thanks to his friendship with a landowner in the village and after obtaining permission from the Pope of Rome at the time, Honorius III, he chose a cave to celebrate Mass. There, he placed a stone image representing the baby Jesus and, beside it, a real, living ox and mule.

On that Christmas night, he gathered the entire Christian community to pray at the nativity scene. He delivered a beautiful sermon, and legend has it that the event was so moving and the community prayed with such devotion that when the saint held the stone child in his arms, it instantly came to life.

It is at that moment that we could say the tradition of nativity scenes was born.

**BETHLEHEM:** a house where flesh becomes Bread. Bethlehem is like a house of bread, and the nativity scene tastes like bread, a home of tenderness. In a way, nativity scenes, mangers, or portals bring us the most tender aspects of the mystery of God and humanity, like good bread. Since that first Christmas, we are all children of the Great Mystery. Whether we are children or adults, poor or rich, kings or shepherds, we all participate and belong as "figures" to the nativity. We were born in Bethlehem.

In other words, the Bread was born for our sustenance, the whole that constitutes our being, which was once nothing. Speaking about the value of images, of that Mystery, is speaking about catechesis, about plastic art. It is a catechesis that enters through our eyes and touches our hearts due to the profound Gospel echoes it carries and its great beauty.



The path to St. Francis leads us to that origin from which life springs. This origin is where everything earthly contains the hand of God, and it guides us towards the true sustenance of humanity, our daily sustenance born from simplicity, humility. It comes from that bread that everyone shares, whether rich or poor. It conveys the beautiful symbolism of bread, a piece of bread as nourishment that should not be missing from any table. This leads us to a transcendent whole that comes from the divine to the simplest, guiding us towards the true meaning of the Eucharist.

Bethlehem, where the Bread of Life was born, where life was made in the bread, the bread that nourishes and strengthens the spirit and gives meaning to our existence. It has been eight centuries since the Poverello of Assisi helped make Christmas more vivid, initiating, in a way, "the culture of the nativity," or rather, updating what is always present: the love of God in His Son Jesus Christ, born in a humble manger for our salvation.

***Hno. Pablo Noguera Aledo***





**A common  
heritage**

# Shoulder to shoulder

The associative movement,  
promoting the tradition of nativity scenes,  
as entities bearing  
our cultural heritage.



# From Clay to 3D

## BRIEF ANNOTATIONS ON ARTISTS AND ARTISANS IN THE FIELD OF SPANISH NATIVITY SCENES

A detailed study of existing documents has revealed that the first historical record of the creation of a nativity scene sculpture dates back to around 1289 in Italy. The popularity of these Italian pieces during that time was such that a work with similar characteristics to an Arnolfo di Cambio nativity scene in the Provincial Hospital of Palma de Mallorca, of Neapolitan origin, was discovered. This ensemble was declared a Cultural Heritage Site in 2003 as it is the oldest Spanish nativity scene still in use within Christianity.

The representation of nativity scenes, as we know them today, truly began in the late 15th century when images of the birth of Christ were separated from existing altarpieces in churches and convents. They began to be displayed as separate groups with their own identity, allowing them to be observed from all angles with highly detailed and meticulous formal characteristics.

In the 16th century, Saint Cajetan recommended the installation of nativity scenes in female convents as a form of devotional campaign. The manual skills of these nuns in sewing, combined with the affordability of images consisting of heads, feet, and hands, were crucial for the spread of these representations and served as a precursor to the "Naples" model. In Spain, notable examples of this style are the ensembles in the Convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, the nativity scene in the Madrid convent of the Madres Agustinas Recoletas, and that of the Recoletas in Salamanca, all from the 18th century.

Due to the connections that the Bourbon dynasty had with southern Italy, the Neapolitan nativity scene (*il presepe napoletano*) gained popularity among the Spanish bourgeoisie in the 18th century. In 1759, King Carlos III ordered the construction of what would be called "El Belén del Príncipe." The social and aesthetic significance of the nativity scene's installation in the Royal Palace of Madrid led to a later expansion, commissioned by King Carlos IV, where sculptors José Esteve and Bonet and José Ginés worked exclusively on additional pieces between 1787 and 1790. This expansion involved adapting the Spanish regional models to the Neapolitan scene, deeply influencing the later production of *costumbrista* (genre) scenes.

Regarding the production within the Iberian Peninsula, it is important to highlight that it achieved significant importance throughout the 18th century, with the participation of prominent contemporary artists in nativity projects. Notable names include Francisco Salzillo in Murcia, La Roldana, Jose Risueño, Pedro Duque Cornejo, and Cristóbal Ramos in Andalusia, and Amadeu Ramón in Catalonia.

La Roldana's most notable nativity scene works include "The Rest during the Flight into Egypt," part of the Countess of Ruiseñada's collection, and the "Holy Family with the Child Taking His First Steps," an endearing scene that highlights La Roldana's skill in handling small-scale formats. She, the Royal Sculptor, created some of the most important historical nativity scenes in Spain, alongside Salzillo, and her terracotta small-scale nativity scenes are the subject of numerous current exhibitions that are highlighting her work.



The Murcian region holds the most distinctive and prestigious status in terms of nativity imagery created on the Iberian Peninsula in the 18th century. The workshop of Francisco Salzillo is undoubtedly the driving force behind this sculptural specialization in the region. The artist's connection to Naples was due to his father's Italian origins, with Nicolás Salzillo hailing from the Neapolitan city of Santa María de Capua. Following the trend brought by Carlos III to the Peninsula, the novelty of including nativity scenes in the personal collections of various clergy and wealthy nobles in the first half of the 18th century set the stage for the creation of the magnificent nativity scene by Francisco Salzillo, commissioned by the Murcian noble Jesualdo Riquelme in 1776. This nativity scene was created by Francisco Salzillo between 1776 and 1783 and was later completed by his disciple Roque López and his workshop around 1800.

As for the art surrounding Andalusian nativity scenes in the 19th and 20th centuries, "Perhaps Cadiz and Granada are the Andalusian provinces that embody, with the greatest vigor, the nativity scene tradition. There is evidence of the existence of sculptors in 18th-century Cadiz (...) This sculptural tradition continues in our times with Pedro Ramírez of the Jerez nativity scene association." When referring to Cadiz, it likely refers to Ángel Martínez, and in the context of Granada, as a significant center, it probably alludes to the "figures of Alborox" and to Antonio Jiménez Rada and his son.

Martí Castells Martí, born in Barcelona in 1915 and passing away in 1995, is one of the most important nativity scene sculptors of the 20th century. The fame of his figurines reached international acclaim, with pieces in collections around the world, and some of his works can currently be admired in the Ethnographic Museum of Barcelona.

In the 21st century, Spain continues to be a reference in the field of nativity scene sculpture with the emergence of new craftsmen and sculptors who dominate the current market, introducing new techniques such as 3D modeling and the use of resins, which coexist harmoniously with traditional techniques like the use of polychrome terracotta.

### **Bruno Díaz Ríos**

*Doctor of Fine Arts. University of Seville.*

- **Fig. 1.** NATIVITY SCENE. Attributed to Pietro and Giovanni Alemanno. Around 1480. Polychrome Wood. Church of the Annunciation. Hospital de la Sangre. Palma de Mallorca
- **Fig. 2.** NATIVITY OF THE AUGUSTINIAN RECOLLECTS. Salamanca. Gift from the Count of Monterrey. 1645
- **Fig. 3.** Nativity Scene of the Prince. Royal Palace. 1759
- **Fig. 4.** Ramón Amadeu. Virgin and Child, Nativity Figure. Bordas Collection, Ethnological Museum of Barcelona



# The Evolution of the Nativity Scene, FROM CORK AND MOSS TO 3D PRINTING

I'm going to try, with this short article, to provide a bit of history on the evolution and construction of the Nativity scene. Past, present, and future.

