

# THE HOLY FAMILY IN NALDA PORCELAIN

Antonio Ten Ros

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The theme of the Holy Family, or the traditional Bethlehem, is one of the most popular in Western art, in an infinity of supports, from the humble clay to the elitist marble, going through an infinity of iconographic representations made with the materials and techniques more diverse. Any image search on the Internet is enough for the screen to be filled with artistic interpretations of the theme of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, in a group, individually or accompanied by shepherds, animals or kings.

European porcelain does not escape this trend and there are numerous figures, or scenes, produced by historical and new brands. Thus, just the best-known artistic porcelain factory in the world, Lladró, together with its other great brand, Nao, has more than thirty porcelain and stoneware figures or sets on this theme, from many different sculptors and in many different styles, from the strictly realistic to the most schematic and from a humble sleeping baby Jesus to the splendor of a complete nativity scene of 8 pieces or more.

The great production of this company, from the end of the 50s to the present, makes these sets easy to find in stores, houses and even museums. Lladró's effort to collect all his production in its catalogs and, in part, to put its images online, with careful attention to specifying the responsible sculptor and the year of first production, contributes to this knowledge and adequately documents his constant dedication to the subject.

Much less known, however, is the artistic production dedicated to this theme by the "Victor de Nalda Porcelain and Refractory Factory" in Almácer (Valencia), abbreviated "Nalda", the first porcelain company in which the Lladró brothers worked, from 1949 to 1953 and which extended this facet of its production, along with the best-known industrial porcelain for the electrical sector, between 1947 and 1971, when its artistic section was finally closed.

Nalda produced her first porcelain figure in May 1947, by the hand of a great sculptor, Vicente Beltrán Grimal, his assemblers and painters, and a great ceramicist and expert in chemistry and furnaces, Alfonso Blat Monzó. Vicente Beltrán Grimal, born in 1896, a professor at the Superior School of Fine Arts in Valencia, had just regained his chair at the school after spending time in prison at the end of the civil war, and the owners of the company, Victor de Nalda Grifols and his wife Ernestina Pujol, the true promoter of the artistic section, went looking for him there, Beltrán, an academic sculptor, was the channel through which a good number of sculptors and painters from the School accessed Nalda, the first of them José Doménech and Fulgencio García López, from that same 1947 until the closing of the artistic section.

Alfonso Blat, for his part, was already collaborating in the industrial section of Nalda, together with Bernardo de Nalda, Victor's brother and responsible for the technical part and the kilns. Blat, already a well-known ceramics artist, had been trained in the main European ceramic institutions and was an active participant in the Valencian creative environment, especially in the field of artistic ceramics, with individual or collective exhibitions from 1935 to 1956.

The final years of the 40s and the first part of the 50s are a time of great artistic agitation in Valencia. After the civil war and the so-called "hunger years" between 1940 and 1945, Valencian society, its most dynamic part at least, seems to explode, in its most easily visualized areas, in a desire for artistic enjoyment, in its very different fields.

The valencian Fallas ambiance slowly returns to its splendour, reconnecting with its audiences and its artists. The great artists: Regino Mas, José Soriano, Fernando Guillot, Carlos Cortina, and also in 1950 Vicente Luna, retake its pre-war activity. All of them, with their disciples and assistants set up an unexpected artistic renaissance. aesthetically and politically, within an order, in still socially gloomy years.

The plastic arts, hit by the regime's repression of its highly significant protagonists during the republic and the war, also had an explosive renaissance between the end of the 40s and the beginning of the 70s, with a multitude of groups that emerged from the School of Fine Arts and that follow one another without interruption. Group Z is active, animated by the painter Manuel Gil Pérez and seven other companions, between 1946 and 1949, sometimes reaching 16, including incidentally the sculptors Vicente Beltrán and Fulgencio García López. "Els Set", with its 10 members, was there between 1948 and 1954 and Juan Bautista Llorens Riera, a painter from Nalda, participated in it. The Parpalló Group, animated by Vicente Aguilera Cerni and made up of artists, critics, writers, architects and journalists, was founded in 1956.

