

## **The Nativity Scene of the Estrela Basilica**

### **A sculptured conception of Joaquim Machado de Castro**



## **The Cult of the Nativity Scene in Portugal**

The cult of the Nativity Scene reached its height in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is one of the most interesting religious and artistic manifestations expressed in the European panorama of that era. Unlike the Neapolitan Nativity Scene, the Portuguese baroque Nativity Scene integrates, firstly, scenes based on the Bible and, secondly, scenes of daily life. Joaquim Machado de Castro (Coimbra 1731 - Lisbon 1822) was, doubtless, the sculptor best engaged in the development of this art.

## **A History of the Estrela Basilica Nativity Scene**

- Construction of the Nativity was commissioned in 1781 by Queen D. Maria I, in order that the Discalced Carmelites, whose convent was annexed to the Basilica, would be able to meditate on Jesus Christ and contemplate His Nativity.
- The sculptor selected by the Queen was Joaquim Machado de Castro who, with his disciples, was engaged on the construction of the Nativity Scene for the period of about five years.
- The Nativity is constituted by a structure of wood and virginal cork from Alentejo – this in homage to the virginity of Our Lady – and includes about 480 figures, fashioned of clay or terracota, the largest figures being finished by using the “carta encolata” Italian technique. The author’s choice of colours and the gilt embellishment was inspired by the Italian artist Bernini.
- This Nativity Scene was completed when baroque Nativity Scenes had achieved their peak in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it is one of the largest ever built. It is also one the most remarkable works modelled by Machado de Castro, a combination of baroque and neo-classic features of extraordinary anatomical beauty.
- There are two other smaller Nativity Scenes by this sculptor in Lisbon, one in the Cathedral and the other in the Museum of Ancient Art. The Nativity Scene in the Estrela Basilica is, without doubt, the most beautiful and the most famous.

## **A Description of the Nativity Scene**

- The central figure spotlighted by the light radiating from the grotto is that of the Infant Jesus, accompanied by Saint Joseph and the Most Holy Virgin Mary, His Mother, who presents Him so that He may be adored by all.
- The frame work of the grotto is constructed in harmony with neo-classic taste: three Corinthian columns support a ruined tympanum.
- The whole Nativity Scene is surrounded with layers of clouds sustaining myriads of Angels in adoration, who entone melodies of glory to God, transmitting ascending dynamics to the entirety of

the Nativity Scene, as they wake the shepherds to announce the birth of the Infant Jesus (Lc II, 8-20).

- The three Wise Kings and their entourage, guided by a star, reach Jerusalem, where king Herod lived, and, still guided by the star, come to Bethlehem to adore the new-born King of the Jews (TM II, 1-12).
- King Herod, for fear of the Messiah because of what he had heard from the Wise Men as to the time when the guiding star appeared to them, orders his soldiers to slaughter all the male infants in Bethlehem (Mat II, 16-18). This Nativity Scene is unique in that it is the only one in which the slaughter of the innocents appears.
- Hurrying to the grotto in Bethlehem to pay homage to the Infant Jesus one can see:
  - The Shepherds with their gifts: milk, cheese, eggs.
  - The Wise Men with their offerings: Melchior with gold from Asia because Christ is King, Baltazar with myrrah from Africa because Christ is Man and Caspar with incense from Europe because Christ is God.
  - The People, of all the races, rich and poor, whose representation calls to mind daily life in 18<sup>th</sup> century Portugal, as can be observed in detail on both lateral pannels of the Nativity Scene: - slaughtering a fatted pig, fishermen cooking eels, shepherds playing their pipes, a hunter stalking his prey, men in a tavern playing cards, a washerwoman, children at their games, sweethearts wooing, a variety of scenes that bring to mind love, friendship, childhood, old age, daily chores, and which emphasize the generosity of the common people towards the Infant Jesus.
- Alongside the manger there is a lamb, to signify that this night was born the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world (Jo I, 29), while an ox and a donkey warm the Infant Jesus with their breath.
- There are many animals, to be seen all over the Nativity Scene, some full of the symbolism of renewal: turtledoves, storks, geese, hens, rabbits, sheep, pigs, boars, horses, camels, dogs and so on.



The Wonder of this Nativity is not just what is visible to the eyes, but the feeling it conveys of a hymn to life, a message of peace and joy.

With the representation of the nativity of the Infant Jesus the Artist awakens the child that exists within each one of us, opening up our hearts to beauty, innocence and messianic joy...

**Glory to God in the Highest and Peace to Men on Earth!**

**Visiting hours**

10 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. (except Sundays and Holy Days)

3.30 p.m. to 5 p.m. (except Mondays)

Phone: 213 960 915

Please note that there must be on visits during services.  
Compliance with this request would be appreciated.

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