The Nativity scene is a popular representation of the Christmas Mystery that is created in homes, churches, institutions, squares, and other places. It is undoubtedly a survival of Roman *lararia*.

Initially, it was just a matter of placing the figures on a table or piece of furniture and, at most, accompanying them with some textile elements. Gradually, mineral and plant elements were incorporated. First came stones, earth, sand, and moss, and later, roots, twisted tree trunks, and grapevines were added. Finally, the addition of cork, which, with its rough texture, perfectly simulates natural rocks. With cork came thyme, rosemary, juniper, and other vegetation, depending on the location. Wood, paper, cardboard, glass, and tin foil were later incorporated. The latter was eventually replaced by aluminum foil, commonly known as silver paper. All of these ingredients, well distributed and shaped, helped Nativity scenes achieve a high degree of realism.

The lighting deserves special mention. In the early days, lighting was either not used or had to be produced by oil lamps. The arrival of gas was a significant improvement, making it much easier to enhance the illumination, not only of the landscapes but also of small details like torches and bonfires. Some Nativity scene enthusiasts had figures made with a small copper or brass tube inside so that they could hold a torch or lantern in their hands to illuminate a specific corner of their Nativity scene.

In popular Nativity scenes, the figures were made of ceramics and, apart from the Christmas mystery, represented rural life occupations such as fishermen, hunters, spinners, shepherds, farmers, washerwomen, priests with their red umbrellas, sometimes on foot and other times on a donkey, and many other variations. These figures, although fragile, were a heritage passed down from parents to children. Already in 1475, there was mention of an embryonic market of figures in the portico of Santa Catalina in Barcelona. In 1585, an inventory of Canon Pere Bonavia certifies the spread of the family Nativity scene. Wealthy or affluent households commissioned their figures from renowned sculptors.

In 1805, the term "Nativity scene enthusiast" was first used. Starting in 1825 and for many years, *El Diari de Barcelona* reported on the most successful Nativity scenes in the city.

We must distinguish between the artistic Nativity scene as we understand it today, which is the result of rich and complex historical processes, and has received various influences. It can be table-top or enclosed, usually occupying large spaces, and the diorama. The latter was created by Antoni Moliné, a member of the *Pessebristes Society* of Barcelona. The marriage of the Nativity scene and diorama was the starting point for new possibilities.





The diorama, which Moliné introduced at Christmas in 1912, changed everything definitively, causing a radical shift in the style of Nativity scene construction. That Christmas, Moliné had run out of cork, which he traditionally used to construct the landscape of the Nativity scene. He procured some plaster from a convent where masons were working. With this new material, combined with burlap, he modeled all the elements, increased the number of planes following the rules of perspective, added depth, and meticulously miniaturized to suit the composition's needs, following the lines of convergence. The new system allowed him to color, shade, and apply painting techniques. This ensemble was framed, giving a final touch to the artistic work, which was, in fact, a three-dimensional painting. It had the added advantage that the viewer's vision could extend beyond the limits, exploring and achieving hidden angles from the front view. The Artistic Diorama applied to the Nativity scene was born, which, after a few years, would be known as the Barcelona School or the Catalan School.

The addition of electricity, with its numerous possibilities, was also a great contribution to the world of the Nativity scene. It would take a long article to explain all the tricks and gadgets that our masters were able to create.

Today, the possibilities are endless with the variety of materials available, from the field of construction to materials like polystyrene sheets, foams, resins, plasters with different drying times, cement glues, and all kinds of paints and varnishes. LED lights, diodes, spotlights, colored gels to change the light color, transformers and power sources with different voltages, timers for creating spectacular effects in lighting and music, fog and snow machines, the list goes on. It could be said that whatever our imagination conceives, we have the necessary tools at our disposal.

And the future is already here, with all the bright prospects and the possibilities of using so much new machinery: laser cutters and engravers, hot-wire cutters, numerically controlled milling machines, and, above all, 3D printers, using filaments as well as resins or metals.

I'll conclude with a quote from Antoni Moliné: "I only conceive art in the Nativity scene as that which brings us closest to representing the Creator's Work."

### **Josep Porta Saburit**

*President of the Association of Pessebristes of Barcelona*



# **Nativity scene tradition: A REPRESENTATIVE EXPRESSION OF SPAIN'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

It all began nearly 800 years ago, on December 25, 1223, in a cave in Greccio, in the Reatino Valley, Italy, as recounted by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter "Admirabile signum." He describes Saint Francis of Assisi's request: 'I desire to celebrate the memory of the Child who was born in Bethlehem and to contemplate, in some way, the Infant who was laid in a manger and how He was placed on hay between the ox and the donkey.' And so it happened; in front of the Nativity scene, he solemnly celebrated the Eucharist. This was the birth of our tradition.

In April 2013, during the International Nativity Scene Symposium in Sitges, the General Assembly of UN.FOE.PRAE. (UFP) made the decision to initiate the process of requesting UNESCO to declare Nativity scene craftsmanship as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This request was made through the four Spanish entities present in the UFP (Spanish Federation of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts, Catalan Federation of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts, Association of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts of Barcelona, and Association of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts of Guipúzcoa). Several meetings with UNESCO entities were held in this regard, many of which took place at the premises of the Association of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts of Madrid (AMB), a member of FEB's executive team.

In mid-2018, under the short federative presidency of our dear and cherished Carles Tarragó, a new push was given, and the Spanish Commission of UFP, along with ABM's executive team, held several meetings with the Ministry of Culture and Sports (MCD).

As a result of these meetings, it was deduced that a prerequisite for the application was that Nativity scene craftsmanship should be inventoried as an Intangible Cultural Asset in some Autonomous Community, or even better, that it should be recognized as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage, or at least that one of these processes should be initiated.

From this moment, ABM began the process of obtaining the declaration of Nativity scene craftsmanship as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Initially, they sought the support of the Community of Madrid (CAM) through the preparation of justifying dossiers and specific meetings. Fortunately, CAM endorsed the proposal of the Madrid association in a document dated March 27, 2019, addressed to the Directorate General of Fine Arts (DGBA) of the MCD.

Secondly, on July 17, 2019, ABM submitted a written request to the MCD's registry, initiating the procedure and attaching the necessary documentation. From that point on, the complex process established by Law 10/2015 of May 26 for the Safeguard of Intangible Cultural Heritage was set in motion:



