

THE BOOKENDS IN THE PORCELAIN OF VICTOR DE NALDA

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In 2023, almost everyone who reads something is reading it in “e-books” with their “smartphone”, with their “e-reader” or with their “tablet”. In another order of things, in the living room of his house, in front of the sofa and next to the occasional computer, a kind of short drawer with straight lines prevails, on which a giant screen that fills almost the entire wall rests.

As you surely knows, two objects that have accompanied humans for centuries are about to disappear from modern homes: paper books and the library cabinet or, in his case, the upper part of a piece of furniture called a “sideboard”, where next to plates and teapots, those objects full of pages were placed. A true domestic revolution in the field of popular culture!

This revolution has caused the virtual disappearance of another ancient object, previously common in private libraries and along with paper books: the "bookend"; “serre-livres” in French. “buchstütze” in German. “sujetalibros” in Spanish; or “книгодержатель” in Russian, to stop us in European languages.

The tradition of bookends is also long. Those massive objects with diverse architecture and composition, whose confessed purpose was to hold books vertically on shelves to favor their vision, accessibility and order. In history we can find bookends of all shapes and materials, although the topic has not yet demanded the attention of art scholars and thoughtful academic studies have still not analyzed them with sufficient depth.

Our study is going in this direction. But the general scope of study overwhelms us. We are going to restrict ourselves here only to the bookends made of a specific material: the noble porcelain and, even more so, to those produced by a single brand of artistic porcelain: those of the “Fábrica de porcelana y refractarios Víctor de Nalda”, of the town of Almacera, north of Valencia, in Spain.

Surprisingly, among the brands of porcelain that have appeared on the market, an unusually abundant quantity of this type of objects has reached us from Víctor de Nalda's factory. Other European porcelain brands, even Lladró, have not dedicated more than one or two models to the subject, if at all, lost among their offer of objects with very different themes.

However, Nalda, whose artistic section, very small by industry standards, only active between 1947 and 1971, and which until 1955 at least did not produce any bookends, has given us, or at least they have come to our knowledge, up to six impressive sculptural models. To these basic shapes, with more or less successful resounding aesthetics, different and spectacular decorations of some of these shapes should be added. A few of these models must have achieved great sales success, judging by the still very frequent appearance of Nalda bookends in the current art markets of Europe and America, especially the models of some rustic Mexican men and women and some spectacular monks in various decorations.

In the absence of more direct and reliable data, which until now has been impossible to obtain, if this secondary market is a good numerical indicator, both of them - Mexicans and monks - are, by far, although not the most spectacular, the most spread among those created by Nalda.

The Nalda brand of artistic porcelain, as we have already studied in other works on Valencian porcelain (Ten Ros, 2023 a, b), produced throughout the years in which it was active, comparatively many fewer models of figures and other objects than other brands and in much shorter runs than those. We have evidence of figures whose circulation was even just a dozen copies, each of them, furthermore, individualized and freely personalized by the art and inspiration of their still unidentified painters and decorators. Its most emblematic and artistically and technically ambitious figures, among those that have come down to us, were thus too expensive to produce and, therefore, went on sale at exorbitant prices for their time. But cost and sales were not the main aspect that worried Nalda, at least at the beginning of the activity of its artistic section. With few exceptions, the market for Nalda figures was “the elites”.

The Mexicans, the monks and in general the Nalda bookends that we will see below are relatively simple figures to model and assemble. They require very few partial molds, perhaps between 4 and 8, with the consequent savings in assembly and reworking of joints that consume so much of the time of a specialized operator and that are a frequent cause of rejection once they leave the oven. Despite their great weight, reaching more than two kg, they must have been relatively cheap by Nalda standards. This, together with their powerful expressiveness, explains their obvious sales success at the factory and, consequently, its relative abundance in the current second-hand market, when the object, while retaining its artistic quality, has lost its most obvious usefulness. Dozens of copies are for sale on portals specialized in art and the second-hand markets at the beginning of 2024, with valuations so different that they show the difficulties of the market in setting prices for figures of this brand. The majority of Nalda's artistic catalog, produced between 1947 and 1971, has never appeared on the secondary market throughout the years of our monitoring or has done so on very rare occasions.

