

A Nativity Scene by 'La Roldana'

Nativity scenes represent and celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, a tradition that spread throughout Europe from the Middle Ages onwards and has survived until the present day in Catholic countries. This genre further enhanced Luisa Roldán's reputation, and several of her works are still kept in Seville.

This Nativity Scene, which is on public display for the first time ever, stands out for its quality and excellent state of conservation. The stylistic features indicate that it corresponds to the artist's Seville period, prior to her move to the Royal Court. Carved in cedar wood, the small figures reveal the sculptor's ability to work with a range of materials and on a small scale, which is also reflected in her terracotta groups. Her skill at portraying expressions can be seen in the figures' facial features. The superb original *estofado* – the application of paint over gold leaf - is most likely the work of Tomás de los Arcos, the artist's brother-in-law who was responsible for these techniques in the studio.

'The Mystery' – the Christ Child, the Virgin Mary and Joseph, have been conserved until the present day, with one of the pages that formed the Procession of the Magi. This is the only procession attributed to the artist, and is part of the collection of the National Sculpture Museum in Valladolid. Both groups, the Mystery and the Procession, were originally part of Seville collections and the similarities between them indicate that they were part of the same set.

A herald, whose horse was later modelled in clay by José de Cárdenas into 1727, precedes the Procession. Behind him we find four retinues: the entourage accompanying Melchior, wearing Roman robes, comprising a page and a herald mounted on a unicorn; in turn, Gaspar, dressed as a Turk, is flanked by two servants; finally, and in keeping with tradition, Balthasar is portrayed as a black king riding a dromedary, like his herald, and is followed by a considerable number of pages.

The fourth group has been identified as that of the mythical King of Tarsus. His anachronistic robes are reminiscent of those of the reign of King Philip II, hailed at the time as the new Salomon. Manuscripts such as those of Friar Juan de Pineda and Friar Gerónimo de la Concepción, had identified southern Spain, and in particular Cadiz, as the site of Tartessos, the kingdom that helped Salomon build the Temple of David, as justification for the claim of the biblical origins of the Spanish monarchy.