

The dialectical relationship between popular and hegemonic culture

The nativity scenes in Plaça de Sant Jaume, Barcelona

The presence of religious symbolism in a public space is a controversial issue. Every Christmas there is a debate on the suitability of installing nativity scenes in public squares. As part of my doctoral thesis *Simbologia religiosa a l'espai públic. El cas dels pessebres públics i les possibilitats d'innovació en el pessebrisme* (Religious symbolism in public spaces. The case of public nativity scenes and the possibilities of innovation in the nativity scene movement) directed by Dr. Josefina Roma, which I defended in January 2017, I ethnographically analysed the reactions generated by the nativity scene in Plaça de Sant Jaume, in Barcelona, that allowed me to appreciate the dynamics established between hegemonic and popular culture. Nativity scenes that veer away from the idealised, traditional image of the manger generate a dialectic that favours the evolution of the tradition. Some ideas initially rejected by the establishment, which represent hegemonic culture, end up

being incorporated over the years, with little fuss. In this way we verify how the dialectic proposed by Lombardi-Sartriani (1978) between popular and hegemonic culture is fulfilled.

The data I analysed comes from articles published in the press and in-depth interviews. I have established certain reaction categories relating to the presence of religious symbols in public spaces, as well as the possibility of evolving and updating popular traditions.

The conclusions of this study give us elements that help us understand and reflect upon similar situations brought about by the presence of religious symbols in public spaces.

From the institutional assignment to the project

In 2004, Barcelona City Council selected Escola Massana, on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, to design the public nativity scene to be placed in Plaça de Sant Jaume. It has become the custom, over recent years, to invite one

The nativity scenes in Plaça de Sant Jaume, Barcelona, first displayed in 2004, have allowed the nativity scene movement and popular culture to reflect on these traditions and the possibilities of renewing them. Studying the reactions to that nativity scene allows us to observe the dialogue established between hegemonic and popular culture. A comparative analysis of how the nativity scenes have developed over successive years shows how this dialogue makes it possible for traditions to evolve.

Els pessebres de la plaça de Sant Jaume de Barcelona, d'ençà del que s'hi va instal·lar l'any 2004, aporten al pessebrisme i a la cultura popular la possibilitat de reflexionar sobre les tradicions i les seves possibilitats de renovació. L'estudi de les reaccions que va provocar aquell pessebre ens permet observar el diàleg que s'estableix entre la cultura hegemònica i la cultura popular. Una anàlisi comparativa de l'evolució dels pessebres d'anys successius mostra com aquest diàleg possibilita l'evolució de les tradicions.



Enric Benavent

COL·LECTIU EL BOU I LA MULA
Member of the Col·lectiu El Bou i la Mula, author of various studies and books on the nativity scene movement. He holds a PhD from Ramon

Llull University and is a lecturer and member of the GIAS research group, in the Faculty of Social Education and Social Work Pere Tarrés.

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Los pesebres de la plaza de Sant Jaume de Barcelona, desde el que se instaló en 2004, aportan al pessebrisme y la cultura popular la posibilidad de reflexionar sobre las tradiciones y sus posibilidades de renovación. El estudio de las reacciones que generó aquel pesebre nos permite observar el diálogo que se establece entre la cultura hegemónica y la cultura popular. Un análisis comparativo de la evolución de los pesebres de años sucesivos muestra cómo este diálogo posibilita la evolución de las tradiciones.

of the city's design schools to plan and implement this manger scene, together with the Rubió i Tudurí Gardening College.

To carry out this assignment, Massana school held a competition for third year Art and Design Project students to select and develop a proposal. This subject was directed by the lecturer Jordi Canudas, and took place between September and December, right at the beginning of the academic year. It was initially difficult to fill the commission, both on the part of the teachers, as they were working on the curriculum for the art of commitment course, and the students, since, although licensed to participate in a contest and be involved in the city's nativity scene, many of them did not feel motivated by such a project. In the end, several groups of students formed who then worked on projects for the competition.

The process of designing the nativity scene was the same as for any other project they undertook at the school: there was an initial phase of research, they developed a sketch, and then they constructed a model.

The research phase was exhaustive. It began with a general presentation on Christmas, as well as the nativity scene and its symbols, given by the lecturer Josep Mañà. From this point, and with the help of the students, various very different concepts took shape, relating to people's personal experiences of Christmas, like nostalgia, gatherings, and consumerism, or in reference to the festival's historical and pagan backgrounds, as well as the anthropological side of the festivities. They analysed popular nativity scenes and the figures typical of traditional Catalan versions, to see which figures are involved, what they symbolise, how they are dressed, what offerings they bring, and so on. They questioned the possibility of introducing today's real-

ity into the nativity scene, of including modern technology. They also questioned which language should be used, how to make reference to the city—as this was a commission from the City Council to be located right in the middle of Barcelona—, about who the manger scene was addressed at, and whether the target audience comprised just children or the entire general public.

