

CLASSIC MEXICAN FOLK ART



Maria Luisa's Portrait of Christmas



Text by Roseann Hanson
Photographs by Edward McCain

It was impossible to remain unaffected. As I walked into the room, I imagined my reaction was nearly identical to that of everyone who sees it: I blinked, stared for a moment of awe-inspired silence, then exclaimed with delight at the scene before me.

And what a sight it was: 15 feet wide by 17 feet deep, from waist-height rising 12 feet to the saguaro-rib ceiling. Its 300 figurines, the stream cascading down its rocky course, all the plants and flowers, Mary and



Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem, the three wise men, the Indian village with women grinding corn, the Mexican home with a "fire" burning out front, the detailed scenes representing important events in Jesus' life, and the angels flying through the twinkling heavens were all part of one of the most elaborate and detailed public *nacimientos* — Mexican-style Nativity scenes — in the Southwest.

Each year Maria Luisa Tena of Tucson spends more than 300 hours assembling this work of classic Mexican folk art in honor of her late mother, who crafted such a Nativity each Christmas for her family in Mexico. It fills a whole room at the Tucson Museum of Art's La Casa Córdoba, a historic adobe building in downtown Tucson. This year marks its 18th assembly.

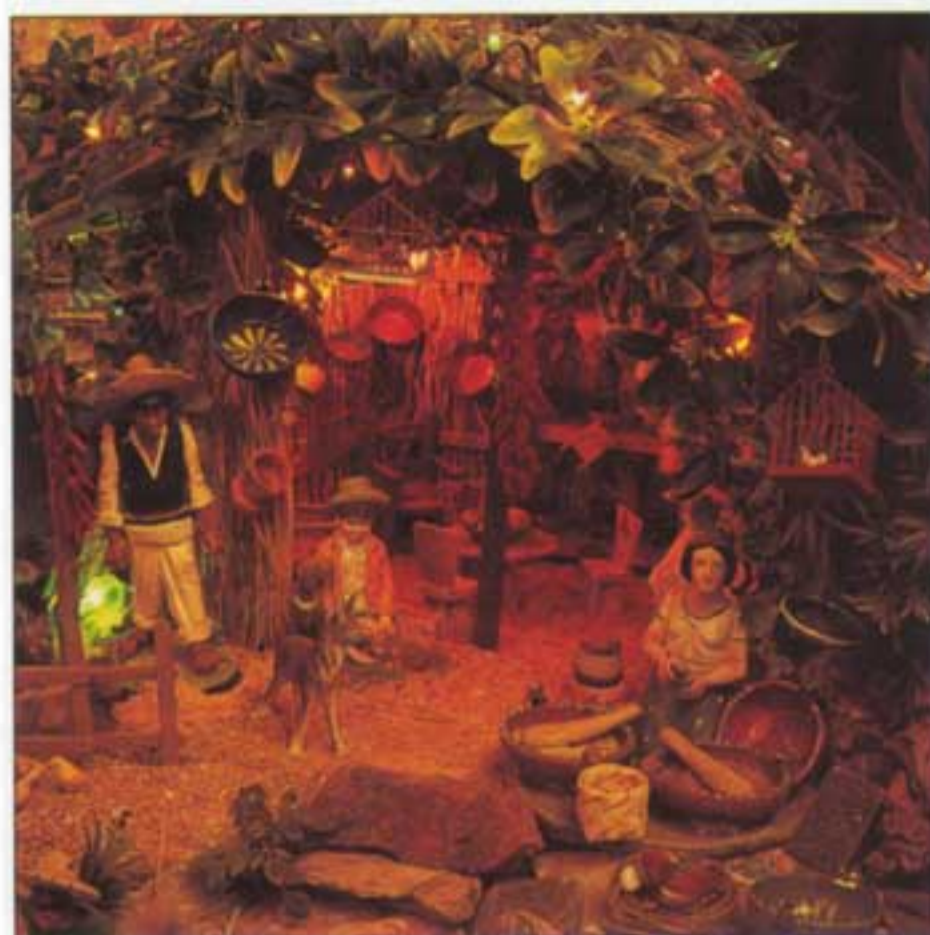
The Casa Córdoba nacimiento is part of the ancient tradition of re-creating the night of Christ's birth, though the only thing it really shares in common with the European Nativity with which most of us are familiar is the Holy Family.

Depicting the birth of Christ in pictures began in Bethlehem shortly after the event, but the first known Nativities made with figures are believed by some scholars to have been crafted by a 13th-century Italian artist whose scenes are displayed today at the Basilica of the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Popular belief often credits the first Nativity to St. Francis of Assisi, though this is up for debate among scholars. What is nearly certain, however, is that St. Francis'

devotion to the Nativity, especially his use of live animals in re-creating life-size scenes, helped popularize and spread this Christmas tradition worldwide.