Numerous exhibition halls were opened, featuring their circle of artists, and official institutions undertook various promotional activities art, exhibitions, scholarships and pensions. Undoubtedly, a creativity that spreads throughout the artistic spectrum and permeates its different manifestations arises from this environment, just at the moment when Vicente Beltrán is recruiting artists from his intellectual world, the School of Fine Arts, for Nalda.

Ceramicas Hispania, founded in 1943 in Manises, under the umbrella of Ricardo Trénor y Sentmenat, X Marqués de Mascarell de San Juan, did not need that impulse or that quarry. Solidly based on the artisan and industrial ecosystem of the Manises ceramics, it drew on its artists and specialists, and copied the traditional aesthetic universe of the european porcelain , especially German, as a reference and model for its porcelain works. Lladró, founded as a company by the three brothers Juan, José and Vicente when they left Nalda in 1953, given the scarcity of economical resources in its early days, drew on local artists such as José Rausell, Antonio Arnal, Manolo Leonor and Amparo Amador, some of them their co-students in the School of Applied Arts and Artistic Trades, in Valencia, until they managed to sign Fulgencio García, when he left the shadow of Vicente Grimal and his environment in Nalda.

Nalda thus appears as a singular natural emanation of the currents that animated the Superior School of Fine Arts, in Valencia, and of Vicente Beltrán, who would soon be the director of the School. The absence of documentation and more specific investigations makes it impossible, for the moment, to know the names of most of the sculptors, painters and decorators of Nalda and of other brands such as Cerámicas Hispania.

Of the artists at Cerámicas Hispania we know only Antonio Testón Sixto, sculptor and artistic director, who was accompanied by "seven or eight sculptors", including Antonio Arnal, Fulgencio García López as a freelancer and another sculptor named Granero. Much later, Miquel Navarro would work there.

We know Nalda's sculptors and their works from before 1955: Vicente Beltrán, Fulgencio García López, José Doménech, Amparo Montoro, Amparo Hueso and Francisco Catalá, all of them with a degree in Fine Arts. We also know the last sculptor from Nalda, Ramón Inglés Capella, who created art in Nalda somewhat later, from 1966 to 1970, also a School of Fine Arts graduate. Among the painters and decorators we only know of the Lladró brothers, who call themselves that way, and the artistic environment described, to which Juan Bautista Lloréns Riera and some of his fellow students belonged.

The abundant list of Lladró sculptors, in addition to those mentioned, its first artists, is full of names from Fallas: Juan Huerta Gasset joined Lladró to replace Fulgencio García at the beginning of the 1960s and he was followed by Francisco Catalá, who left Nalda and Salvador Furió, Salvador Debón, Vicente Martínez, Antonio Ballester "Tonico", Julián Puche, all fallas sculptors, along with Julio Fernández and Julio Ruiz, decorators and painters. Almost all of them, sculpted representations of the Holy Family, individually or in a group. After these, the endless list of Lladró sculptors of the following years includes numerous names dealing with this theme up to the present day.

### **The Holy Family in Nalda**

At least until 1954 we do not know Nalda figures with the theme of the Holy Family, although we do know of works of a religious nature, such as images of the Sacred Heart, produced by the hand of Vicente Beltrán or a Virgen del Pilar, a copy from another source. After 1966 we are not aware of any religious work by Ramón Inglés. Nalda's representations of the Holy Family must therefore be from the period 1955-1966. Unfortunately we practically do not have reliable data to assign sculptors or decorators to the Nalda works that have come down to us from that intermediate period. Only the opening of business archives, if they still exist, and the collaboration, where appropriate, of academic institutions and museums, can alleviate this lamentable ignorance for art history.

However, we do have the works that time has respected. In the case of the elitist and academic Nalda, this conservation is almost a miracle. The artistic Nalda was never commercially profitable. As a hobby of its owners accompanying its enormous industrial production, it does not seem that they were too concerned about the mass production. We have documentary evidence of some Nalda object whose production is limited to 26 copies and oral testimonies of much less in some particularly expensive and/or complex figures. Compared with runs of tens of thousands of some Lladró figurines, whose "exclusive objects" numbered hundreds of copies, and given the fragility of porcelain objects, it is thus possible to understand the description of "miracle" attributed to the survival of some from them.