The Victor de Nalda company had been making industrial porcelain, especially insulators for the electrical industry, since 1913. After the civil war and the rise of massive electrification in the country, it became practically the only company that produced large and medium-sized insulators in Spain. Until the mid-70s it had this market almost captive. Financially healthy, it was able to create an artistic section that began, in fact, to produce exquisite and very expensive porcelain figures in 1947. But at the end of the 60s, faced with the explosion of sales of the simplest, cheapest and most populist porcelain from Lladró and its imitators, the section was already an overly expensive money-losing machine. Victor de Nalda closed the section in 1971 to continue doing what made it profitable: the production of electrical insulators, also affected by competition from other factories. We refer to the aforementioned works and others that can be found on our website <https://www.uv.es/ten> in the bibliography to finish contextualizing this study.

As I have already attested, is not weird. The artistic porcelain of the "V́ctor de Nalda Porcelain and Refractory Factory", was from the beginning oriented towards those reduced Spanish elites capable of appreciating its quality. Being this market too narrow, Nalda could never have been a successful brand in the competitive framework of porcelain art. The artistic section of Nalda was at first stage born as an image and prestige operation for the parent industry and as a means of social advancement for its owners V́ctor de Nalda Fŕgols and his wife Ernestina Pujol, in 1947, in the middle of the post-war period of the Spanish civil war, once the ominous "years of hunger" (between 1939 and 1945) had passed. This is the key point that mostly contributes to explain the story of the artistic section of Nalda.

Consistent with its objectives, Nalda decorative porcelain opted more for excellence and image, regardless of cost, than for mass production and sales volume. The numbers of models and copies that we know were launched to the market are actually ridiculous by industry standards, even for its time. At the beginning of the 70s of the 20th century, the Lladró brothers' brand already counted the copies of its most notable figures in tens of thousands and circulations of thousands were more the

norm than the exception. On the label of some Nalda pieces is marked the number of copies produced of this item. We have found one jug in which this total number of copies is 24!

Despite this, at the end of its life, Nalda tried to enter the European and American market through its network of contacts and representatives in the porcelain industry. Some of its artistic objects still appear in the art markets of the US, Germany, France, the United Kingdom or Latin America, with a disparity in prices that attests to the reality of a classical “non-market”. They have remained as delicacies for connoisseurs and for minorities of collectors, capable of appreciating the artistic, technical excellence and rarity of a piece of artistic porcelain, or as useless junk for the less informed people too! Curiously, after some of the bookends that we have already mentioned, the next offers, by number of works, that appear in the art markets are not figures but apparently utilitarian objects, also too expensive to produce and decorate to be competitive in the world of porcelain from the last third of the 20th century. We find surprising jugs and glasses that artistically imitate wooden or copper objects, as well as vases or lamps. Consequently, with its very limited production, the rest of the figures and other objects of the Nalda brand for sale in second-hand markets are practically anecdotal, with completely different prices, from a few euros to hundreds of euros or dollars. The setting of prices in this non-market is often left to the discretion of the poorly informed private seller, who seeks to get rid of an out-of-fashion object, appealing to the aesthetic whim of the possible compulsive buyer or, on another scale, that of the antiques dealer. In search of the aesthete who knows the brand.

The splendor of the Nalda slips.

In other studies we have thematically followed the sculptural, pictorial and decorative production of Nalda Porcelain, especially in its impressive biscuits from the first period, between 1947 and 1954 (Ten Ros 2023 c), in the representations of the Holy Family, a classic theme originally addressed, (Ten Ros 2023 d) and in the series of his regional costumes, the demonstration of the excellence of Nalda painting in porcelain (Ten Ros 2023 e).

That first period, its biscuits and the rest of its figures, is dominated by the aesthetics, between classical and art-deco, of its first sculptors, under the influence of Vicente Beltrán Grimal, a leading figure in Spanish sculpture (Diez Arnal J. s /f). Fortunately we know well those first Nalda sculptors. The couple Victor and Ernestina de Nalda, eager for artistic and social recognition for themselves and for their parent company, entrusted their new adventure to the best sculptor they could find in the Valencia of the time: a Vicente Beltrán, recently rehabilitated after his time in prison as a result of retaliation by the Franco regime, who had regained his position as a professor at the School of Fine Arts of Valencia.