- On November 3, 2020, the "Technical Report for the Declaration Process of Nativity Scene Craftsmanship as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage" was completed by the Cultural Heritage Institute of Spain based on the documentation provided by the ABM This report was intended for presentation at the upcoming meeting of the Historical Heritage Council scheduled for the end of November 2020.
- On November 20, 2020, the Spanish Historical Heritage Council under the Ministry of Culture and Sports issued a positive report to initiate the Nativity scene craftsmanship declaration process as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- On March 10, 2021, the Directorate General of Fine Arts requested reports from specialized advisory institutions related to the matter, in this case, from the University of Murcia and the University of Navarra. Both reports were favorable, with some suggested improvements.
- In November 2021, the file was sent to the Autonomous Communities for the hearing process, and some proposals and considerations were received.
- In December 2021, the second "Technical Report for the Declaration Process of Nativity Scene Craftsmanship as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage" was prepared by the Cultural Heritage Institute of Spain, incorporating the requested improvements.
- On December 29, 2021, a resolution from the Directorate General of Fine Arts initiated the Nativity scene craftsmanship declaration process as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- In the "Section III. Other Provisions" of the Official State Gazette (B.O.E.) dated January 5, 2022, under the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the resolution of January 3, 2022, by the Directorate General of Fine Arts, was published, initiating a public information period to allow interested parties to examine the file and make comments.
- On March 2, 2022, the Subdirector General of Management and Coordination of Cultural Assets responded to the entities that submitted comments, indicating which comments were accepted and which were not. In March 2022, the third and final "Technical Report for the Declaration Process of Nativity Scene Craftsmanship as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage" was prepared by the Cultural Heritage Institute of Spain, incorporating the accepted comments.
- On June 15, 2022, in the "Section III. Other Provisions" of the B.O.E., under the Ministry of Culture and Sports, Royal Decree 481/2022 was published, declaring Nativity scene craftsmanship as a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage, and, as a result, its inclusion in the General Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- This has been a long process, lasting almost four years, characterized by enthusiasm, determination, hard work, and hope. During this time, the significance of Nativity scene craftsmanship, its profound meaning, and its vast richness in our country have been documented and explained, from its religious significance to the works of art that are now part of our National Heritage. It also encompasses the millions of people, whether they are nativity scene enthusiasts or not, who continue the deeply rooted tradition of setting up a Nativity scene, with all that it entails, every Christmas.



From this point on, Nativity scene craftsmanship falls under the National Plan for the Safeguard of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which implies the adoption of strategies for its protection, the establishment of action plans for its transmission, dissemination, maintenance, and custody, and, in this way, the necessary safeguarding measures are established.

Nativity scene craftsmanship has survived to the present day thanks to all those who love this tradition, and its continuation will remain our responsibility. The publication of the Royal Decree should not be seen as an end in itself. It marks a qualitative leap, a historic event without precedent. As the collective bearer of the tradition, it is now our duty to carry out the Action Plan for its Safeguard, with the difference that from now on, we can count on the assistance, collaboration, protection, and monitoring of the State Administration.

Nativity scene craftsmanship is now a Representative Expression of Spain's Intangible Cultural Heritage, and we are in an excellent position to work together to have it recognized internationally by UNESCO.

***Fernando de Miguel Rodríguez***

*First Vice President of the Association of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts of Madrid (ABM)*

*Advisor to the Presidency of the Spanish Federation of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts (FEB)*

*Gold Insignia and Honorary Member of ABM 2022, FEB Trophy 2021*

*Gold Insignia FEB 2023*



# Cultural Heritage, AN OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE FOR NATIVITY SCENES

As we approach the commemoration of the 800th anniversary of what is considered the first Nativity scene, the one San Francisco staged in Greccio during the Christmas Eve Mass of 1223, the Nativity scene movement is coordinating and working to achieve UNESCO recognition of Nativity scenes as a manifestation of universal intangible cultural heritage. Over eight centuries, Nativity scenes have spread all over the world, across different continents, and have encompassed a set of practices that have shaped an associative reality around the art of creating Nativity scenes, around Nativity scene craftsmanship. This entire journey, the traditional aspect, the art of crafting Nativity scenes, the desire to associate and share it, leads us to observe and pay attention to the reality of a living cultural heritage, an inheritance passed down by our predecessors, one that needs to be preserved, protected, and passed on to future generations.

The Nativity scene is undoubtedly an inheritance of its own history and the narrative surrounding the birth of Jesus, but from the perspective of Nativity scene craftsmanship, we must also emphasize its evolution and collective practice, which has placed it within the dimensions of art and a shared and participatory culture. Nativity scene craftsmanship has transcended the religious meaning of the Nativity scene, shaping its reality as an expression of the popular culture of our communities.

For UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage refers to "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills – along with the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated with them – that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from one generation to another, is constantly recreated by communities and groups based on their environment, interaction with nature, and history, instilling in them a sense of identity and continuity and thus promoting the respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. This description aligns perfectly with the heritage and reality of Nativity scene craftsmanship, which is why we are confident that, at some point, we can expect UNESCO to officially recognize Nativity scenes as intangible cultural heritage. When that moment comes, we must understand that it is not the end of the road but a new beginning.

What significance will achieving this recognition hold? Undoubtedly, the challenge of its possible declaration will fall on the Nativity scene movement itself. It will be a great opportunity, which, in turn, transforms into a significant challenge to strengthen and promote Nativity scene craftsmanship, especially in its intercultural, creative, and associative dimension. It will be the responsibility of institutions and governments to provide support and allocate resources and means for its development and preservation, but the Nativity scene movement, the community carrying this tradition, must be the executor and driving force behind this intangible heritage. It is up to us, the Nativity scene enthusiasts, to work to keep this tradition alive.

Preserving and promoting Nativity scene craftsmanship as a global cultural movement is our main objective, one that should be supported by a strategy that incorporates the following ideas:



- 1. Acknowledging and recognizing it as a living cultural practice. Intangible cultural heritage includes the knowledge and practices passed down through generations, which we want to transmit to future generations as part of our social and cultural practices, our "popular and traditional culture." It's important to note that most of this associative and expressive activity related to popular culture inherently stems from collective contributions. The great challenge is to maintain the involvement in our Nativity scene organizations, especially in their public projection. Too often, some administrations and sectors of our society have considered Nativity scene craftsmanship as a marginal practice, but the reality is evident in the thousands of visitors who attend Nativity scene exhibitions in our towns and cities. Nativity scenes are present in the festive cycle of Christmas celebrations and traditions, and we must collectively amplify this reality, which exists in many countries. We need to promote careful and efficient public communication of our activities, fostering not only local but also international visibility.
- 2. An opportunity and a challenge to showcase cultural diversity and its global presence. Josep Maria Garrut (Barcelona 1915-2008), a renowned Nativity scene enthusiast and founder of UN-FOE-PRAE, in his work "Viatge a l'entorn del meu pessebre" (1957), speaks of the "democratization of the Nativity scene," referring to its widespread popularity and adaptation to the local context of each community. Fostering and recognizing this diversity of Nativity scene expressions and practices enriches Nativity scene craftsmanship as a cultural element, a common manifestation that takes on different forms in various communities, passed down from generation to generation, sharing techniques and knowledge to keep a tradition alive.
- 3. Nativity scenes as an art form and creative expression. Over the years and across generations, we can see the evolution of Nativity scene figurines and landscapes in different social and cultural contexts. Basili de Rubí (†1986), in his work "Art Pessebrístic" (1947), speaks of assimilation into the local environment and everyday life. For Basili de Rubí, "each work is the inexorable product of its time, a specific culture, and civilization." In a way, this desire to contextualize Nativity scene art also reflects an aspiration to express ourselves through iconography, the desire to create art. Building Nativity scenes also carries the purpose of artistic and symbolic expression in their creations, intended to engage those who observe them. This artistic dimension, the Nativity scene as art, is another fundamental pillar for the preservation of Nativity scene craftsmanship, offering new formats and messages that bring richness and vitality to the craft, updating the message and prompting constructive and, why not, questioning perspectives.
- 4. Transversality and transfer beyond the Nativity scene Nativity scene craftsmanship has been shaped and projected socially through collective dedication and practice. There are documented associative realities that have existed for over 160 years, such as the Nativity Scene Association of Barcelona, representing a desire to share and collectively build the art of creating Nativity scenes. Within each local and territorial context, non-profit organizations have been created with the purpose of keeping this tradition and creative expression alive, seeking collaboration among Nativity scene enthusiasts to promote and preserve Nativity scene craftsmanship. There has been an associative presence of Nativity scene craftsmanship in different regions and countries, but it was 70 years ago that it sought to formalize its transversal reality as a practice extended worldwide. On May 31, 1952, in Barcelona, representatives of seven Nativity scene associations founded an international organization under the name UN-FOE-PRAE (Universalis Foederatio Praeseptica), with the clear



to "unite Nativity scene corporations from all over the world for the sole purpose of preserving and promoting the tradition of creating Nativity scenes."