To this is added that the practical disappearance of Nalda from the collective memory and from a good part of the artistic universe, unlike Lladró or even Cerámicas Hispania, with much more production per model, has relegated Nalda objects to "curiosities" of a very relative economic value, despite its undoubted aesthetic value. Nor has the practical non-existence of an art market fed by multiple figures helped to fix prices and preserve them as valuable objects.

Fortunately, the tradition, now in decline, of family "showcases" and, to a lesser extent, institutional funds, has allowed the survival of a part of the works that interest us here.

It is this fortunate circumstance that allows us to verify, work after work, the great freedom available to our anonymous sculptors and decorators of Nalda when they embarked in the process from the creation studio to the finished figure, without too many economic restrictions imposed by the need to make a profit on the sale.

Despite this anonymity, the history of porcelain art cannot allow these representations of the Holy Family to escape to the specialized knowledge and popular culture, as representatives of an era and artistic trends that were developed in the central years of the 20th century.

Up to now, we know only three representations of the Holy Family from Nalda brand. They are very different, each one of them in an original, surprising, unique style, not only because of its format or its subjective sculptural value, but also because of its unusual characteristics.

Without other documents, unfortunately there is also no Oral History testimonies about them. The figures are our only source of information for the moment.

The first in time, in our belief, due to its stylistic resemblance to others whose era we know approximately, is a complete Holy Family in porcelain decorated with slips (engobes) in cream tones.

Its style is purely impressionistic. The emphasis is on the shape and the play of volumes, rather than on the details, submerged in the extravagance of a palette of subtle cream and brown colors, in which details such as the kiss that Jesus child seems to give to his mother are barely suggested.



Figure 1. Holy Family. Nalda. Technique with slips. Anonimous. Dimensions: 80x70x230 mm.

Figure 2. The Joseph arm.



Figure 3. The kiss.

The slips are the undoubted protagonists of the piece. Only later does the eye begin to capture the details of the sculpture, the striking and familiar loving arm of Joseph encircling the Virgin's shoulders or the barely pointed hands holding the child. The effect is almost intimate and supernatural at the same time

Nalda begins to widely use its exclusive slips, mixtures of fluid porcelain slip and colored clays from his own mines, the composition of which is kept secret within the company, at the end of the 1950s, in the decoration of his figures. Those clays, or engobes, are more frequently a ceramist technique, clay without kaolin, than that of porcelain objects. The engobes are a mixture of the same kaolin paste of the body, with special colored clays and, perhaps, an artificial colorant. But in the Nalda slips, as in his spectacular crystallizations, one can recognize the techniques that Alfonso Blat Monzó applied to his own artistic creations, in ceramics in his case, which have come down to us. The decoration with its secret slips has become the hallmark of the company and the technique that has made it immediately recognizable throughout the world.



Figure 4. Lady in black. Nalda. A good example of engobes. Unknown sculptor. Dimensions: 80x90x220mm.

Even more ethereal is the appearance of our second figure, in which impressionism is superimposed by a sculptural expressionism, almost architectural in its forms, devoid of the most pronounced touches of strong color of pictorial expressionism.



Figure 5. The Virgin and Jesus. Nalda. Glossy white enamel and gold. Unknown sculptor. Dimensions: 47x47x180mm.



Figures 6 and 7. Some details



Left all in white enamel, with just the golden touch of the crowns, the figurine manages to create a feeling of purity and elevation, accordingly to the nature of what is represented. It reflects perfectly, despite its small size, an entire intimate, interior world, from which arises the artistic expressiveness of the sculptor.

There are no details or colored impressions that could disturb the peace of the composition, whose pure, geometric lines rise from the practically square base to come together in a loving lap, the center of the composition, in which the left hand that holds the Child, contemplated from a superior perspective by the undefined face of the Virgin. It is to be viewed on a neutral background, with nothing around it.

The decorative style of the figurine, a uniform glossy white enamel, is rare among the Nalda objects but not unique. Nalda painters use it when searching to emphasize purity, as in the following example, as in its Mandolin Girl.



Figure 8. Girl with mandolin. Nalda. Glossy white enamel with a touch of pink. Unknown sculptor. Dimensions 140x130x150 mm.