The focal point of a Nativity is the manger, of course, and depending on the creator's whim the attendant figures can be as simple as the holy family, the wise men, and stable animals, or, as is so popular in Mexico, an entire village. In France a Nativity is a *crèche*, a *krippe* in Germany, a *presepio* in Italy, a *pesebre* in Spain, and in the Spanish-speaking Western Hemisphere it is a nacimiento (in Spanish, *nacer* is the verb "to be born"). Figures have been made of anything from wax, ivory, and precious metals to wood, clay, tin, and even dried fruits and nuts. They are made by famous artists or peasants in cottages, and they can fit into a shoebox or fill several rooms. In Europe the tradition is so strong there is even an International Association of Friends of the Crib.

At about the same time the freestanding Nativity scenes began flourishing in Europe,



native people in the Americas were experiencing their first contact with Europeans and their religion. Missions were established in Mexico and the American Southwest, and native peoples were converted to the new religion, its customs, and art.

The Nativity was embraced eventually with characteristic enthusiasm and embellishment by Christian Mexico. The nacimiento tradition is very strong in certain parts of that country, such as Guadalajara, where Maria Luisa Tena grew up. Not just a holiday decoration, a nacimiento in a Mexican home is the focal point of their Christmas worship, representative of their devotion to God and their own family. Whole industries and mercados are devoted to crafting and selling *figuritas*, or figurines, and accessories for nacimientos.

Over the years, as people moved throughout Mexico, settling the northern frontier and what was to become the state of Arizona, they brought with them their rich traditions, including the assemblage of nacimientos at Christmastime.

Maria Luisa joined me one winter day at her nacimiento. A steady stream of visitors from all over the world filed into the small viewing space, and we learned that no matter what languages we spoke, the message of the Nativity and the delight it created were universal.

"Ever since I was a little girl, six or seven years old, I can remember nacimientos at Christmas. In Mexico almost everyone made even a small Nativity," Maria Luisa explained, sometimes in English and when the words were inadequate, in Spanish. In her family, it was her mother who painstakingly

(PRECEDING PANEL, PAGES 46 AND 47)

An elaborately detailed nacimiento, a Mexican-style Nativity scene, displayed in Tucson was inspired by one woman's devotion.

(RIGHT) Maria Luisa Tena begins work on her nacimiento in midsummer to have it ready by November. The scene is different every year, using figurines collected from throughout Mexico.





(OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE) A small part of the *nacimientito* depicts a ranch scene with a family at its chores. (LEFT) Creating a *nacimientito* is a holiday tradition among many families in the Southwest. And while all of the scenes are different, in each one the most important aspect is the Christ child in the manger.

created a large *nacimientito* in one of the rooms in their home. "The vendors in the mercados sold many things for *nacimientitos*, and also for months before Christmas we would go to the hills with our *madre* to gather things — cactus, moss, little trees — to decorate the Nativity."

After her mother passed away, Maria Luisa, who had moved to Tucson with her husband, Joseph, began building a *nacimientito* at La Casa Córdova in 1978 as a volunteer with a group called Los Padrinos de la Casa Córdova. When that group disbanded a few years later, many of its members as well as the Tucson Museum of Art continued to sponsor the annual assemblage. The hundreds of figurines have been collected all over Mexico by Maria Luisa, her family, and friends.

The Nativity scene is different every year, and Maria Luisa and an assistant begin

work as early as August in order to complete it by late November. They often work late into the evening, she said. "Thank goodness my husband supports me. Many times he has had to eat TV dinners!"

Many families in the Southwest create *nacimientitos* in their homes, and each family has its own traditions. James "Big Jim" Griffith, director of the University of Arizona's Southwest Folklore Center, described one Tucson family's custom of moving their Nativity figures throughout the home to act out the Christmas narrative, starting with *Las Posadas*, the time Mary and Joseph looked for shelter, then at midnight on Christmas Eve, Jesus is placed into the manger. By January 6, the three kings have arrived, and finally the flight into Egypt begins, and everything is packed up for the next year. Other families, Griffith said, display Jesus in the

manger before Christmas Day because they say it represents their belief that Christ is with them every day.

Whatever the tradition, whether it is called a *nacimientito*, a *crèche*, or a *krippe*,

the special devotional and familial ties with a Nativity scene are universal.

"I love this tradition. My mother, who was a wonderful artist, did this, and I brought it to Tucson," said Maria Luisa. "I would love everyone to make a Nativity scene at Christmas." ■

Author's Note: The Tucson Museum of Art's La Casa Córdova, 140 N. Main, is open Monday through Saturday 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. and Sunday, noon to 4 P.M.; there is no admission charge to Casa Córdova. Maria Luisa Tena's *nacimientito* is displayed from one week before Thanksgiving through the end of March. For information, call (520) 624-2333.

Tucson-based Roseann Hanson also wrote about the Audubon holiday bird count in this issue.

Edward McCain, also from Tucson, has made a visit to Maria Luisa Tena's *nacimientito* part of his Christmas festivities.