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TITLE - The Nacimiento
Artist Finds Inspiration in Boyhood Memories and Christmas Tradition

By Alex Garcia | Sun Contributing Writer

Growing up in Jalisco, Mexico, Luis Villanueva used to spend hours outside the window of one of the wealthy residents of his town admiring the colorful nacimiento (nativity scene) with all of the religious figurines that shined brightly inside their home.

Displaying a nacimiento, or nativity scene, is an essential part of the Christmas holiday in many households and churches around the world. While different cultures may have their own version, universally the nativity scene depicts the birth of Jesus Christ. It typically includes a manger, Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the Three Kings, shepherds, angels and stable animals.

Mexican nacimientos, which Villanueva displays, are distinct with an abundance of detail that ties religious devotion of culture. Villanueva's nacimiento displays a scene from a Mexican Village that includes a figure of a woman in braids making tortillas, a baker, a peasant carrying a load of wood, all of them wearing traditional Mexican dress.

Typical of a Mexican nacimiento, Villanueva's, an esteemed artist known for creating stunning works of art from recyclable items, there's also a fountain that recycles water and ends in a pool where a visitor can find the figure of a boy and ends in a pool where a visitor can find the figure of a boy riding a small boat.

Several of the scenes are lit by strategically placed lamps in different colors that add to the effect: red for hell, green for fields, amber for the stable and manger holding baby Jesus.

The Mexican nacimiento can be quite large and detailed with new figurines added to it each year.

The Nativity Scene is a tradition going back centuries. Documented history gives credit to St. Francis of Assisi for introducing the nativity scenes to Europe in 1220 after his return from Egypt. Some accounts state he used a straw filled manger set between a real ox and donkey and statues or costumed people instead of figurines. In 1562, Jesuits in Prague put a manger that is considered to be the first of the modern type of nacimientos. Spanish conquistadors established the tradition in the Americas, where the indigenous people added their own touches.

In Mexico, the first known "Mexican" nacimiento was created by Pantaleon Panduro in the town of Tlaquepaque Jalisco,

featuring "nopales" and figures that resembled Mexican peasants, said Villanueva, who has delved into the history of the tradition. "Mexican nacimiento figurines are not shown in the traditional European dress, but in indigenous clothing," Villanueva said.

For Villanueva, it is essential part of his Mexican heritage and holiday traditions. "You always have to have a nacimiento," said the resourceful artist.

Villanueva has created "sacred art" from discarded items including a series of Virgins that reflect various countries and cultures. People are always surprised to find that he has created art befitting churches and museums from the most humble items found in trash bins.

Creating art from very little was sparked by necessity for Villanueva. His love for art and the nacimiento began when he was barely six years old. Very poor, his family could not afford to buy the pieces for the wonderful Christmas tradition, so Villanueva started making his own from things he found from around his home.

"I started making the figures out of cardboard. The beards and the hair I would make from hair I cut from the sheep in the ranch and I used to paint them with old crayons and crushing malva flowing in water," he remembered. "I was so poor, I invented things. I would dress my figures with the shiny paper inside the cigarette boxes or the paper that came with candy and gum."

Fifty years later, those memories are still intact. His nacimiento has grown to be a true work of art that the artist proudly exhibits in his Woodland Hills home. If a passerby would peer in his window today, as he did of his neighbors many years, they'd see an enormous display, far larger and more ornate than the one that impressed him as a boy.

Villanueva, a retired health professional, can now afford to buy figurines. His nacimiento includes some 200 of the 500 figurines he has collected over the years from his trips around the world. There are figures from, Columbia, El Salvador, Germany, Guatemala, Italy, Spain, and, of course, his native Mexico. They are made in a variety of shapes, colors and materials: Clay, wax even plastic.

Others, Villanueva has of course, made himself. The figures are placed on behind and within structures Villanueva has constructed from discarded carton and turned into what he calls "rock paper." It provides grooves, fields and the cave where the main figure in the nacimiento where Baby Jesus lays in a manger, Villanueva will tell you that, from all his research over the years, baby Jesus was born not in a man-made stable, but in a cave turned into a stable. In addition to Mary and Joseph, Villanueva displays the revered Virgen de Guadalupe.

There are several angels made from bee's wax he purchased more than 35 years ago in Guanajuato, Mexico, a wall he painted blue with white stars, and clouds made of cotton from a pillow he found on one of his trash hauling adventures.

“The pillow was really dirty, but the cotton was very clean and look at it now, it looks wonderful,” Villanueva said proudly. He pointed to a grey comet over the baby Jesus accompanying one of the angel figures he made from cardboard. Pointing to still more angels, Villanueva reflected, “When I bought those figures they cost me \$3 each,” he said of the angel figures. “Now, each one is worth \$100 each.”

Tradition has it that the nacimientos are void of the baby Jesus until Christmas eve, Dec 24th, when the figure is brought out and rocked as a newborn baby, often by the children of the house. The figure is then placed in the manger in the nacimiento, which stays up through January 6th, Kings Day or the Epiphany, to mark the day when the three kings, or Wise Men, Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar made their arrival in Bethlehem after following a star in the sky.

It can take Villanueva up to two months with the help of several assistants to put up his nacimiento, but the time is worthwhile, he said, because it's a tradition he now tries to instill in his U.S.-born nephews.

“For me, Christmas is the most wonderful and beautiful time in the world when we celebrate with music, food and presents. But we cannot forget our tradition to build our nacimiento, show our devotion and take inspiration from the birth of Christ.”

Editor Diana Martinez contributed to this story.