Beltrán, linked to the art-deco aesthetics but original in his artistic language, built around himself a group of sculptors and painters, all from the School of Fine Arts, with roots in classicism but personally original in their aesthetics and open to new interpretations of the Central European tradition. Among them, it is worth highlighting Fulgencio García “Garcieta”, already famous Fallas artist, a true genius who would soon leave Nalda to pursue his career with the Lladró brothers and be his reference sculptor. Along with Garcieta, Beltrán attracted Nalda to José Doménech, who would be director of the artistic section because he preferred to dedicate himself more to the School of Fine Arts, of which he would be director. From the School he also brought out the most promising graduates: Amparo Montoro, perhaps his favorite student, Amparo Hueso and Francisco Catalá.

These “classic” sculptural origins are perceived, in addition to the shapes, in the decoration. Nalda begins by using enamels (dispersions of silica, metal oxides, aluminum flux and dyes in some liquid vehicle), perhaps applied over or under a layer of lead or tin glaze, which had been the classic painting technique since the beginnings of European porcelain. His artists will soon overcome this more classicist stage for the sake of much greater creative freedom and the use of novel decorative techniques in porcelain.

With the help of the well-known ceramist Alfonso Blat Monzó (Pérez Camps, 2003), who was already working in his technical section, Nalda introduced into its artistic figures materials that he already applied in his industrial products and that it would begin to use in his utilitarian artistic porcelain: the slips. The “engobes (in Spanish)” or slips, in ceramic language, are mixtures of liquid porcelain, called “barbotina” in Spanish, with colored clays, so that their behavior under fire is similar to that of pure porcelain paste, but managing to deposit layers of good thickness on it in which to obtain artistic effects impossible to achieve with simple enamels. Nalda slips will become a distinctive element of the brand. Where the power and possibilities of decoration with slips are best perceived, more than in the figures themselves, is in the objects, in which creative and stylistic freedom is not at all constrained by anthropocentric models. We can see it in some examples of Nalda objects:



Figure 1. Nalda, Jar.



Figure 3. Nalda. Bottle.



Figure 2. Nalda. Jug

Figure 4. Nalda. Lamp



Figure 5. Nalda. Glasses

To obtain its raw materials, Nalda had, in addition to external suppliers, abundant mines of kaolin of different composition and naturally colored clays in the provinces of Valencia, Guadalajara, Cuenca and Teruel. It is a unique case among European artistic porcelain factories, explained by the enormous consumption of raw materials carried out by the technical section to provide insulators throughout Spain. Alfonso Blat, expert in chemistry and firing kilns, had learned the slip technique in Central Europe during his study trips and applied it, in addition to porcelain insulators, to his own ceramic production, and from there to artistic porcelain, achieving in Nalda spectacular textures. The Nalda bookends, halfway between the decorative figure and the utilitarian object, allow the emphasis to be placed more on the impressionist impact than on classical realism. As figures created by professional artists, sculptors and painters, they can be considered spectacular and resounding manifestations of the slip technique applied to art.

Unfortunately, the documentary history of Nalda, in terms of its artists, is a black hole about which we have little data, especially from the period between 1955 and 1965, when bookends began to appear on the market. We still only have, to glimpse the artistic reality of the company, the news and details transmitted by the workers, their descendants, and even their competitors and above all, fortunately, its material substrate: the figures and objects that can be attributed to this period with some verisimilitude.

This black hole still prevents us from having specific names of the creative talents of the Nalda of that time. After the modeling, assembly and baking of the pieces, the bookends passed mostly into the hands of anonymous, less expensive artisan decorators, who were in charge of applying the slip layers or “pátinas”. But there were painters graduated from the School of Fine Arts who set the aesthetics for these artisans and carefully monitored the final result. Oral tradition, the testimonies of former workers and directly in our case that of the last person in charge of the section, Amparo Ros Puig, have preserved these few human details for us. In other contemporary factories, from Cerámicas Hispania to Lladró, painters and decorators were professionals who emerged, rather than from the Higher School of Fine Arts, from the School of Arts and Crafts, of Valencia, the School of Ceramics of Manises or, in the In the case of Lladró, its own professional schools, centers that the Lladró promoted with great success in their factories to train their own employees.

Therefore, we do not know either the sculptors or the decorators of the series of Nalda bookends that we present here, the true masters who have left us the works that we know. Theirs is the credit if the bookends were a real bestseller. Unfortunately, it seems the company's files do not contain more specific data.

We can only point out, as certain data, that in his first period, between 1947 and 1954, Nalda still did not produce any bookends. Its sculptors from the first period, Vicente Beltrán, Fulgencio García, Amparo Montoro, Amparo Hueso and Francisco Catalá, who at the end of the 50s had already left the company, do not sign any bookends. Nor in this early period was the slip technique used. The decoration of the figures continued to be based on enamels.

