

THE “GRUPO OF LAGARTERANAS” IN NALDA PORCELAIN

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The most spectacular figure produced by the artistic section of the “Fábrica de Porcelana y Refractarios Víctor de Nalda”, hereinafter “Nalda”, is undoubtedly that of the two rearing horses in biscuit, sculpted by Fulgencio García in 1949. The “Caballos” of Nalda deserved the honor of being presented as the most spectacular porcelain piece in the Spanish Ceramics Exhibition "La ceramique espagnole du XIIIe siècle à nos jours", held from February 15 to April 22, 1957 at the Palais Miramar, Cannes, on the French Riviera, to which Victor de Nalda was invited as a representative of all Spanish porcelain.



Figure 1. Caballos. Nalda. Sculptor Fulgencio García

The Caballos is undoubtedly a sculptural prodigy, with their balance of masses, but also a technical miracle. Porcelain is reduced by up to 18% in the two firings required to produce a biscuit piece. The two very fine legs of each horse on which the figure rests are almost a physical impossibility, except that contemplation of the figure is the best proof that such a feat is possible.

But the biscuit, pure porcelain, without varnishes or enamels, is an excessively elitist type of artistic porcelain. By not allowing the slightest mistake, which the enamels would allow to hide, it is reserved for special pieces aimed only at minorities. Since the 18th century, and in imitation of Chinese porcelain, in which the biscuit technique is practically not used, European porcelain is decorated porcelain, both in figures and in table services and complementary objects.

The Vincennes and Sèvres factories, which produced some works of art in biscuit porcelain, reserved this technique for very unique pieces in imitation of white marble sculpture. The 19th century would expand the production and publics of the biscuit, but always remaining an elitist product in front of the abundant production of decorated porcelain. The 20th century followed this dynamics and the biscuit figures produced by European factories are always exceptional works compared to the more popular enameled and painted porcelain.

The same would happen in Spain. Until the civil war of 1936-39, only a few brands had produced artistic porcelain and practically all of these disappeared with the war. After the war, the first artistic porcelain factory to embark on the adventure of producing porcelain figures was Cerámicas Hispania, from Manises, which began its adventure in 1943, in the middle of the European war and in an Spain immersed in the so-called "years of the hunger" (1940-45). Four daring entrepreneurs were in charge: Salvador Valero, Eduardo Mira, pharmacist and chemist, Antonio Testón, also its first sculptor, and Ricardo Trénor y Sentmenat, X Marqués de Mascarell de San Juan, as leading figure and capitalist partner. Cerámicas Hispania identified itself from the beginning with the aesthetics of the great German porcelain brands and, from its first mediocre works to the excellence of its production in the 60s of the 20th century, its painters, almost only women educated in Manises ceramics industry, left an abundant sample of his trade and sensitivity

After Hispania, the important industrial factory of Victor de Nalda, from Almacera, north of Valencia, which almost monopolized the Spanish market for large insulators for power lines, began an adventure that led it to produce its first porcelain figures since 1947. The promoter of the initiative, Ernestina Pujol, wife of the owner of the company Victor de Nalda Frígols, as we have studied in another work, surrounded herself from the beginning with the best artists she could find in Valencia. At the head of these, they chose Vicente Beltrán Grimal, an already renowned academic sculptor and professor at the School of Fine Arts in Valencia.

Vicente Beltrán arrived in Nalda accompanied by two other great sculptors, Fulgencio García López and José Doménech, also graduates from the School of Fine Arts and with whom he had met in the Modelo Prison, in Valencia, where they were imprisoned by the triumphant regime in the civil war as guilty of republican sympathies and activities.

We know well, then, the first sculptors of Nalda and their works, at least in the period 1947-1954. At first, Vicente Beltrán and Fulgencio García monopolized the making of the sculptures that would serve as the basis for the production of the figures. José Doménech, formally the director of the artistic section on loan from Vicente Beltrán, collaborated with the above until his own production began to appear, first with copies of German originals and soon with more personal adventures. They are joined by two women sculptors: Amparo Hueso, who only signs works as a "collaborator" of Beltrán, and Amparo Montoro, Beltrán's favorite student at the Superior School of Fine Arts, in Valencia. The last of Nalda's first sculptors, Francisco Catalá Blanes, also a graduate in Fine Arts, would join at the beginning of 1952.

Upon finishing her studies, our protagonist, Amparo Montoro, daughter of artisans, began her short professional career as an assistant to the valencian "Fallas" master Octavio Vicent, who hired her to make fallas children's "ninots" heads until Vicente Beltrán claimed her for Nalda as a sculptress.

Her first piece in Nalda dates from August 1951. In 1957, she married Juan Bautista Llorens Riera, a Nalda painter since 1954, and gave up sculpture, although as a freelance professional she collaborated with Porcelanas Lladró, for which, according to Juan Lladró, she “carried out four or five figures”.