The recognition of Nativity scene craftsmanship as intangible cultural heritage of humanity should be a new impetus for the necessary coordination of Nativity scene craftsmanship on a global scale, sharing knowledge and giving visibility to different Nativity scene proposals and expressions, acknowledging its transversal reality. A global Nativity scene craftsmanship, in all its cultural dimensions, should focus not only on creating Nativity scenes but also on promoting the transmission, renewal, and introduction of new practices, as well as fostering the documentation, reflection, preservation, and dissemination of this heritage. The Nativity scene movement

itself is and should be the primary responsible entity for all these tasks, with the necessary support, but it should be the primary driver and executor. After all, it's the community carrying this tradition, through its own activities, that defines one of the fundamental pillars of recognition as intangible cultural heritage. It is essential to encourage and build common knowledge networks and spaces.

Belén, pessebre, jaiotza, presepe, crèche, nativity scene, pesebre, krippe, presepio, jaslice, betlem, kribbe... diverse names for a shared cultural heritage, one that we should collectively advance. The desired international recognition as intangible cultural heritage should provide an opportunity for a new impetus, renewed energy in favor of Nativity scene craftsmanship.

**Ramon Albornà Rovira**

*President of the Catalan Nativity Scene Federation*



# **BELENISM: A LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE**

## **Roundtable. Seville, November 2023**

**Carmen Camilleri**

**Nativity Scene Enthusiast. Secretary of Un-Foe-Prae**

The responsibility of both local associations and the International Federation that promotes the art of nativity scenes is of vital importance. These associations must keep alive the tradition and culture of nativity scenes while also being prepared to address any challenges the world may face in the future. Therefore, their responsibility is significant, as the world is constantly changing, and, as a result, all associations, along with the Federation, must stay up to date with all developments.

Nevertheless, their ultimate goal remains the same: to bring together people who hold the art of nativity scenes in their hearts in its various aspects. It is in our hands as committees of these associations, both at the local and international levels, to evolve with the changes and preserve the tradition of nativity scenes in the future by organizing courses, exhibitions, and other activities to continue teaching this tradition to current nativity scene enthusiasts and, most importantly, to future generations living in a world that may not necessarily support the preservation of this tradition.

**Nicolò Celegato**

**Nativity Scene Enthusiast. President of the Cammino ad Oriente Association**

The nativity scene art of the future can be summarized in a few guiding principles for everyone, both nativity scene enthusiasts and non-enthusiasts:

- Continue the search for new materials for construction; without technical innovation, there can be no continuity.
- Organize basic technique courses to attract people, explaining all topics in a simple manner.
- Promote your associations through social media and inform institutions of the activities carried out during the year: communication and promotion can attract new participants.

**Gema Carrera, Anthropologist**

**Coordinator of Ethnological Heritage Projects,  
Andalusian Institute of Historical Heritage.**

Nativity scenes represent intangible cultural heritage for many communities. They involve a set of knowledge, techniques, and expressions that have been passed down from generation to generation, resulting in tangible objects that are intrinsic to this knowledge. These techniques, material aspects, and expressive forms vary from one place to another, showcasing cultural diversity. They are significant for communities and groups worldwide who identify with them and continually recreate them as part of their cultural heritage, adapting to their natural and cultural context while innovating constantly.





Therefore, it is crucial to recognize and safeguard the techniques, knowledge, and practices associated with nativity scenes to ensure their transmission to future generations. Documenting these techniques and promoting the teaching of these skills is important. The 2003 UNESCO Convention acknowledges the role of communities, groups, and individuals in safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage, so strengthening the associative network surrounding nativity scenes is fundamental. As for new forms of expression and materials, their dynamism is a sign of the health of this activity, and it is necessary to continue innovating to keep it alive in today's society, involving new generations.

**Moderator:**

**José Luis López Chaparro. Nativity Scene Enthusiast. Vice President of the Belenista Association of Badajoz. Member of the Belenista Association of Seville.**

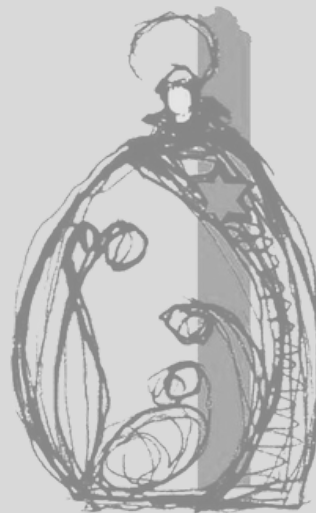
**HERITAGE - ASSOCIATIONISM - CREATION**

What are we doing with our knowledge, are we passing it on?

What is the current state of the associative movement? How can we strengthen the associative network?

How can we enhance and strengthen the nativity scene through symbolism?

Different forms of expression, where are we headed? Will there be continuity?





**With  
open arms**

# UNIVERSALIS FOEDERATIO PRAESEPISTICA (Un-Foe-Prae)

**Federation that groups together the Nativity Scene federations of the world.**

Date of foundation: May 31, 1952

Number of members: 21 entities

Address: Based in Rome. Office of the President Lledó, 11 - 2nd Floor - Barcelona

#### Objectives:

To preserve the cultural and artistic diversity of the Nativity Scene tradition worldwide.

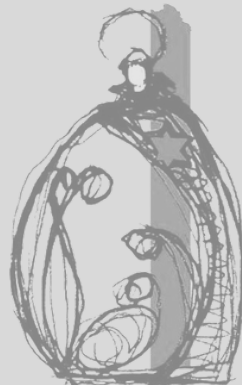
#### Main activities:

Congresses, events, exhibitions, recognitions. Institutional Relations with UNESCO.

Website: [www.unfoeprae.org](http://www.unfoeprae.org)

Email: [unfoeprae@gmail.com](mailto:unfoeprae@gmail.com)

Facebook: [Universalisfoederatiopraesepistica](https://www.facebook.com/Universalisfoederatiopraesepistica)



# ASSOCIATION OF NATIVITY SCENE ENTHUSIASTS OF BARCELONA

To maintain the popular, religious, philosophical, cultural, and artistic spirit that makes setting up a nativity scene more than just placing figures on a more or less successful stage.

Date of foundation: November 17, 1863.

Number of members: 166.

Address: Carrer Lledó 11 - Barcelona.

## Objectives:

Through the creation, promotion, and dissemination of the art of the nativity scene, to help foster unity and fraternity among the citizens, keeping alive the culture and popular traditions, and collectively building a better world. To be a national and international reference in the creation, teaching, promotion, and dissemination of nativity scene art in all its aspects.

## Main activities:

Courses, lectures, talks, promotion, and construction of nativity scenes.

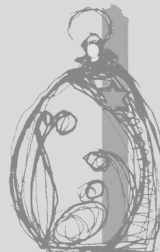
Website: [pessebristesdebarcelona.cat](http://pessebristesdebarcelona.cat)

Email: [hola@pessebristesdebarcelona.cat](mailto:hola@pessebristesdebarcelona.cat)

Facebook: [pessebristesdebarcelona](https://www.facebook.com/pessebristesdebarcelona)

Instagram: [@pessebristesbcn](https://www.instagram.com/pessebristesbcn)

X (formerly Tweeter): [@pessebristesBCN](https://twitter.com/pessebristesBCN)



# GIPUZKOAKO BELENZALEEN ELKARTEA

## "FRANCISCO DE ASÍS"

### ASSOCIATION BELENISTA OF GIPUZKOA

Abegi is the leading organization for the preservation and promotion of the nativity scene tradition in Gipuzkoa.