This is a technique that is closer to the well-known ceramic sculpture enamelled with lead, tin or titanium, and to crockery or other earthenware objects, than to porcelain itself, in which white, glossy or satin enamel is usually reserved for less expensive figures in which the porcelain paste is not perfectly white, due to impurities. The biscuit figures, in the 19th century style, should not have any type of enamel, trying to imitate a marble appearance, but this requires an extraordinary quality kaolin.

Our third item is not, in fact, a classical figurine. Totally different in nature, it is more a plate, or an ensemble of plates than a true sculpture. The sculptor gives the leading role to the painter, to the decorator, one would say to the architect. On a trapezoidal wooden table, which creates a deceptive sensation of perspective to the eye, three irregular porcelain plates are placed, combining straight and curved shapes and individually intensifying the sensation of a game of perspective.



Figure 9. Nalda. Holy Family. Anonymous painter. Plates on a wood table.  
Dimensions: 260x320 mm.

The plates, although it is difficultly appreciated in the pictures, are not flat. Their edges rise, waving irregularly, from the wooden base to which they are glued. More than a sculptor playing with shapes, it seems that the director of the piece has left the matter free to adopt the shape that his play with fire leads it to. I

It is the opposite of what the porcelain sculptor longs for, whose greatest fear is always that the kiln, and the inevitable contractions of the paste, will destroy the careful balance of dimensions that he hopes to have achieved before submitting his work to it. Here there is a dialogue between the chemist, who formulates the composition of the mixture of kaolin, quartz and feldspar and homogenizes the resulting mass, the sculptor who creates the forms and the painter who draws the silhouettes. If they wanted to create flat surfaces, they would have. It gives the impression that they longed to give, for once, freedom to their matter.



Figures 10 and 11. Details. Our Lady and Jesus. Nalda. Anonymous painter. The four-leaf clover mark is visible on the wood at the Virgin's feet.

Once again, the explosion of engobes, porcelain slips, with the classic black, brown and cream tones that abound in the Nalda figures, underscore the impressionist subtlety of some enamel blues that define the figures of the Virgin and Child. The sgraffito technique, used to delimit fields and to paint objects, see the rod, accentuates the fluid aesthetics of a porcelain drawing.

Nalda, in a unique case among his objects, except for his propaganda pieces, signs the work with its brand, the four-leaf clover, in wood pyrography, the technique for the comet too, on the front of the piece, well located at the feet of the Virgin. Except for those propaganda pieces, we do not know of a Nalda signature that is directly visible to the viewer. They could have put the pyrography on the back and it would have been consistent with their usual practice. No. They have placed it well in view.

Everything is, then, extraordinary in this work from Nalda. Certainly they have a few decorated porcelain trays, supposedly utilitarian objects, and even from the earliest times we have documentary evidence of two "plaques": "Placa marina" and "Placa El rosal", crafted by Vicente Beltrán with José Doménech as a collaborator, and dated between 1951 and 1952, which we have not been able to find. Beltrán's style, however, is far from that of the panel and, in Beltrán's early days, Nalda still used enamels, rather than slips, in decorating the pieces. Our Sagrada Família is undoubtedly closer to the objects from its last period, as in the case of the tray below, than to the more "classical" aesthetics of Nalda's academic origins:



Figure 12. Tray. Nalda. Engobes, vitrifications and enamels. Painting and sgraffito. Dimensions: 325x425mm.

The panel of the Holy Family, with its small plaques, is surely a work from the end of the period covered by its artistic section of Nalda, shortly before its disappearance in 1971.

Allowed to be fired by the large kilns of the industrial Nalda, we got to see personally, in early 70s, some impressive porcelain plates for decorating building facades. The tray, in its technique, like the plates, is reminiscent of those. They did not go beyond mere prototypes and catalog models. Repetitive in their manual decoration with slips, they were not artistic murals but rather singularly colored architectural coverings. They were too expensive to be used in utilitarian buildings and the experiment, which took place when it was decided to definitively close the artistic section and transfer its workers to the technical section, did not go any further.

Due to its uniqueness, without any documentary or historical support, the romantic idea remains that the plaque of the Holy Family, signed by Nalda below the Virgin, may be one of the last artistic pieces to come out of its kilns. The story, and the appearance of new Nalda works that may occur in the art market, will shed new light on the intimate trajectory of a work of art, the product of still anonymous sculptors, painters, decorators, chemists and kiln technicians.

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