It is during what we call “the intermediate period”, between 1955 and 1966, the one from which we have not received any information about sculptors or assignment of works, when the series of bookends must begin. The oral history and family tradition of the author of this study attests to this, unfortunately without more concrete details. It is also the time when Nalda begins to produce objects other than the classic figures, some of them shown above, and when the slip technique appears in practically all of Nalda's production and becomes its most distinctive sign. It is also the time in which Víctor de Nalda Grífols passed the baton to his sons Víctor and Ernesto de Nalda Pujol and the latter began to acquire executive prominence in the artistic section, leaving Víctor de Nalda Pujol more focused on the industrial part.

Finally, in 1966, Ramón Inglés Capella (1932-1997), a man with a rich and complex biography (Bueno, Baltasar (s.f)), joined Nalda as its main sculptor. Ramón Inglés entered the School of Ceramics in Manises in 1949 and, from 1953-1957, was student at the Higher School of Fine Arts in Valencia, where he was a classmate of Lola Sala, future wife of Juan Lladró Dolz, the eldest of the Lladró brothers. After winning some sculpture prizes, he carried out further studies at the School of Fine Arts in Paris, with a scholarship from the Provincial Council of Valencia and went to the Sèvres Manufacture in 1964, under the guidance of the Spanish ambassador, José María de Areilza. Although Sèvres offered him to continue as a sculptor, he returned to Spain, to Porcelanas Bidasoa, in Irún, in 1965, where he did not adapt to the style of the brand.

In 1966 he returned to Valencia and through Lola Sala he was hired as a technician, not as a sculptor, at Lladró, where he remained only a few months before being hired by Víctor de Nalda as practically the only sculptor for his artistic section. He remained in Nalda until 1970, when the imminent closure of the section, which would take place in 1971, induced him to become independent and create his own company, Porcelanas Inglés, in his town, Bétera (Valencia).

Ramón Inglés is important in our history of bookends because surely, although we still do not have documentary evidence, he is the author of several of the series of bookends. In addition to the Oral History and family testimonies, his distinctive style, which is evident in other Nalda and Inglés pieces, is joined by the similarity of themes, models and decorations with those produced in his own company when he became independent from Nalda. It is notable, and even surprising, for example, the number of figures of Mexican types produced by Nalda and Inglés and, among them, bookends. Other Nalda bookend models also have the Inglés imprint, but we have not been able to find analogues in his own production. For the rest, until new archives could be opened, if they still exist, the identity of the sculptors responsible must remain anonymous.

Another notable aspect in Ramón Inglés's career is his personal and commercial dependence on Víctor de Nalda, at least in his early years. Indeed, in a difficult stage of his life, having returned from Porcelanas Bidasoa, with no professional prospects in Valencia, Víctor de Nalda Pujol opened the doors of Nalda to him when Lladró closed them in a humiliating way. Ramón Inglés began to sculpt a good number of figure models for Nalda. Among his proposals, the brothers Víctor and Ernesto de Nalda selected those that they considered most in line with his historical career. But in these years, as we have already pointed out, the competition from Lladró, much more skilled in connecting with the demands of their time and the mass market and, above all, at much lower prices, had already brought the artistic Nalda to commercial ruin. In 1969, the person in charge of the section, Amparo Ros Puig, the core of daily management, felt ill and never recuperated. A few months later, plagued by problems, Víctor de Nalda made the decision to conclude the artistic adventure and close the section, which would materialize at the beginning of 1971, despite the fact that he was still trying to find a new director for it.

Ramón Inglés had already begun to produce figures in his house in Bétera. His separation from Nalda was not traumatic. On the contrary, the Nalda brothers give him all the facilities and even sell him their priceless collection of molds, those of the figures of Vicente Beltrán, Fulgencio García and many sculptors who had passed through Nalda. Shortly before, around 1969, Juan Lladró had offered to Víctor de Nalda to buy the entire collection and Nalda rejected it. Already in his workshop, Inglés even molds and puts on sale a few figures coming from this collection: These figures rarely appear on the market with Inglés's brand.

But a more important thing carries Inglés away from Nalda: The slips. A secret whose formulas and materials were preserved with great care in Nalda and which, as we have pointed out, were already its greatest distinctive sign. Nalda effectively becomes his supplier of kaolin and colored clays and transfers him the slip formulas. These slips will appear in great profusion in his later figures,

although in less bold tones than in Nalda. From the figures that have arrived to us, we are fortunate to be able to compare sculpture and decoration with slips of some Inglés figures for Nalda and for his own Inglés brand.