Foundation Date: February 7, 1947.

Number of Members: 268.

Address: Igeltegi kalea no. 3 bajo - Donostia – San Sebastián.

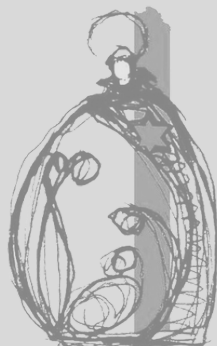
#### Objectives:

- Ensure the short and medium-term preservation of the nativity scene tradition in Gipuzkoa.
- Serve as a meeting point, provide training, and foster enthusiasm among individuals who, for any reason, wish to support this tradition

#### Main Activities:

- Creation of nativity scenes and organization of exhibitions in various churches and locations within the city and the territory of Gipuzkoa.
- Since 1986, complete management of the "Belén de la Plaza de Gipuzkoa," an iconic Christmas display in Donostia.
- Organization and conduct of introductory courses for individuals interested in nativity scenes and refresher courses for members.

Website: <http://asociacionbelenista.com/>



# SPANISH NATIVITY SCENE FEDERATION

**As a nativity scene enthusiast family, we are more effective and enjoy ourselves more when we share our passion for nativity scenes.**

Foundation Date: 1963.

Number of Members: 75 entities.

Address: Gobernador, 11 - Madrid.

## Objectives:

To study, promote, and spread the art of nativity scenes, serving as a link between various organizations.

## Main Activities:

National congress, annual competitions, Night of the Nativity, publication of Anunciata magazine and federation materials, virtual courses and talks, nativity scene discussions, management of study and planning activities, virtual exhibitions, and more.

## Publications:

Annually, Anunciata magazine and federation materials.

Website: [www.anunciata.es](http://www.anunciata.es)

Email: [feb.belenistas@gmail.com](mailto:feb.belenistas@gmail.com)

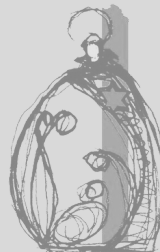
Facebook: [feb.belenistas](https://www.facebook.com/feb.belenistas)

Instagram: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.instagram.com/feb_belenistas)

Twitter (formerly): [@feb\\_belenistas](https://twitter.com/feb_belenistas)

Youtube: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.youtube.com/@feb_belenistas)

TikTok: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.tiktok.com/@feb_belenistas)



# CATALAN NATIVITY SCENE FEDERATION

**The Catalan Nativity Scene Federation, as an associative reality, is the expression of a shared commitment to collectively promote and construct nativity scenes and preserve our cultural heritage.**

Foundation Date: 1985.

Number of Members: 68 entities.

Address: C/ Lledó, 11 - Barcelona.

## Objectives:

To coordinate, promote, and foster nativity scenes and nativity scene art as a living cultural expression, and to work towards their preservation.

## Main Activities:

The "Trobada de Pessebristes de Catalunya," an annual gathering of nativity scene enthusiasts, now in its 51st edition.

The "Biennial de Pessebre Català," with 18 editions, showcasing the contemporary creativity in nativity scene art.

Biennial exhibition at the Centre d'Artesania de Catalunya, promoting the artistic and creative aspects of nativity scenes.

## Publications:

"Revista Naixement," an annual magazine with 13 editions / Nativity scene cut-outs for painting, published annually since 2010.

Book "Una vida en imatges, pensaments d'un pesebrista." / Book "Germans Castells, art i figures per al pessebre."

Book "Pessebres del món. Art, cultura i tradició" (out of print).

Website: [www.anunciata.es](http://www.anunciata.es)

Email: [feb.belenistas@gmail.com](mailto:feb.belenistas@gmail.com)

Facebook: [feb.belenistas](https://www.facebook.com/feb.belenistas)

Instagram: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.instagram.com/feb_belenistas)

Twitter (formerly): [@feb\\_belenistas](https://twitter.com/feb_belenistas)

Youtube: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.youtube.com/@feb_belenistas)

TikTok: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.tiktok.com/@feb_belenistas)



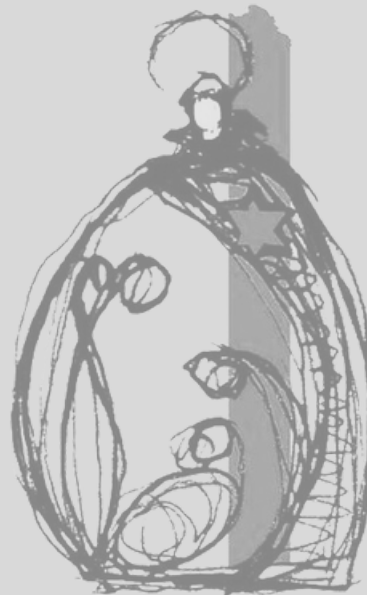
# PRAESEPIUM, EL SUEÑO DE SAN FRANCISCO

Praeseptium, the Dream of Saint Francis, is an exhibition jointly organized by the Spanish Nativity Scene Federation, the Catalan Nativity Scene Federation, the Association of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts of Barcelona, and the Gipuzkoako Belenzaleen Elkarte.

The term "Praeseptium" refers to the representation of the nativity scene, which is at the heart of the tradition symbolizing the birth of Jesus. On the other hand, the "dream of Saint Francis" alludes to the story of Saint Francis of Assisi, to whom the first recreation of the Nativity of Jesus on Christmas Eve in 1223 in Greccio, Italy, is attributed. This act is considered a crucial starting point for the tradition of nativity scenes.

Thus, eight hundred years ago, a dream has become a reality in our homes and around the world. Over the centuries, what Saint Francis of Assisi created with such passion has evolved into a deeply rooted tradition in our popular culture. It has been passed down from generation to generation and, as a result, has evolved into an expression of our intangible cultural heritage.

The main objective of the exhibition is precisely to highlight and emphasize the intangible cultural heritage that nativity scenes encompass, emphasizing its historical, artistic, and cultural significance.





# SEVILLE NATIVITY SCENE ASSOCIATION

## The Power of Enthusiasm

Foundation Date: 1978

Number of Members: 220

Address: C/ Francisco Elías Riquelme, 17 - Seville

### Objectives:

To promote the Christian sense of Christmas in homes and in the community and to encourage the creation of artistic nativity scenes.

### Main Activities:

Nativity scene techniques day, courses, workshops, and lectures on nativity scenes.

Christmas proclamation and poster for Seville.

Christmas concert.

Nativity scene competition for Seville and the province.

Selection of photographs.

Setting up nativity scenes in public spaces.

Various gatherings

### Publications:

Annual magazine "Angelus Domini."

Website: [www.anunciata.es](http://www.anunciata.es)

Email: [feb.belenistas@gmail.com](mailto:feb.belenistas@gmail.com)

Facebook: [feb.belenistas](https://www.facebook.com/feb.belenistas)

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Youtube: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.youtube.com/@feb_belenistas)

TikTok: [@feb\\_belenistas](https://www.tiktok.com/@feb_belenistas)



# CÓRDOBA NATIVITY CULTURAL ASSOCIATION

A Young Association with Ongoing Education

Foundation Date: 2010

Number of Members: 115

Address: Calle Sancho el Craso 7 - Córdoba

Objectives:

To teach, educate, and promote nativity scene art.