The students particularly noted the presence of the townsfolk in the nativity scene, first looking at the nativities from Naples and Provence, and, subsequently, the Catalan figures. They realised with surprise that the manger scene brings together many meanings and symbols that go beyond religion *per se*.

In the course of the research and reflection, the following key words emerged: periphery, residual, marginal, and poverty. The students therefore wondered how they could illustrate the things that are peripheral in the centre of the city. Little by little, two concepts became clearer:

- It had to be an urban nativity scene.
- It had to use contemporary artistic language.

This enabled the project to be tied to classwork based on contextual art and the art of commitment. This approach does not look to represent reality, but demands a co-presence in which the artist introduces themselves into the landscape to work on and modify it. It is participatory art that seeks to involve the viewer. The work of art is not a finished product, it is an event that can benefit collective life and may interest many audiences. Ardenne (2006: 121) describes the artist, not as someone who creates a work from a position of authority, but who extends an invitation, who encourages the public to speak and listen, in other words, create

collectively. Participatory art considers the viewer to be a citizen, a political being, and modifies the notion of public, revoking the principle of passivity.

It should be noted that the majority of the students were not involved in the nativity scene, nor did they have a clear religious reference in their lives, but they were able to see that traditions bring together feelings, ancestral values and cultural symbols. This generated interest that motivated the search for more detail in the research phase. The formal possibilities of the nativity scene were then considered: how to use images, text, and observer participation. From this analysis, the students went on to ask what they wished to convey, the message they wanted to send out through the manger scene, and they decided to re-read the tradition with the intention of updating it.

Winning project: *Pessebre Barcelona*

The winning project focused on the public square and the daily activity there. Its design was based on knowledge of nativity scene traditions and an analysis of its origins. The idea involved transposing the popular nativity scene into the present day, to include a representation of the people, including their jobs and daily activities. The nativity scene was an urban space, a fragment of public park. And the citizens were the figurines, paralleling each other's activities—the woman fetching water, the shepherd, the washerwoman, the woodcutter, and so on. And the visitors, too, were incorporated into the whole, becoming yet more characters.

One of the great ideas of this winning project was to ensure a clear parallel with the traditional nativity scene. *Pessebre Barcelona* comprised a set of silhouettes made from photographs of modern people mirroring the actions of the figures in 19th century nativity scenes. The intention was to translate

the characters from the popular manger scene into people typical in the city. If the traditional nativity scene represented the townsfolk around the time Jesus was born, who would these people be in a 21st century city? The parallels between the figures in the popular stable setting and the photographs of people were:

The shepherd carrying a bundle of firewood: a man distributing butane gas bottles; the washerwoman: a lady with a bottle of detergent; the musician: a young man with dreadlocks playing the guitar; the woman fetching water: a lady carrying a couple of plastic bottles of water; a snowman: a tourist; the farmer: a workers from the parks and gardens; the spinner: a lady knitting; the woman with a basket: a lady with a shopping trolley; the woman giving food to the chickens: a lady feeding the pigeons; the shepherd bringing an offering: a man with presents; the woman with a basket of eggs: a lady with a dozen eggs; the man making *alloli* (garlic mayonnaise): a lady eating salad; the bread man: a young person with baguettes under his arm; a shepherd with the sheep: a man with a dog.

It was decided that the silhouettes of the figures in the Nativity should not be made using modern-day people, and they were instead created from the photographs of popular figures from the ethnological museum. The students considered that this was the best way to maintain the tie with tradition and at the same time say this was a nativity scene. They thought that making silhouettes using contemporary figures would not have helped build this link between the representation and the Nativity concept. On the other hand, Baroque or Neoclassical figures would not have meshed with the process they had been following. The entire nativity scene was a translation of popular figures into contemporary urban characters, and therefore the figures had to



"The farmer" Nativity Scene BCN (December 2004). ESCOLA MASSANA.



"The Woman of Water" Nativity Scene BCN (December 2004). ESCOLA MASSANA



Figures from the Nativity. Nativity Scene BCN (December 2004). ESCOLA MASSANA

make this relationship with the popular nativity scene very clear.

Analysis of the reactions that appeared in the media.

Getting the nativity scene movement into the press is not an easy job. The news relating to this topic almost always ends up being simply a reference to clichés. There are, however, certain recurrent issues seen each year at the beginning of the Christmas season. These include the Santa Llúcia Fair and the *caganer*, the ‘pooping man’ – a mainstay of the Catalan manger scene. In addition, it is typical to see news relating to the theft of Nativity figures or acts of vandalism to public displays.