On the subject of bookends, the clearest example of authorship ascription is that of two of his Mexican models. Both Nalda and Inglés factories produced a surprisingly high number of Mexican-inspired figures, which, lacking of precise documentary references, have not yet been the subject of study. Among them, its seated Mexicans have such stylistic and decorative similarity that the ascription of authorship is practically inevitable. Let's see the Mexicans of Inglés to be able to compare them later with those of Nalda:



Figure 6. Inglés. Mexican sleeping.



Figure 7. Inglés. Mexican sleeping.

Figure 8. Inglés. Seated Mexican.



Figure 9. Inglés Seated Mexican.

Nalda's bookends

It is time to present to the reader the collection of all bookends with the Nalda mark that have come to our knowledge. As we said at the beginning, any heavy object with two more or less well squared sides can serve as a bookend. Even some porcelain figures, massive and not excessively tall, would be capable of fulfilling it even without being designed for that purpose. The Nalda figures that have come down to us and that are described as such are so because oral tradition attests to this and that this is the function that they still retain in the collective memory in the art world. Given the lack of documentary records, and given the small number of pieces that were made of many models, it is possible that some figure with a bookend function have not left a trace until now or have not come to our knowledge. Lacking of better chronological assignment or better criterion, we review them in alphabetical order, as appeared in Spanish

Scribe

Mexican woman

Mexican man

White monk, in two finishes, pure white and spotted white

Black monk

Thinker

Egyptian vases

We have put the weight in grams of the models to show that they are all massive objects; in some cases exaggeratedly massive. The great weight of a figure with such a condensed structure, without cracks or cracks appearing, is an example of the technical quality with which the raw material, a very homogeneous porcelain, has been prepared and fired. The porcelain suffers a loss in dimensions of up to 18% in the first two of the three or four passes through the kiln, at different temperatures, that the figures and objects require to be fired and set the decoration. When sintering, or vitrifying, at around 1350 degrees Celsius, close to its softening point, the material, due to inhomogeneities of the mass, to its own weight or to incorrect assembly of the different partial molds that make up the figure, accumulates stresses that can lead to cracks, deformations or detachments of their varnishes, slips or enamels. Nalda, in its industrial ovens and with its excellent technicians, overcame challenges that other porcelain factories could not achieve until, late in the last part of the 20th century, the progress in the construction technique of ovens and their fuels, temperature control and cooling programming, allowed them to do so.

The measurements are approximate and have been taken from specific specimens. Due to the aforementioned factors, inhomogeneities of the dough in successive editions of the figures or even different positions in the oven, no two figures are the same. The approximation, however, must allow the reader to obtain a precise image of the size.

SCRIBE. Weight 2213 gr. Dimensions (x,y,z): 195x170x240mm.