Main Activities:

Beginner and advanced courses, diorama and nativity scene exhibitions.

Publications:

National Congress book 2021

Website: [www.anunciata.es](http://www.anunciata.es)

Email: [feb.belenistas@gmail.com](mailto:feb.belenistas@gmail.com)

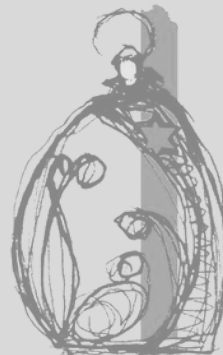
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Objectives:

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Main Activities:

Beginner and advanced courses, diorama and nativity scene exhibitions.

Publications:

National Congress book 2021

Email: [secretaria@asociacionbelenistacordoba.es](mailto:secretaria@asociacionbelenistacordoba.es)

Facebook: [asociaciónculturalBelenistadeCórdoba](https://www.facebook.com/asociacionculturalBelenistadeCordoba)

Instagram: [belenista\\_cordoba](https://www.instagram.com/belenista_cordoba)

Youtube: [Asociación Belenista de Córdoba](https://www.youtube.com/Asociación+Belenista+de+Córdoba)



# JEREZ NATIVITY SCENE ASSOCIATION

**The Jerez Nativity Scene Association, a pioneer in Andalusian nativity scene art, is characterized by innovation and creativity in their works, which they imbue with realism and luminosity, evoking profound sensations in those who contemplate them.**

Foundation Date: 07/02/1976

Number of Members: 170

Address: Chancillería 7 - Jerez de la Frontera

## Objectives:

Promotion and encouragement of the tradition of nativity scene art.

## Main Activities:

Promotion and creation of nativity scenes. Courses: Introduction to nativity scene art, Masterclas" of nativity scene techniques. Contests: Family and organization nativity scenes, nativity scene photography, Christmas poetry. "Virgen de Belén" choir to promote Christmas carols. Organization of classical Christmas music concerts.

## Publications:

Nativity scene outreach magazine "Lentisco," published annually since 1987 / Book "Los Nacimientos Jerezanos, Sus Técnicas de Construcción," 1990 / Booklet "Cómo Realizar un Nacimiento," 1981 / Booklet "Curso de Belenismo," 1984 / Booklet "La Vegetación del Nacimiento," 1995 / Booklet "Construcción del Río con Agua Simulada," 1997 / Christmas Carol Songbooks, 1996 / Collection of books "Velada Poética Navideña," since 1988 / Collection of Nativity Scene Sketches, 1997 / Collection of Sketches of Nativity Scenes As.B. de Jerez, 2000 / Collection of Nativity Scene Prints "Los Nacimientos Jerezanos y sus Técnicas de Construcción," 2003 - reissued in 2020 / Annual Collection of Christmas Cards, 1980 - 2002 / Collection of DVDs of Jerez Nativity Scenes, from 1996 to the present / Collection of CDs with traditional and original Christmas carols, from 1992 to the present / CD "Misa Navideña por Villancicos," an original composition, 2005.

Website: [www.belenistasdejerez.es](http://www.belenistasdejerez.es), [www.museodelbelen.es](http://www.museodelbelen.es)

Email: [asociación@belenistasdejerez.es](mailto:asociación@belenistasdejerez.es)

Facebook: Belenistas de Jerez

Instagram: [belenistas\\_de\\_jerez](https://www.instagram.com/belenistas_de_jerez)

Youtube: Belenistas de Jerez



# CULTURAL ASSOCIATION NATIVITY SCENE ARTISTS OF SAN FERNANDO EL REDENTOR

## Salt to the Island

Foundation Date: 11/09/1993

Number of Members: 110

Address: Calle Marconi n°2 - San Fernando

### Objectives:

Nativity scene art

### Main Activities:

Promoting Nativity scene art

### Publications:

Annual bulletin

Website: [Belenistasdelaisla.com](http://Belenistasdelaisla.com)

Email: [secretariabelenistasdelaisla@gmail.com](mailto:secretariabelenistasdelaisla@gmail.com)

Facebook: Belenistas de la isla

Instagram: Belenistasdelaisla



# INTERNATIONAL NATIVITY ART MUSEUM

**A refuge for the art and tradition of nativity scenes.**

Foundation Date: 2017

Address: Polígono Casería del Rey - Autovía A-92, Exit No. 138, 29532  
Mollina, Málaga

## Objectives:

To support the tradition and art of nativity scenes by providing a privileged space for their exhibition and preservation.

## Main Activities:

The 5,000-square-meter building features seven exhibition halls and a temporary hall where visitors can view over 100 artistic nativity scenes and dioramas, along with more than 2,000 exclusive figures created by renowned national and international sculptors. Outside, visitors can enjoy an exhibition of olive oil mills, rooms from a typical Andalusian home from the early 20th century, and agricultural tools.

## Publications:

Catalog I and appendix, Catalog II and appendix, catalog for the National Nativity Scene Congress held in Mollina.

Website: [www.museodebelenes.com](http://www.museodebelenes.com)

Email: [reservas@museodebelenes.com](mailto:reservas@museodebelenes.com)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MuseodeBelenesMollina>

Instagram: @museodebelenes

X: @museodebelenes





**Bird's eye  
view**



**Gold Medals  
Un-Foe-Prae**



# MONTSERRAT RIBES I DAVIU

Proposed by the Spanish Federation of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts, Catalan Nativity Scene Federation, Nativity Scene Association of Barcelona, and the Nativity Scene Association of Gipuzkoa.

She was born in Sabadell and has been residing in Castellar del Vallés since 1973, where she has her workshop and a permanent exhibition of the nativity figures she creates by molding clay with her hands. From 1968 to 1974, she studied Fine Arts and graduated in Engraving, Printing, Relief, Antique Restoration, Ceramics, Decoration, Painting, and Sculpture, specializing in the latter discipline.

As a decorative sculptor, she was part of the "Elisa" company for 30 years (1983-2013), creating an annual collection of decorative figures for various countries in the European Union, the USA, Canada, and Japan, with periodic exhibitions of her work in Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Paris, Brussels, Milan, Birmingham, Frankfurt, Utrecht, Toronto, Montreal, Sydney, Auckland (NZ), Alberta, and Mississauga (Canada).

Between 1978 and 1997, she ran her own school in Castellar del Vallés, dedicated to teaching clay modeling to children and adults. Over thirty years ago, she began to immerse herself in the world of nativity scenes after friends from the Nativity Scene Association of Castellar asked her to create figures for their nativity scenes. This commission marked a turning point in her career as a decorative sculptor, redirecting her sculptural work towards nativity figures from that moment on.

Since 1982, she has collaborated, creating nativity figures, with nearly all the Nativity Scene Associations in Catalonia and Spain, and since 2006, she has also worked with nativity scene enthusiasts from other countries in the European Union and the United States. In the creation of her figures, the sculptor displays all her artistry to infuse them with great tenderness and convey through them all the emotion and sentiment with which she creates her work.

For Montserrat, each and every one of her figures must reflect a feeling, uniting inspiration and technique. Each figure is created by hand, molding the clay with her hands and "a stick."

She has contributed as an author to some books and articles on nativity figures, where she has evoked her own artistic consciousness. She participates annually in nativity scene markets at the National Congresses organized by the Spanish Federation of Nativity Scene Enthusiasts, as well as in other national and international nativity scene forums.

In 2003, the Generalitat de Catalunya awarded her the title and diploma of "Master Craftsman" in the field of Sculpture. This recognition is given to individuals who have turned their profession into a craft or pedagogical practice to continue traditional crafts. They are people with a recognized professional history, technical mastery of their craft, demonstrated teaching skills, practiced expertise, and contributions to their craft. All of these qualities are embodied in Montserrat Ribes. The title of "Master Craftsman" is lifelong.



