

CHRISTMAS GUEST ARTWORK, 2022

Nun's Bethlehem **Nun's Nativity Scene**

Mallorca, circa 1890

Paper, cardboard, shells and baked and polychromed clay
45 x 51 x 33 cm (overall dimensions with display case)
Zamora, Peña Martín Traditional Nativity Collection



A typical 'Majorcan Nun's Bethlehem' in a glass case, which the cloistered nuns used to assemble as a gift for their relatives, friends, or benefactors. If Mallorca's status as an island has meant that its heritage is particularly well preserved, the same is true of many of its stained-glass nativity scenes, due to their closed nature. These nativity scenes, intended for domestic piety, imitated the larger ones in their main features, which are genuine to Majorcan nativity scenes: the predominant cave, decorations made of crushed shells, and the appearance of the Glory.

The nativity scene consists of a cave, shaped like the mouth of an oven, made with rough paper, crumpled and glued, so that sand, shells, moss (Bethlehem herb), flowers and plants would adhere to it. The cave, and especially its floor, is decorated with crushed shells; shells and conch shells, which symbolise birth into the afterlife, in other words, resurrection. A garland of paper flowers surrounds the front of the cave, the presence of which is symbolic, since Jesus is identified with spring, a nature in full bloom because of his birth.

The cave is home to the Holy Family. The Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, the ox, and the mule surround and venerate the Christ Child. Three shepherds, dressed in regional Majorcan clothes, come to adore the Christ Child. They wear trousers or bloomers and dark jackets, showing their white shirts over their chests, and they wear wide black hats. On their shoulders they wear a goatskin, which was the natural defence of the island villagers against the weather. The one closest to the Infant Jesus is shown kneeling, having left his hat on the ground, and offering a lamb; the next one holds his hat in his hand, while he carries a basket on the other arm, and the third is shown removing his hat, and in his other arm he holds a basket of red apples. As for the authorship of the figures, made of moulded, baked, and polychromatic clay, they are reminiscent of the coarse or crude art of the Santet junior, as Father Llopart called it.

Above the Mystery appears the heavenly glory, presided over by the Holy Spirit, consisting of a background of clouds, bordered with the heads of paper cherubs, which are brightly coloured lithographs. The glory is surrounded by the figures of several angels, also made of chromolithographed paper, which were used in Majorcan nativity scenes from the mid-19th century to the beginning of the 20th century.

As for the nativity window, it is a simple box with a single pane of glass on the front, supported by four turned legs.

Text by the curator: Ángel Peña Martín