Figure 10

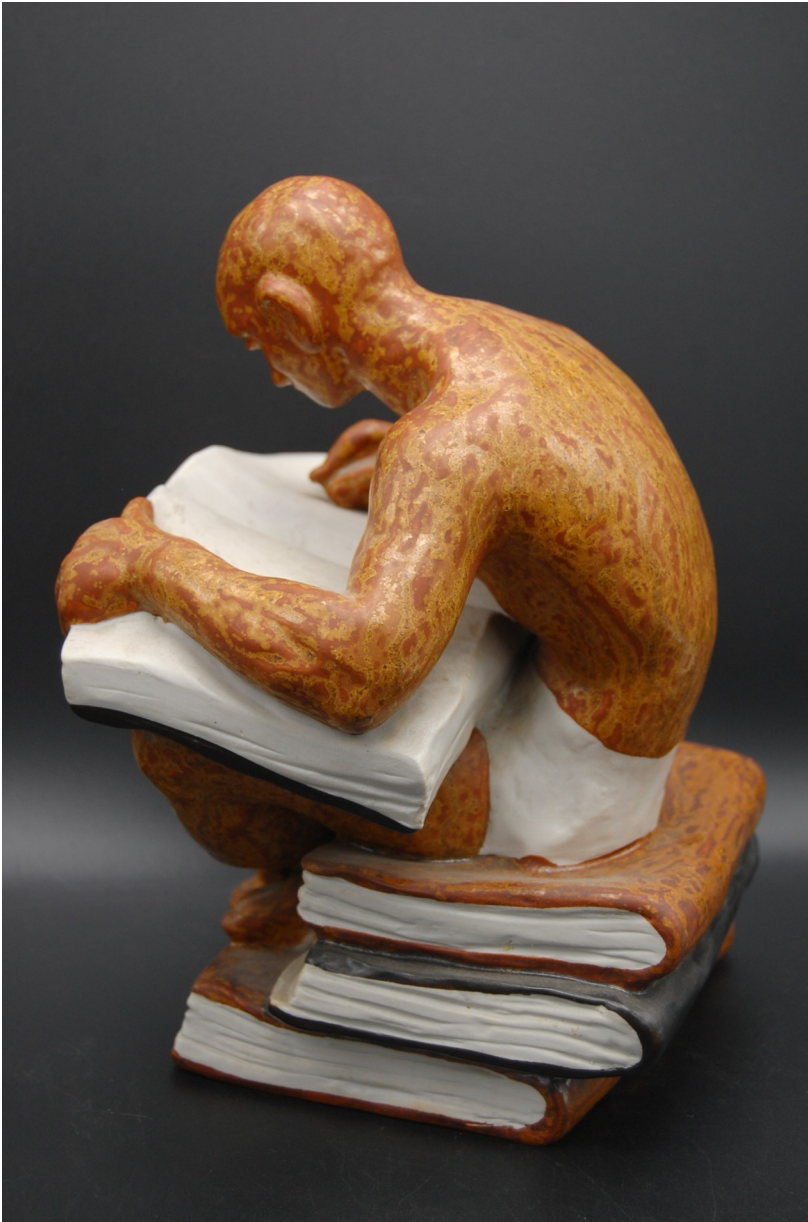


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

MEXICAN WOMAN. Weight 1125 gr. Dimensions (x,y,z): 150x140x185 mm.



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

MEXICAN MAN. Weight 1580 gr. Dimensions (x,y,z): 166x174x195 mm.



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

WHITE MONK, IN TWO FINISHES, PURE WHITE AND SPOTTED WHITE. Weight 1635 gr.
Dimensions (x,y,z): 173x230x186 mm.