Some years ago, the media got a new date for its Christmas diary: the inauguration of the nativity scene in Plaça Sant Jaume, in Barcelona, the timing of which, in some way, marked the beginning of the Christmas season. The attraction of this nativity scene from the media’s perspective changed dramatically as of Christmas 2004. The nativity scene whipped up a new media storm due to the novelty of its approach, proposing a dialogue between tradition and modernity, thanks to its aesthetics. The installation provoked many different reactions and, consequently, increased the attention the Plaça de Sant Jaume nativity scene received each year. As its creator proudly stated: all these reactions contributed to the fact that this was the highest profile manger scene ever in the history of the Catalan nativity scene movement. The proof is that, thirteen years later, many people still remember it.

I have dug up the news and opinion articles that were published relating to that nativity scene. I can start, therefore, with opinions published years ago without any interaction between the researcher and the people who expressed their views. I have classi-

fied and categorised what was said, either in favour of or against the idea. Finally, I have grouped the comments transcribed literally from the original sources according to certain core concepts that allow us to see how the views are contrasted.

a) First impressions of the nativity scene. We can see that the initial positive or negative reaction to the display is more linked to emotional than rational aspects. Those who value it positively express superficial feelings of surprise, novelty, or the fact it is “*fun; original; something new; provides variety; a good idea¹; it is good to change²; surprise; it makes me laugh; it is novel; you have to keep adapting; it is provocative³*”, while those that negatively assess it are more concerned with the feelings involved “*lacking mystery, magic and emotion⁴; very poor nativity scene; has no soul; lacks tenderness; it upsets me; traumatising nativity scene⁶; controversial design; the idea is idiotic⁷; it’s a zero*”.

b) A second block of comments can be grouped around tradition. In this section we see that tradition is understood in different ways. We could say that there are two trends: one is evolutionary in nature, linked to ideas of progress, which admits that tradition is not immutable: “*transposition to the present day, an updating of the nativity scene⁸; re-reading of the traditional manger scene⁹; it is refreshing¹⁰; adapts old concepts; transported to the present; tradition does not have to be copied¹¹; fits with tradition¹²; it symbolises the tradition of using local characters¹³; it maintains the tradition¹⁴; it recognises the modernity of the Nativity¹⁵*”; and another is opposed to change. Tradition is both something that cannot be touched or that may be adapted, and this is the starting point for the way people received this nativity scene, a display that was clearly conceived by the artists from a vision open to tradition and with the intention

of adapting this to the present day. Those who express negative comments hark back to an idealised nativity that “*has ceased to be traditional; we want to think about the festival as we have always done, with the corny nativity scenes we have always known; if God came and saw this manger¹⁶; this is not a nativity scene¹⁷*”

c) Comments that appeal to religiousness. Among these comments we see that people who feel a negative connotation, also view the nativity scene as deliberate belligerence towards Christianity or religiousness: “*simple propaganda¹⁸; it’s revenge¹⁹; it wants to bring about the end of our culture’s moral and ideological principles²⁰; a lay nativity scene²¹; calling this human grouping a nativity scene is confusing reality; it’s a mockery; it stinks of anticlericalism²²*”. From the negative comments you can get the idea of a certain moral and cultural essentialism. On the other hand, the way those people who make positive comments view it leads us to a deeply religious interpretation of the proposal “*it is not a lay nativity scene²³, we are all called by God; you need to look for the symbolism in the figures²⁴*”.

d) Opinions that emphasise the aesthetic aspect. Here we find two variables, one centred on personal taste, and another that tries to aesthetically reason. The aesthetic novelty is not accepted by some “*I prefer a more classic style; aesthetically debatable; the figures should always be Baroque; the figures are too realistic; tacky²⁵; the worst things are the figures of Joseph, the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus*”, and yet, in contrast, others recognise it as “*innovative; modern²⁶; good design; up to date; contemporary artwork; it has a ground-breaking air about it²⁷, kudos to the figurine makers for the nativity figures²⁸*”. It is remarkable that, on the one hand, the hyperrealism of the figures is criticised, while at the same time there was no acknowledgement

of the figures chosen for the nativity scene, taken from a popular nativity scene and, therefore, closely linked to tradition.

- e) A final block of comments are grouped under the heading of public repercussion: from these comments we find that generating controversy in the opinions of the public is simultaneously considered a positive aspect: *“there is a lot of talk about it so many people come and have a look²⁹; it maintains the tradition³⁰; it is the highest profile nativity scene³¹; it respects municipal bye-laws; it has exposed many prejudices³²”,* and negatively *“the most highly criticised nativity scene in history³³; they understand it is controversial and they do not like it³⁴; demand its withdrawal³⁵; women are doing traditional jobs... it should have other people in the city, like the window cleaners³⁶”*. However, what this last negative soundbite does, by saying that some characters typical on the public streets are missing, is show that the commenter understands the intention of the nativity scene's artists perfectly.

The great disparity of reactions highlighted the importance of the nativity scene in our traditions. There are a large number of factors involved in the comments we have seen: from the purely aesthetic to those that refer to religious symbolism. The experience of this nativity scene marked a turning point in regard to those that would be displayed on this site in later years, and invited them to reflect on the survival of traditions and the possibility of renewal.

