



NATIVITY SCENE FIGURES BY RAMON AMADEU

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# TRADITIONAL NATIVITY SCENES IN OLOT



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THE NATIVITY SCENE AT CASA TRINXERIA, OLOT (GARROTXA)

OLOT, THE CAPITAL OF THE GARROTXA, IS ONCE MORE BECOMING AN IMPORTANT CENTRE FOR THE ART OF THE NATIVITY SCENE, A TOWN WHERE THE “PESSEBRE” RECEIVES THE RECOGNITION IT DESERVES WITHIN THE GENERAL FIELD OF ARTISTIC CREATION.





THE THREE WISE MEN BY RAMON AMADEU



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**T**he Birth of Our Lord, like other episodes from Christ's childhood, is a subject that has inspired artists throughout the ages. We find the scene in Romanesque and Gothic art, the Renaissance, the Baroque, in Gaudí's Modernism and in other pictorial or sculptural movements or schools.

As long ago as the Renaissance the churches of Olot had altarpieces in which the Nativity played an important part. Local and visiting artists were contracted to carry out these works, which in the course of time were gradually replaced by the bombastic, gilded Baroque, in which the relief scenes on the altarpieces are lightly and skilfully polychromed. The altarpieces of Pere Matas for the church of Santa Maria de Segueró (la Garrotxa), and of Pau Costa for the Capella del Roser in the parish church of Sant Esteve in Olot, are good examples of the artistic trends that existed in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries respectively.

Because of this, this familiarization with art was bound to stir up the sensitivity of the people, who were fully able to appreciate what was put before them. The leaders of the brotherhoods were aware of this interest and competed for sculptors and painters to create worthy works which would incite piety at the same time as they caught people's attention.

It was during this period and in this context, during the eighteenth century, that work started at Casa Trinxeria, in the very centre of Olot, on a nativity scene of extraordinary characteristics, the only one of its

kind in our country. This stately home, which became municipal property a few years ago, still contains the furniture and decoration of that century. The nativity scene is in a glass cabinet taking up more than two walls in one of the rooms on the southern side of the house. The figures of this hand-made nativity scene are distributed around the different spaces arranged in steps and filling the whole cabinet from top to bottom. Each of the finely detailed clay figures shows its own peculiarities. There are Biblical characters and others illustrating local types, some of which are wearing the traditional red *barretina* on their head. The scenes in this *pessebre* certainly don't answer to a methodical chronological order; instead the figures are grouped together according to the room available. Amongst the scenes represented are the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Anunciata, the dream of St Joseph, the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the Innocents. The collection includes a range of animals dotted here and there and ornamental vegetation, made out of paper and painted wooden balls, covering chalk formations and concretions. There are also castles, cut out of paper, with soldiers on guard, scenes from the passion and death of Christ, the Virgin of the Tura and pictures of the saints venerated by this wealthy family, such as Sant Narcís, Sant Joaquim and Santa Anna. The Olot branch of the family goes back to Josep de la Trinxeria, who was born in Prats de Molló and joined the guerrillas fighting against the French occupation of

the Roussillon following the Treaty of the Pyrenees.

The arrival in Olot, fleeing from the war and the French, of the Barcelona sculptor Ramon Amadeu, who produced work for the town's churches, was providential. During his stay, from 1809 to 1814, he also worked on the creation of nativity scene figures inspired in the world around him. Amadeu only had to copy the faces, the clothes, the expressions and the gestures of the people with their peasant air, assiduous visitors to the town on account of its being an important centre for commercial, industrial and social activities. With his hands he made detailed, remarkably expressive, slightly baroque human and animal figures which many of his followers took as their model. In this way, the art of the nativity scene took a strong hold in Olot. Every year, during the Christmas season, well-off homes and craftsmen built family Nativity scenes which people could visit on days and at times established beforehand. In the last third of the nineteenth century, groups of people would go from house to house to see these Nativity scenes. At the chapel of Sant Francesc, on the top of the volcano of Montsacopa, there was another one. There were plenty of artists who created figures—such as Pere Pla, Miquel Soler (*Coliques*), M. Blay, Josep Clarà, Celestí Devesa and others—, many of which were made in molds and commercialized by "El Arte Cristiano" and other workshops making religious figures and founded after 1880. The art of the Nativity scene was growing in popularity, and one





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POPULAR NATIVITY SCENE

of the factors that most contributed in the twentieth century was the draw organised every Christmas by the "Associació Catequística d'Olot" for the children attending religious instruction. In 1913, for example, Melcior Domenge donated some 400 figures to this draw. The Nativity scene movement entered a phase of popular expansion which by 1915 included a competition organised by the local weekly *El Deber*. The names of Manuel Sellas, Sadurní Brunet and Jaume Casas, amongst many others, have a direct link with more

recent artists like Danésjordi, Juli Batallé, Maurici Valls, Manuel Traité, who have kept alive the flame of a local tradition that preserves the characteristics listed by Father Basili de Rubí in 1933 in his *Manual del Pessebrista Olotí*. With this legacy it was possible to hold the "Mostra Internacional de Pessebrisme d'Olot 92-93", which is a continuation of the "Mostra de Pessebres d'Olot". Apart from the work of local artists, it was possible to see anthological exhibitions of Nativity scenes created by members of the country's Nati-

vity scene clubs and associations or else by specially invited foreign regions or countries. Last year the exhibition was held from 11 December 1993 to Candlemas Day, and the Sabadell Nativity scene club presented a comprehensive selection of their best work in Olot.

Altogether, then, the capital of the Garrotxa is once more becoming an important centre for the Nativity Scene, a town where the art of the *pessebre* receives the recognition it deserves within the general field of artistic creation. ■