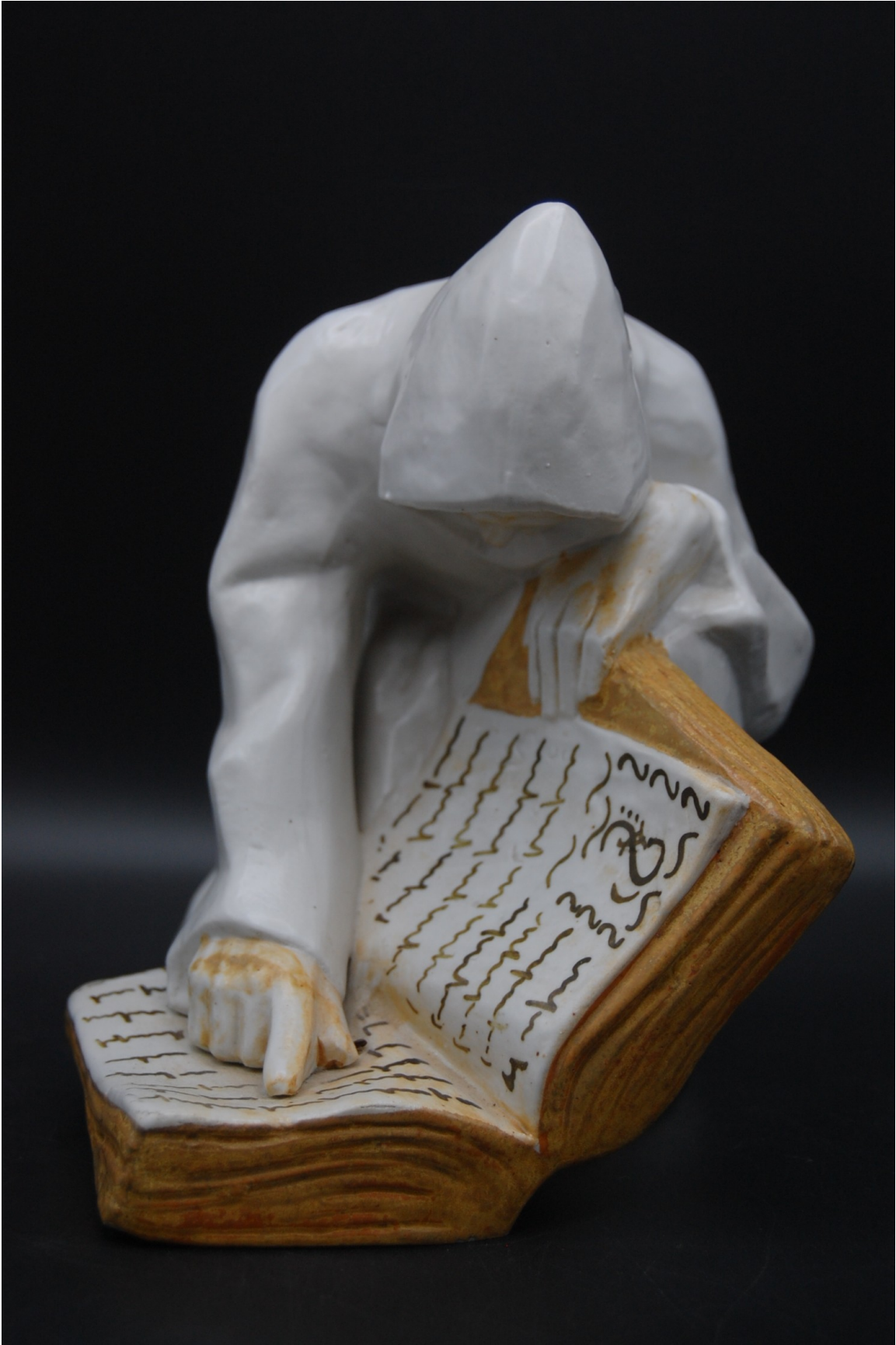


Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29

BLACK MONK. Weight 1640 gr. Dimensions (x,y,z): 175x227x185 mm.



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33

THINKER. Weight 1278 gr. Dimensions (x,y,z): 160x125x205 mm.

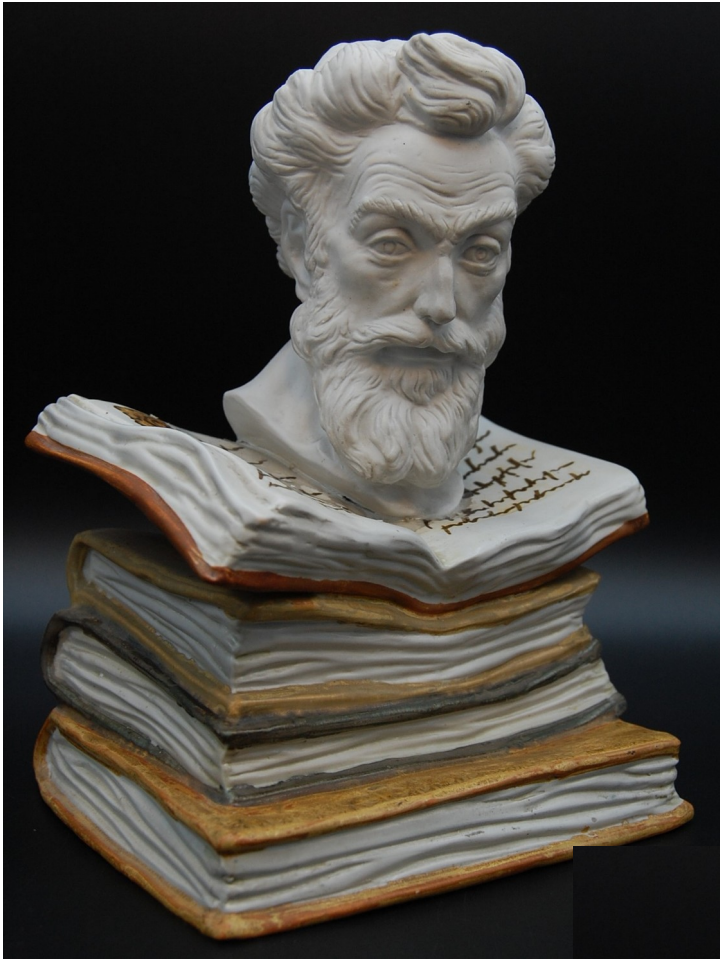


Figure 34



Figure 35



Figure 36



Figure 37

EGYPTIAN VASES. Weight 1423 gr. Dimensions (x,y,z): 125x150x225 mm.



Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41

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