Should traditions be renewed?

The 2004 nativity scene sparked reflection on traditions, on how to transmit them, and whether or not they should be updated. The people who designed the manger scene clearly intended to take a tradition and translate it into a

contemporary aesthetic. It was by no means an impromptu manger scene. In fact the students made a serious study of the traditions surrounding the world of the *pessebre* and its figures, based on the books of Joan Amades and other basic literature dealing with this subject, to determine the figures of the popular nativity scene, as well as their symbolism. Next, interpreting the tradition, they transposed the typologies of the characters from the popular nativity scene to a new social and cultural framework. The decisions they made when translating the traditional characters had to respond to the symbolism of the figures and, at the same time, they had to be coherent with contemporary society. One of the results of this interpretation of the characters meant, for example, that it was impossible to incorporate the pooping figure of the *caganer*, or its urban reinterpretation – the urinating *pixaner* – , in order not to contravene the municipal bye-laws. For the same reason, the figure of the lady feeding the pigeons was omitted.

Traditions have their dynamics of birth, maturity, growth and change. Hobsbawm (1988: 13) talks about the origin of certain traditions that seem old but which are not. He talks about invented traditions, how they come about in a way that is difficult to recognise, in a brief and measurable period of time. However, Llobera (1994: 223) clarifies this statement, arguing that the new forms of tradition are rooted in ancient ones, without which they would not be successful.

In the process of transmitting traditions, this phenomenon of the origin of tradition must also be taken into account. All traditions have their own beginnings and in order to fully analyse the values, norms, or behaviour they channel, it is necessary to see where this origin is. Some traditions have survived better than

others. What provides us elements to analyse is not so much their endurance but the origin and journey of the traditions, as well as the processes of reinterpretation and recreation they have undergone. Ethnological heritage, says Josefina Roma (1995: 42), has taken hundreds and thousands of years to purify and modify itself, and it is precisely this peculiarity of evolution and constant adaptation to new circumstances that gives it its own distinct identity in different places.

The presence of nativity scenes in public squares can be considered an invented tradition. Originally the construction of these displays was restricted to private spaces: firstly, monasteries or churches and, later, the palaces of nobles or the salons of stately homes, where they were exhibited in showcases, visible throughout the year as a decorative element within the home. The nativity scene is an element of the Christmas celebration that originally had a clear devotional function. Although at the end of the 18th century there were already signs of the presence of popular nativity scenes, it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries that the middle and working classes became fond of constructing nativity scenes and creating their figures. This produced what Hobsbawm (1988) had been talking about when he said that in the face of an unvarying tradition, a custom is moulded to give it new meaning, even being re-invented. The nativity scene that people incorporated into their homes, trying to simulate what they saw in the houses of the wealthy folk, unvaryingly maintained traditional elements, the scenes and characters, while at the same time including new components, in other words, the tradition was recreated. These nativity displays were not fixed decorative elements like they were in the more well-to-do houses, but rather ephemeral constructions that had to be remade each year, with

only the figurines and a few other elements being preserved.

The new nativity scenes did not lose their devotional character, in principal, although at the same time they became less formal and included the personality of the maker in the plastic expression of the Birth story. The roles in the popular nativity scene responded to this recreation of tradition and the depiction became a folkloric reality representing the characters specific to each place, their clothing, houses, landscape, and activities. In fact, representations of the birth of Jesus in all its artistic forms have always admitted anachronistic elements that regionally and culturally identify the creators.

The custom of setting up and taking down the nativity scene makes people apply their manual dexterity to the display each year, striving to achieve a good effect. Observing nature and being ingenious enough to combine the elements well are important components of this popular art form that shows how tradition is enriched and transformed into a creative leisure activity. The manger scenes in houses, at the beginning of the 20th century, in many cases became elaborate constructions worthy of being displayed further afield than just the family environment. Many places picked up the habit of getting people to visit the nativity scenes in the houses by using written invitations, visiting hours, and special events. This led to nativity scene competitions, usually based in the parish or related to Catholic Action groups. We see, then, that from an ancient, deeply rooted tradition, such as the three dimensional representation of the birth of Jesus, which is perhaps the most essential definition of what a nativity scene is, new traditions have been created thanks to novel customs adapting the construction of the display to the new, welcoming context.

The tradition of crafting the nativity scene has also involved a steady evolution in the materials and techniques used. Using plaster to make the display is a technique that had already been documented in some early 20th century nativity scenes. A Barcelona native, nativity scene maker Antoni Moliné developed the work with this material, using it not only for joining pieces of cork and making distant mountains, as he had already seen in other examples, but to build all the elements of the landscape in the display (Moliné, 1952). Plaster nativity scenes soon achieved a new form: they ceased to be panoramic presentations, and became visible only from a single view point, allowing for better use of depth. This innovation gave rise to the construction of nativity scenes contained within boxes, in the style of theatre scenery. This meant the perspective could be forced and different visual planes employed. The diorama technique applied to these displays elevated the tradition of making them to a sophisticated art that deserved to be exhibited, and visited by the general public. The appearance of nativity scene associations was a response to this new tradition of building displays for exhibition. This began to generate what some have called the “second path” of the nativity scene movement. This is characterised by the idea of artistic recognition, relatively independent of all religious significance, and a creative excellence that justifies the attention of a cultured public (Cardús 2010: 13).