The names of other Nalda painters have not come down to us, with the exception perhaps of Juan Lladró and his brother José. Juan Lladró (1926-2017), the eldest of the three Lladró brothers, a worker at Nalda from 1949 to 1952, a student too at the School of Arts and Crafts, in Valencia, and who had already painted, being a 15 years old boy, for a ceramic company in Meliana, near Almacera, affirms, although we have no other documentary evidence than his own words, that before he joined Nalda, the company had difficulties finding good painters. According to Juan Lladró, Nalda even tried sending already baked figures to Madrid, to the “Generalísimo Franco Foundation”, active since 1941, for decoration. In any case, looking at the figures that remain, the painting in Nalda has already reached in 1948 a high degree of perfection in the decoration of its figures. Vicente Beltrán was very strict concerning quality and many pieces ended up discarded and broken to prevent their release to the market

From January 1952, Amparo Montoro gradually became a prolific sculptor of figures for Nalda. January 19 of that year, we found the first of a set of five little figurines of girls, putti, playing different instruments, which “come out of the kilns” throughout 1952, with a splendid pictorial decoration that testifies to the high level of the anonymous painters. from Nalda.



Figure 2. Putti. Nalda. Sculptress Amparo Montoro.

We find Amparo Montoro's putti also mounted together around a tree, in a singular composition, for which the biscuit finish, the most demanding for the sculptor, the assemblers and the technicians of cooking, is chosen, at least in the specimen that has come down to us. The “Grupo la Orquesta” comes out of the kilns in November 1952



Figure 3. “Grupo la Orquesta”. Nalda. Sculptress Amparo Montoro.

Finally, a short time later, on April 6, 1953, the figure that constitutes the core of this work, the “Grupo de Lagarteranas” by Amparo Montoro, came out of the Nalda kilns. The “lagarterana” costume, typical of the town of Lagartera, in Toledo, enjoys a well-deserved fame in the world of folklore and sewing for its spectacular composition and the neat decoration of each of its pieces, from the handkerchiefs to the hose.

The artistic section of Nalda inaugurates with this figure a long series of figures in regional costume, of smaller size and ambition, but in which the sculptural splendor and pictorial maturity of Nalda's artists and technicians is also reflected.

The “Grupo de Lagarteranas” can be considered the equivalent in spectacularity, in decorated porcelain, of Fulgencio García's Biscuit Caballos, undoubtedly the reference figure, due to its sculptural perfection and its technical difficulty, of Valencian, and even Spanish porcelain, until the disappearance of the artistic section of Nalda, in 1971. With the Lagarteranas, Nalda is at the level of the great German porcelain brands of the 19th century, the world reference in decorated porcelain, as France will be in biscuit porcelain.

The “Grupo de Lagarteranas” is made up of an ensemble of two women and a young girl, seated sewing, spinning and making bobbin lace, dressed in their full Lagarteran costume. Fortunately preserved, at least in one copy, its excellent state of conservation allows us to enjoy the infinite details that sculptors, assemblers and painters have accumulated to make a true masterpiece.

If we know the sculptress, we are not sure of identifying its painters. Due to the coincidence of dates, considering that the first "out of the kiln" of this figure is April 1953 but the making of copies must have been extended to subsequent years, a firm candidate is the aforementioned Juan Bautista Llorens Riera, future husband of the sculptress, who enters Nalda in 1954.

Llorens had just graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Valencia, where he had been a founding member of a dynamic group of painters "Els Set", "Los Siete" in Spanish, active between 1947 and 1954 and formed by, in different periods, up to 10 painters: Ángeles Ballester Garcés, Vicente Castellano Giner, Vicente Fillol Roig, Juan Genovés Candel, Vicente Gómez García, Ricardo Hueso de Brugada, Juan Bautista Llorens Riera, José Masiá Sellés, Joaquín Michavila Asensi and Eusebio Sempere Juan.

In any case, whether Llorens Riera or another of his schoolmates brought by Beltrán to Nalda was the painter for the “Grupo de Lagarteranas”, the figure has been exceptionally preserved and continues to amaze us for its spectacular nature and incredible complexity of execution, especially considering taking into account the social and historical context in which it appeared, the Spain of the early 50s of the 20th century, a country still ruined by civil war and European post-war.

Undoubtedly, being too expensive, the “Grupo de Lagarteranas” could not be a popular work. As we can remember, the porcelain modeling technique only resembles sculpture in the first image that comes out, in clay, from the hands of the sculptor. From there it begins a long process in which many qualified specialists are involved if the result must be good enough:

After the evaluation of its production cost and the approval of the sculptural work by the company's management, a specialist must break the figure into a set of separate pieces, some very small, which in turn will serve as the basis for the manufacture of plaster moulds. The “Grupo de Lagarteranas” requires the production of dozens, more of half hundred, of these partial molds. To fully understand its complexity, it is worth clarifying the long classical process a little more.