Today, Montserrat Ribes' nativity figures are part of the private collections of numerous nativity scene enthusiasts and collectors worldwide. Additionally, her figures are on display in the Nativity Scene Museum of Catalonia (Montblanc), the International Nativity Scene Art Museum (Mollina, Spain), the Nativity Scene Museum of the Vatican, the Duomo di Reggio Emilia (Italy), and the Collegiate Church of Orleans (France), among others.



# GÜNTHER HOPFGARTNER

In 1992, Günther Hopfgartner founded the Nativity Scene Association of Grödig along with Bertl Beran. Up until then, only the Nativity Scene Association of Lofer and some individual members in the Nativity Scene Association of Salzburg existed.

He participated in the renovation of the nativity scene in the church of Grödig, the replica of Baron Mayr Melnhof's chapel, and the construction of the Holy Sepulchre for historical landmarks in Grödig. He also donated a large nativity scene for "Licht ins Dunkel" (Light in the Darkness) and various social institutions.

After the Salzburg Regional Nativity Scene Association was on the verge of dissolution, it was initially taken over by Mr. DI Hofrat Simmerstätter and Mr. Beran Rupert (1994 - 1998). Günther Hopfgartner supported the work of the Regional Nativity Scene Association in the background.

In 1998, Günther Hopfgartner was elected President of the Salzburg Regional Nativity Scene Association. During his tenure, 12 other local associations were founded, resulting in 12 local associations within the Salzburg Regional Association. Mr. Hopfgartner served as an auditor for the Austrian Friends of the Nativity Scene Association and has been a board member since 1998.

In 2000, the Nativity Scene Building School was founded. Günther Hopfgartner worked intensively to make the opening of the Nativity Scene School in the provinces possible, including the administration of the Master Nativity Scene Builder examination. To this day, he never misses the opportunity to personally assess the oral examination of each participant. He is also deeply involved in the history of the nativity scene and always tries to inspire the school's participants with this history.

In 2000, the complete renovation of the Salzburg Provincial Nativity Scene was undertaken. With a significant financial effort, it became possible to restore the nativity scene carved by Professor Bernhard Prähauser in the city of Salzburg. It was not easy to take on the responsibility of preserving this treasure, especially at that time when the Regional Nativity Scene Association had very limited financial resources. The restoration cost more than 7,000 euros at that time, and Günther Hopfgartner managed to organize these funds.

In 2004, the Salzburg City Nativity Scene became the Salzburg Provincial Nativity Scene. Since then, the nativity scene is installed each year in a city where there is a nativity scene association. It has become a highly admired work. Günther Hopfgartner also made a significant personal effort to finance the redesign of the nativity scene and the purchase of a transport trailer.

In 2004, the Salzburger Krippenzeitung was first published. Mr. Hopfgartner conceived and produced the first newspaper of the Nativity Scene in Salzburg. Since then, the newspaper has been published annually and remains free for all members. Both the collection and the articles are written or reviewed by Günther Hopfgartner himself.

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In 2006, an association was formed with Waldbreitbach. This year, the Salzburg Nativity Scene Association joined with the Village Nativity Scene and the Friends of the Nativity Scene from Waldbreitbach, Germany. Many personal friendships have emerged from this association.

In 2007, the Nativity Scene Association of Bad Vigaun was founded. Mr. Hopfgartner established the nativity scene building association in Bad Vigaun. Under his leadership, the nativity scene of St. Margaret's Church, near Bad Vigaun, was created, as well as the nativity scene of the parish church in Bad Vigaun, and, from this year, the new Passion Cross in the parish church of Bad Vigaun. He also dedicates himself to providing nativity scene building courses, particularly enjoying courses with children. From September to Christmas, he spends at least three evenings a week in the nativity scene workshop. If he had his way, there would be a nativity scene in every room.

In 2011, he organized the International Alpine Nativity Pilgrimage in Maria Plain, with participants from various countries, including Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland.

In 2016, he organized the "100 years of the Salzburg Regional Nativity Scene Association" with a regional exhibition at the Franciscan Monastery. The Archbishop and Governor Haslauer visited the exhibition, and a commemorative publication titled "Festschrift 100 Jahre Landeskrippenverband Salzburg" was produced.

In 2017, he organized the International Alpine Nativity Pilgrimage in St. Leonhard/Grödig.

In 2017, a large local nativity scene was built and installed in Bad Vigaun, representing all the associations in the city with figures made by themselves. During his tenure, he supported all associations in their development efforts, whether through financial contributions or by providing free nativity scene building courses in the respective towns.

In 2019, nativity scenes in Austria were important to him, and he played a decisive role in the successful new beginning of the Austrian Friends of the Nativity Scene Association. In October 2020, he assumed the role of treasurer in the Austrian Friends of the Nativity Scene Association.

In 2021, he organized the Austrian Nativity Scene Pilgrimage to Michaelbeuern, which was able to take place despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

For these reasons, the Austrian Friends of the Nativity Scene Association proposes that Günther Hopfgartner be honored by Un-Foe-Prae at the 2023 World Nativity Congress. This recognition is primarily for his many years of tireless commitment to the nativity scene movement, whether at the regional, national, or international level.

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# MICHEL VINCENT

Michel VINCENT has been passionate about nativity scenes from a very young age. He started collecting nativity scenes and santons from childhood. He created his first nativity scene with santons of his own making. In 1983, he received guidance and training from a Meilleur Ouvrier de France santonnier. He is well aware of the works of the early santonniers of Marseille. While he draws inspiration from Provençal works, he also adapts his characters to the folklore and other traditions of his region, creating nearly 150 "Walloon" characters in 1984.

After completing secondary studies in languages and Latin, he chose to study history and later pursued Fine Arts, from which he graduated with a master's degree in Sculpture and Applied Arts. After obtaining a higher education teaching certificate, he was awarded a scholarship from the Lambert DARCHIS Foundation in Rome, founded in 1699. He spent several months in Italy and was a resident of the Belgian Academy in Rome. His research is dedicated to the history of nativity scenes through archives and libraries, without neglecting the practical perspective of renowned nativity scene artists.

In November 1991, he was one of the founders of the Belgian Association of Friends of the Nativity. He has been its director since 1993 and has often represented the association at international council meetings. He regularly participates in the association's exhibitions with his personal works or from his collection. He worked as a scientific collaborator at Krippana and became its curator between 1998 and 2005.

During the last Un-Foe-Præ congress, of which he was one of the organizers, he conceived a complete exhibition in the church of St-Remacle in Liège, which brought together nearly 200 nativity scenes from his collection. The works showcased the richness and variety of traditions in Belgium.

He is also responsible every year for setting up several nativity scenes in churches in Liège, their maintenance, and restoration. In addition to his work as a figurist or nativity scene artist, he is also the author of several books and dozens of rigorous scientific publications on nativity scenes and Christmas traditions. A synthesis book of over 200 pages on Belgian traditions is currently being completed.

He dedicates part of his time to teaching the art of nativity scene creation. He has taught modeling courses, particularly within associations in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Some of his participation in nativity scene exhibitions include:

In Belgium: Presentation of personal creations.

From 1981 to 1996, the creation of large-scale Walloon or Provençal nativity scenes in the church of the Sacred Heart in Robermont. Several of these nativity scenes have been featured in television reports. This collaboration has continued since then, as the church is less accessible and lacks adequate safeguards against theft.