At the same time, the nativity has stepped out of people’s houses onto the street. Some cities have begun to put displays in their main squares. In Barcelona, for some of the post-Franco years, it was typical that nativity scenes were set up in public places, promoted by various initiatives. Some of these kept going until the 1970s, as was the case of the Sant Roc festival commission from Plaça Nova, in the gardens

of Avinguda de la Catedral. This trend did not break with tradition, but rather incorporated a new custom with a novel way of exhibiting the nativity scene, and in doing so generated a new tradition linked to Christmas. “Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalisation and ritualization, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (Hobsbawm 1998:15). The displays in public squares disappeared, only to be revived again at the beginning of the 1980s when many forms of popular street traditions were recovered.

In the late 20th century, however, society was considerably changed from that of the 1950s. In fact, the same nativity movement associations that had had their golden age between the 1940s and 1960s were in decline, and they did not experience a revival until well into the 1980s. Public nativity scenes exhibited in town squares slowly gained a different kind of acceptance to that they had had in the 1950s. There were criticisms related to aesthetics and, later, concerning the pertinence of this type of religious display in a public place. The reactions, in some cases, involved acts of destruction or the theft of figures, particularly of Baby Jesus.

The 2004 public nativity scene in Barcelona can be said to be the recreation of a traditional act, incorporating elements of the recipients themselves, contextualising the ideas being transmitted.

Craft or art

In the world of the nativity scene movement, chance has divided the displays into either popular, when they are made of cork and moss, or artistic, when they are made of plaster. Pondering this a little, it is clear that if the classification refers solely to the type of material used or the kind of nativity

scene that is created, something is not quite right.

We would like to reflect on this topic from the perspective of art and craft, which indeed have somewhat blurred boundaries, and between which there is, more often than not, continuity. If we had to place the nativity scene movement nearer one than the other of these poles, we would say that it is more closely allied to craft. Artisans, usually associated with useful creations, are concerned about reproducing an acceptable model, logically incorporating technical improvements, but with no other pretence than to transmit the model. An artist's intention goes beyond the mere model. The artwork incorporates the will to enter into a dialogue with the public using symbolic language. The artist worries about transmitting, giving a message, and interpreting a reality. For this reason, Panofsky (1995) affirms that the understanding of a work of art cannot be satisfied with iconography—recognition of represented elements—but must arrive at iconology—interpretation of a deeper sense.

Art contributes narrative intentionality. The artist interprets the reality and expresses it in a symbolic way, intending that the spectator takes part in this dialogue. Works of art can serve to criticise the society in which they have been created and present visual metaphors through which certain values are transmitted; in some way we can consider the artist to be a social critic.

In the late 1950s Josep Maria Garrut (1957: 80) talked about the backwardness of nativity scenes, claiming that the movement was, within the arts and the aesthetic world, retarded by almost a hundred years. Despite being a firm advocate of popular nativity scenes, and especially indigenous scenes, he believed that the wealth of display was not exhausted in popular scenes

or those made of plaster. He therefore stated that it was necessary to open our minds to those artists that make the nativity scene a work of art, since, beyond the valuable representations made by the craftsmen, they contribute to expanding the scope of this traditional activity. Nativity scenes that correspond to the category of works of art are not always well understood or accepted, since for many people the pleasure of observing a display comes from the recognition of that undisputed model typically transmitted by the craftsman. Those scenes conceived artistically, invite the viewer into a dialogue with the work, to complete it with their interpretation. The work of art is only truly finished when the audience comes into contact with it.

The interpretation of a piece of work. Dialogue with the public

Some people who visited the nativity scene in Plaça de Sant Jaume suggested that if the written explanation, which was next to it, was not read, the meaning was not clear. It is true that works of art do not always have an obvious meaning. After all, the relationship between an artist, their work, and the public is a process of coding and decoding symbols.

The 2004 nativity scene demanded a global view, looking beyond the formal elements that constituted it, since it was a work with deep intentionality. It was necessary to enter the paradigm of contemporary art, in which the boundaries between the audience and the work blur, and the observer becomes part of the work. In this case, the realistic figures that formed the nativity scene were iconographically so easy to recognise that this proximity prevented, in many cases, and in a natural way, further interpretation. Lluís Permanyer³⁷ wondered whether it was sensible to put those figures out in the open, representing people exactly like those that could appear there. The

writer, who in the same text defended the art form's need to evolve, did not consider that the installation was a work of contemporary art; they held to the traditional roles of a spectator who views and an object that is viewed, affirming that in an exhibition made in a closed space the realism would pose no problem.