Each mold is filled with slip, a very liquid porcelain paste. The plaster quickly absorbs the moisture from the porcelain layer in contact with it and, after a time that the specialist deems appropriate for a layer of porcelain to form only partially dehydrated, thick enough to give consistency to the piece, the mold is poured of the excess slip, still liquid. When demolding the pieces, a set of small porcelain pieces is obtained. They are allowed to dry to a certain point, which should allow the next step, the assembly of the entire figure. The process requires great experience and security on the part of the assembler. All the pieces being dried, the assembler glues all pieces together, using very fluid porcelain paste, until the entire figure is mounted.

Once the figure is assembled, it is the turn of the refinisher, who with a special set of spatulas and more liquid porcelain, goes over all the joints between the pieces, joint by joint, taking care that there are no air bubbles or areas in which the layer of porcelain is too thin or too thick. It is a slow and very laborious process, in which the final result is not guaranteed. Any error in this process will be revealed when the piece is placed in the kiln, in a first firing, at about 900 degrees, for "drying", in which the figure suffers a reduction of about 5% of its size, or in a second firing, the "sintering", already up to about 1300 or 1400 degrees, depending on the quality of the paste and the added fluxes, in which the porcelain is vitrified to acquire its final consistency, losing in this process of

12% to 15% of its volume. Before the second firing, or after, depending on the decoration chosen and except in the case of biscuits, the piece is varnished and, depending on the choice, a layer of engobe, a liquid colored porcelain paste, or high-temperature enamel, with a quartz base, is applied.

In the classical process, only after this second firing is the turn of the painters, among them the eye specialists, a critical part of the final result, who decorate the figure with enamels. Then the figure goes again to the kilns, this time at around 1000 degrees. A critical temperature control is needed. The application of gold or platinum varnish usually requires a fourth firing at less than 500 degrees.

Nalda's very first figures, from 1947 and part of 1948, usually present too noticeable joints that, without completely spoiling the figure, do detract from its quality. The appearance of cracks between the different parts, unless the application of a suitable enamel allows to hide the defect, is a reason for rejection and discarding of the entire piece. In Nalda, unlike other brands, all defective figure was broken, avoiding a piece with even small defects be found in the market.

As we can see, it is a technically long and artistically complex process, in which many specialists had to come together to obtain a perfect work. Nalda was lucky to have, in addition to its own kaolin and clay mines, excellent materials chemists and kiln technicians who produced for the technical section and collaborated in the artistic section. Once the first difficulties were overcome, the result was always spectacular.

The Group of Lagarteranas



Figure 4 to 15. Nalda. Grupo de Lagarteranas. Sculptor Amparo Montoro.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

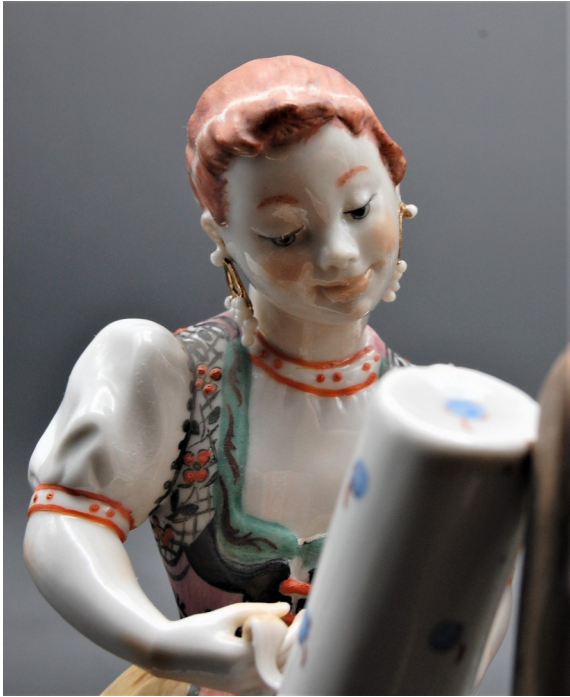


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

The “Niña Lagarterana”

The Grupo de Lagarteranas is sculpturally and pictorially excessively complex and, furthermore, highly technically complicated. It is too expensive to become an accessible figure, except for a tiny minority. Nalda must have produced very few copies. We know that ours was a demonstration object of the excellence of the brand.

To try to make the effort spent profitable, Nalda produced at least one simpler Lagarterana and chose the young girl who was part of the original group for it. To do this, its sculptress used the resource of supporting the cushion, called “mundillo” among the fans, in which the needles that guided the threads were stuck, in a tree with leaves. It is a brilliant solution that had already been used in her Concert and that had previously been popularized by Fulgencio García in several of his figures. The result, although simpler than the complete figure, is still spectacular, with even more precise details than in the group and with its same pictorial richness. We do not know its “out of the kiln” date, but it was certainly after 1954 and before 1957.



Figure 16 to 22. “Niña Lagarterana”. Nalda. Sculptress Amparo Montoro.



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

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