112/87: Exhibition "A Thousand and One Saints" at the Museum of Walloon Life in Liège - Large nativity scene of Liège and antique santons. Writing part of the catalog.

From 1990 to 2005, constant participation in Krippana. The works made for the museum, including a diorama representing a district of the city of Stavelot, remain on display.

Exhibitions 12/1991, 1992, 1993 by invitation from the city of Brussels as part of a European nativity scene route, in 2001, 2006, 2008, and 2011.

11/1992: Participation in the exhibition "Le temps de Noël" at the Museum of Walloon Life. Various nativity scenes, statuary material, and writing of a lengthy ethnographic article for the French Community of Belgium (governmental organization responsible for education and culture).

2002-2008: Large nativity scene at the Botrange Nature Center museum in collaboration with Krippana; this 9m<sup>2</sup> ensemble has been completed year after year and reconstructs an overview of the fauna, landscapes, and customs of the Ardennes and Eifel regions in the 19th century.

Curator of several significant exhibitions between 2002 and 2009 at the MArAm museum in Liège (Museum of Religious Art and Mosan Art) in collaboration with Professor Albert Lemeunier†, curator, and the museum team; the last one took place as part of the "Grand Curtius" Museum.

Abroad: Participation in various international or local nativity scene exhibitions, including:

1987, 1990, 1997: International Santonniers Fair in Arles. In 2011, a loan of 300 pieces from Mediterranean islands and Provençal pieces. In 2018, about a hundred nativity scenes from Asia. Several scientific collaborations and catalog writing. In 2021, a loan of a hundred German nativity scenes.

1990: Exhibitions in Saint-Remy de Provence and Lyon.

1993: Sisteron, loan of the large Provençal nativity scene.

1996: Forum des Halles, Paris. Several loans for the windows of the Walloon-Brussels Center in Paris.

2002: Diocesan Museum of Graz (Austria), loan of nativity scenes and writing part of the catalog.

2003 and 2004 creation of large nativity scenes of 60m<sup>2</sup> in Maastricht. Several participations in the "Crib Trail" in Cologne, in 2015 the assembly of a complete exhibition of over 80 nativity scenes and Walloon nativity scenes, most of them old, and some personal works for an exhibition in Cologne City Hall. Cologne and Liège have been sister cities since 1958.

2006: Diocesan Museum of Barcelona (Pedralbes Abbey).

2008: Museum of the Government of Spaanse in Maastricht: loan of the Liège nativity scene.



I2012: Barcelona - loan of Belgian and Dutch nativity scenes as part of the 150th anniversary of the Catalan Association of Friends of the Nativity.

Participation in the Krippenweg of Rurdorf (Association of Friends of the Crib Rhineland-Westphalia) and participation on several occasions in the construction of the church nativity scene. Museum of the Nativity of Muzeray (Meuse department, France): loan of many nativity scenes and scientific collaboration from the museum's inception, as well as the biennial nativity scene festival in the streets of the village.

Personal works are in nativity scene museums in Rome, Brembo di Dalmine (Bergamo), Madrid, Pamplona, Hadek-Kralove (Czechia), and in private collections in Germany, California, Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, Brazil... Collaborations in various magazines in Belgium, Germany, and Italy.



# FRANZ GRIESHOFFER

In 2009, Franz Grieshofer assumed the role of one of the two presidents of the Association of Friends of the Nativity of Austria. The then presidents of the provinces of Vienna and Lower Austria asked him if he would take on this task, and he simply said yes, without having a precise understanding of the situation and the responsibilities within the association.

He was familiar with the Association of Friends of the Nativity, although he followed their activities rather peripherally. Occasionally, he would visit Christmas exhibitions in Vienna and Lower Austria, and most importantly, he read the association's magazine, "Krippenfreund," which was regularly published and to which he was subscribed through his workplace, the Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde. This ethnological museum, founded in 1895, not only had the association's magazine but also an extensive and valuable collection of nativity scenes from the entire former monarchy area. This formed the basis of his scientific approach to nativity scenes. During his thirty years at the museum (1975 - 2005), the last ten as the director, he had the opportunity to study nativity scenes intensively. Numerous exhibitions and publications attest to this. The highlight was the 2008 Christmas exhibition, which presented nativity scenes as a reflection of past life. A lavishly illustrated catalog was also published.

However, his encounters with nativity scenes date back to his earliest childhood, which he spent in Bad Ischl, where he was born on November 14, 1940. It was a tradition to visit Leopold Moroder's large Eastern nativity scene in the confessional chapel after Christmas mass. The life-sized and lifelike figures always evoked his childlike wonder. During his school years, which he completed in Bad Ischl, it was a family custom for his parents to take him to see the nativity scenes on local farms, where nativity scenes covered in moss filled entire rooms. At that time, he could still admire the famous Kalß nativity scene, which can now be seen year-round in the municipal museum of Ischl in its private location. The "Kripperlroas" also took him to Ebensee, the stronghold of impressive landscape nativity scenes in the Salzkammergut.

His proximity to folk culture awakened a desire in him to deepen his knowledge, so he began studying folklore and prehistory in 1964, first in Innsbruck and then in Vienna, where he earned his doctorate in 1971. By stroke of luck, he found his first position at the Austrian Museum of Folklore. Here, he encountered them abundantly again, nativity scenes from Tyrol and the Salzkammergut, which became his profession and calling.

In the Association of Friends of the Nativity of Austria, he served as the association's president from 2009 to 2020, and after the statute reform in 2020, he became the federal president until the autumn of 2021. During this time, he was also part of the editorial team of the association's magazine, "Der Krippenfreund," and contributed to shaping this publication, which has been published since 1909. He also wrote a large number of articles for it. He also represented Austria at various meetings and events of the Un-Foe-Prae, and the organization of the World Nativity Congress in 2012 in Innsbruck by the Association of Friends of the Nativity of Austria was also part of his mandate.

At the last General Assembly of the Association, held in October 2021, Dr. Franz Grieshofer was appointed an honorary member.





# The Nativity Museum of Molina

In 2017, "The Nativity Museum of Molina" was inaugurated in Molina, a small village in the province of Malaga, Spain, thanks to the Diaz-Caballero Foundation. Behind this foundation are Antonio Diaz, Ana Caballero, and their two children, Antonio Jesus and Ana Maria.

The idea for this space originated with Antonio Diaz, Ana Caballero, and Antonio Bernal after realizing that every year, artistically crafted nativity scenes of exceptional quality had to be destroyed because their creators or associations lacked space to store these works.

The Nativity Museum serves as a sanctuary for the art and tradition of nativity scenes. Its purpose is to provide a privileged space for the exhibition and preservation of the tradition and art of nativity scenes.

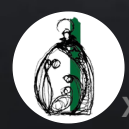
The Nativity Museum of Molina is a modern building designed and constructed to house nativity scenes from around the world. Its over 5,000 square meters encompass various exhibition rooms, basements equipped for the conservation and restoration of art pieces, workshops, an auditorium for events and conferences, garden areas, a café-restaurant, a shop, and rooms for nativity scene creators who are building, repairing, or assembling their cribs.

What was initially a project to create a 150-square-meter exhibition hall to house representations of six nativity scenes from all over Spain turned into the world's largest and most modern nativity museum after discussions with representatives of the nativity scene world.

For over fifteen years, the foundation collected nativity scenes and figures from all over the world, especially from Spain and Italy, but also from the rest of Europe, America, India, Palestine, and other regions. This project would not have been possible without the collaboration and selfless participation of hundreds of nativity scene artists who donated their works to make this museum a reality.

The museum houses more than 7,000 pieces and a vast number of dioramas that have been collected by the museum's founders.





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