Since 2004, the nativity scene in Plaça de Sant Jaume has had a huge impact in the media. The press watch to see how well accepted the City Council's new offering is among the public. This expectation comes from the fact that at some point it was decided to install an unconventional nativity scene. If Barcelona's public nativity scene par excellence was always a classic manger, with classic figures, and conventional aesthetics, it probably would not capture the attention of the media or a good part of the population. All this leads us to consider the fact that proposing new languages in the display is a way to grab the general public's attention, and in return, this helps generate nativity scene culture, as well as artistic culture.

A nativity scene conceived from the mentality we have previously denominated 'religious model making' generates comments on aesthetics, on the patience needed to build it, and the work it entails. Normally, these are the comments heard among the public visiting exhibitions of dioramas, comments that stem from viewer's most analytical and rational aspect. Instead, a nativity scene that intends to take a step further, that wishes to convey a message and bear witness to a specific social moment, never leaves the viewer indifferent, and generates a different kind of comment: of acceptance or rejection, initially related to the concept of taste and, later, referring to personal support, the harmony between the work and the spectator and, finally, the sense or the meaning

being expressed. These kinds of comments have little to do with analysis and rationality, but are instead related to the person's emotional facet.

The nativity scene designed by the students from Escola Massana was not allegorical, it was a symbol. In other words, it did not intend to "represent" the birth of Jesus but instead wished to transport the spectator towards a not entirely rational reality (Duch 2010: 165). It was a nativity scene that sought to take pleasure in knowledge, not just recognition, it was necessary to make an interpretive effort. It was not looking for an analysis of the technical accomplishment, but wanted to provoke an emotional reaction based on a conceptual transposition. The process of interpreting and updating the tradition resulted in a work of art rather than a piece of craft.

According to Panofsky (1995: 17) it is necessary to reach an iconological level in order to fully understand that particular nativity scene. Many people appreciated the display's innovation or difference. These did not go beyond recognising the altered forms of well-known iconography. However, behind this work was a deeper intention or, at least, more symbolism could be read into it. The iconological level aims to display the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, or a religious or philosophical belief that, in an unconscious way, is condensed into a work of art. To penetrate this level of a work of art, there must be a dialogue with it based on the knowledge provided by the iconography. This nativity scene permitted this exercise at different levels.

One of the opinions analysed interpreted the nativity scene as deeply religious, reading into the work the symbolism of an incarnation of God for all men and women; another, in a similar vein, criticised the fact that a columnist described the display as lay

when he saw precisely the opposite. From a reading of the various comments on the nativity scene, we can only conclude that a work of art is never finished unless a viewer looks at it, and that the creative act is not executed by the artist alone; the observer brings the work into contact with the outside world, deciphering it, interpreting its internal characteristics, and thus adding their contribution to the creative act, as Marcel Duchamp propounded.

The columnist, Manuel Trallero³⁸, who criticised the nativity scene, describing it as being lay, lacking mystery, magic and emotion, sought to find a conventional meaning in the work, to recognise in the elements of the nativity that already known thematic content, that aesthetic of baroque or neoclassical figures that was already part of his magical and emotional Christmas imaginings. His final statement, where he explains that he missed the animals and the *caganer*, reinforces this idea. Qualifying the nativity scene as lay, goes no further than an iconographic analysis, which prevented him from appreciating the fact that this particular nativity scene could be seen as deeply religious, more in line with what the Archbishop of Barcelona published in a Sunday supplement around that time, where he emphasised the Christian God's proximity to men and women.

The unfavourable opinions stemmed from not identifying the work with a nativity scene, to the point that some did not even recognise that the figures were characters from the popular nativity scene. It is likely that we are faced with a situation where it is impossible to make even a preiconographic approximation due to lack of knowledge. In other words, there are many people who have a personal imagery of the nativity scene that predominantly centres on their daily experience or their childhood memory of the manger scene, and that is all. The most likely

is that this image is based on figures in the classical or even Hebrew style. Many of these people are unaware of the wealth of characters contained in the popular nativity scene. In this case, they do not recognise the link between their idea of a nativity scene and what was in front of them.

Some of those who designed the work were somewhat surprised to see such incomprehension, perplexity and discomfort generated in the face of what was an update of the story of the birth of Jesus. The only explanation they found for these reactions was a fossilised concept of tradition, and this was not a traditional nativity scene, it transgressed a canon, a solemnisation. Part of the resistance and discomfort was caused by the profile of the characters, who were mostly simple people. They were surprised to see opposition from some sectors of the Church and very belligerent reactions from certain elements in the nativity scene movement.

It is also true, however, that the proposal broke some basic aesthetic codes that probably distracted the attention of the public and left them perplexed, not so much by the content but by the method of communication. Nativity scenes are usually three-dimensional, volumetric compositions, and one which comprises two-dimensional figures—cut-outs or old cardboard nativity scenes—is only made to be viewed from the front. Two-dimensional figures in a three-dimensional space did not make it easy to interpret this as a nativity scene. Also, the hyperrealism of the silhouettes in contrast to the nativity figures generated confusion. If the photographs of people represented characters from the nativity scene, how is it that the central characters in the story did not look the same? Additionally, some people expressed the bewilderment caused by the appearance of rough, poorly-finished figures that, amplified to fifteen times their actual

size, gave out an image that many people could not comprehend.

This Nativity also broke a classic code of the nativity scene movement –and of classical art– the separation of the observer and the observed work. All of a sudden, the people's point of view changed and the observers became part of a landscape of aspiring nativity scene figures, with little difference between them. This change of perspective did not help many people see the silhouettes as updated nativity figures, since nothing marked the differentiation, and a space of human coexistence was generated, as one of the comments said, instead of a nativity scene as they are traditionally understood.

Probably a good part of the adverse reactions to the nativity scene could be explained due to the numerous code changes produced simultaneously. Any communicative experience should be capable of being maintained around common interpretative codes, or those that are close to both the sender and the receiver. Some elements of the communicative process may be changed, whenever the context allows them to be deciphered, but a radical change of many of the elements can create a communication break down or a poor interpretation of the message the transmitter wants to convey, which is what happened with those people who saw the display as a mockery, an act of revenge, or ideological propaganda.

Renewing tradition... to what point?

Popular tradition cannot consist of the indiscriminate recycling of the past, but ought to involve bringing the origin and community objectives up to date. Tradition always involves *hic et nunc* a recreation in which the message must be made true within the culture of each space and time (Duch, 1980: 14). In a society marked by a progressive destructuring of symbols, a pro-

gressive neutralising and objectifying of the human environment, and by a rationalisation of the entirety of human relations (Duch, 2010: 347), religion, and especially popular religion, represents a rarely appreciated relic that has also been spurned by an excessively reflective religiosity. This has led to the predominance of a theoretical faith lacking in plastic expressiveness.

It is quite obvious that this display represented a recreation and contextualisation of tradition. Based on the iconographic elements of popular nativity scenes, it set out to take a step forward and contextualise the figures in the present time. The characters in the popular nativity scene are, in fact, an 18th or 19th century contextualisation of the evangelical story. The work by the students from Escola Massana simply proposed a new contextualisation.

Traditions have, after all, always been adapted and have always evolved. A public space is probably the ideal place because traditions that have a strong, explicit religious component can explore forms of expression that engage in a dialogue with the plurality in today's society. On the one hand, it is good for the tradition itself to question its forms of expression, and on the other, it generates a public debate that inevitably causes society to inquire about things, generating a collective maturing.

The world of nativity scenes is, in general, an out-dated world. Popular nativity scenes, those constructed in houses, remain very faithful to traditional schemes, both in terms of form and content. Although nativity scenes themselves allow creative freedom and penetration of the work, in the end it is a creation that has advanced little. The nativity scene movement as found in the associations, stuck in the diorama formula, has evolved technically with the use of new materials and techno-

logical ingenuity in all the construction phases, but remains practically immobile with respect to the subject and the message that it wants to transmit.

Few initiatives come out of the world of nativity scenes to move towards new forms of expression although from outside the field in its strictest sense, we do see some flexibility and creativity. We must here assess all the creative wealth and integration of the tradition that takes place in many schools. The particular nativity scene in Plaça de Sant Jaume that we have been looking at seems more like a display by a school, rather than an association. It would not be the first time that all the figures in a school nativity were a representation of the children in the institute. Not to mention the wealth and creativity when it comes to the use of materials and aesthetic forms, or the intention of the display to send some message or represent a value. The institutionalised nativity scene movement of the associations does not allow to this rich experience of school nativity scenes to filter through, and this dies between the walls of the school itself.

In the nativity scenes of Plaça de Sant Jaume we can clearly see the dialectic relationship between popular art and hegemonic art. Popular art usually ends up expressing itself through the aesthetics of hegemonic art, but the behaviour expressed in the popular world always exhibits differences with respect to powerful classes, and they question them. When this happens, the culture of the masses ends up absorbing the most popular forms of culture to integrate the recipients. (Lombardi, 1978: 187). Popular art progresses hegemonic art towards new modes of expression and new languages.

In recent years, the nativity scene in Plaça de Sant Jaume has found a balance between updating and tradition.

These symbioses are examples of contemporary aesthetics that maintain the essence of tradition, and involve commissions of designer Jordi Pallí in 2010, 2013, 2014 and 2015.

It seems obvious, then, that the City Council, concerned about the impact the nativity scene in Plaça de Sant Jaume has had in the media since 2004, broke the ground and then gave it back to the city as their own idea. It is a process that has matured over almost ten years, and has tried various formulas. In the end, we see that the updated nativity scene proposed by the Escola Massana students, which was not well received by many people, inspired the 2013 offering by Jordi Pallí where the shepherds and other characters were transformed into locals of the city bringing the rooftops alive. Even Joseph and the Virgin Mary adopted the Barcelona aesthetic. We could say that, conceptually, it was almost the same as that proposed in 2004.

Now, a nativity scene incorporating fellow citizens as protagonists is an officially accepted approach. Anyone who wants to do this can no longer be considered a transgressor. Typi-

cal representations of the Birth have always accepted that the people who make them are represented next to Baby Jesus. This is what we see in the paintings, in *Els Pastorets* (the Shepherd's Play, a Catalan Christmas tale), and in the popular nativity scenes of each culture. The Massana students brought this simple, yet badly accepted idea, into the present day. However, it received a boost from the 2013 nativity scene and, as an official proposal, is now generally accepted. We find a similar situation with the 2015 nativity scene (awaited with bated breath because of the radical change government in the city), which placed the Christmas story in the framework of children's stories, with young people who see a shining star, camels walking through the desert, and a couple in a humble neighbourhood that are showing off their new-born baby.

Opinions expressed contrary to these nativity scenes where characters and scenes are updated are ever less frequent. Proposals that were rejected years ago are now considered more normal. These displays invite other nativity scene builders, like associations and people who make them at home,

to consider the possibility of introducing new looks. Some nativity scene makers who criticised the 2004 nativity scene now incorporate elements of contemporary contextualisation into their own creations.

The social ceasefire around the Barcelona nativity scene, was rocked at Christmas in 2016. The proposal presented that year, the work of the Olot artists Quim Domene and Toti Toronell, once again became a turning point between hegemonic and popular culture. A nativity scene created from the perspective of contemporary conceptual art, based on the verses of J. V. Foix, ignited the anger of certain defenders of the traditional essence.

The 2016 creation was not easy to read, it is true. It had nothing to do with popular manger scenes or the nativity in most people's imaginations. But there are people who, instead of recognising their own limitation, reject the work or the artist when it does not correspond to their own expectations or understanding. Behind these most daring nativity scenes that go beyond classic schemes, is a meticulous creation project, an elaborate intention to transmit a message, to cause reflection, or interact with the viewer. This is not always the case with the classic cribs scenes from the associations.

Some forms of contemporary art are not easy to understand, they are not popular, and to link a popular, simple and easy-to-understand representation, like the nativity scene, to forms of expression that demand a certain degree of reflection is a complex enterprise. Not understanding an artistic representation, or the fact that this does not tie in with what we imagine, does not give us the right to reject it out of hand. Public spaces, which are shared by many and diverse people, is the ideal place for symbols to be debated, so that part of our tradition is able to evolve.



Nativity Scene, Plaça Sant Jaume, 2015 (December 2015). ENRIC BENAVENT



Nativity Scene, Plaça Sant Jaume, 2016 (December 2016). ENRIC BENAVENT

The same people who in 2004 said that this was not a nativity scene, said they longed for that “gas man” display when they saw the 2016 offering. They reiterated, just as they had done twelve years before, that the 2016 proposal was not a nativity scene. This is a very clear example of the dialectic between popular and hegemonic culture. The defenders of the essence of the nativity scene in 2004 strongly disapproved of the work of the students from La Massana. The idea behind the 2004 nativity scene kept finding its way into the designs of successive years, until it was accepted almost without criticism. We can also see how displays from associations increasingly incorporate a contemporary approach to the nativity scene. Twelve years later, the same guardians of tradition, faced with a new innovative proposal that breaks

with classic canon, claim that this is not a nativity scene and they even say they miss the 2004 display.

The presence of creative proposals that escape from the traditional has, in recent years, served to make people aware of the fact that there are several ways to approach the representation of the birth of Jesus. In our society we very frequently hear comments on contemporary works of art that are simply prejudice, that is, judgement before knowledge. It is also true of this particular nativity scene: many people were capable of despising the work without even trying to understand it.

It is very difficult for us to define exactly what a traditional nativity scene is (Montlló, 2016), since this

is an ancient tradition that, like all of them, is in constant evolution and in which we find cohabiting models. Traditions evolve thanks to proposals that veer off from what is accepted at any given moment. St. Francis himself had to ask permission from the Pope to represent the birth of Jesus in the middle of the Mass. When new ideas from below collide with hegemonic proposals, it generates debate and disagreement, causing people to gain new perspectives. This has been the case throughout the long history of art.

In the end, all this leads us to reflect on what type of nativity scene there should be in a public space: if it should be a classical-type, recognised and enjoyed by the majority, or a display that invites a different view, that trans-

mits an open and universal message in which one finds a great diversity and plurality of people coexisting. I believe that public spaces are an ideal place for the dialectic to take place between popular and hegemonic forms of culture. Of course, the decision incorporates an important political component, since political leaders measure the impact that such a popular manifestation may have. ■

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