

Building Your Belén

Bethlehem at Home

Never forget that the Spanish expression “*armar el belén*” – literally, setting up the Belén – means “causing a big commotion.” And a commotion it is.

While some truly devoted belenistas begin to construct their Belén during the summer, or even right after taking down the prior winter's Belén in January or



February, many Spaniards set up their Belenes around December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Some people, particularly Latin Americans, aim for December 16th, date of the start of the Christmas novena – a Catholic practice of nine days of special prayers before a major feastday. But no matter when the "grand opening" occurs, setting up the Belén takes much advance preparation.

If you're a Spaniard, you get your boxes off of the top shelf of your closet and check over the figures to make sure they have not lost any vital body parts during the year. Next you assemble the moss, the cork bark, the various bits of paper and tinsel, and determine what is lacking.

Replacing broken or missing figures means a trip to the *mercadillo de Navidad*, the Christmas market that is held in many Spanish cities in December. Generally, the Christmas markets open around mid-December and run for about a week, until a couple of days before



Christmas. Hundreds of vendors from all over Spain come to the markets to set up stands for selling figures, moss, cork bark and other supplies.

After you have struggled through the crowds at the market, emerging with that perfect *pastor* or even water-mill or other architectural detail, you have to find an appropriate surface. This can be anything from the top of your coffee table or mantelpiece to an entire large sheet of plywood set up on sawhorses. Get out the hammer and nails, build a backdrop, set up your figures and invite the neighbors in to admire your Belén.

If you are buying figures for the first time, you have to decide on the size of your Belén and its figures. Decide how much space you can devote to the scene, and then go shopping for Spanish Nativity figures. Start with the essential Nativity group, called the *Nacimiento* or *Misterio* in Spanish. This is composed of St. Joseph, the Virgin, the Infant, the angel, and the ox and the ass. To find out the figure size, measure St. Joseph, who is the only figure that is standing upright.



Since the figures are sold in centimeters, you should have a handy rule of thumb: If St. Joseph is a 14 cm figure, he's around 5 1/2 inches tall; if he's a 17 cm figure, he's 6 1/2 inches; and if he's a 21 cm. figure, he's about 8 inches tall. A 14 cm (5 1/2") figure is a little taller than a 12 oz. soda can.

Does this mean all the figures you buy or make for your Belén have to be the same size?



No. But generally, if you are buying figures to replace figures in the *Mysterio*, that is, the central group, they should be in the same size range as St. Joseph. When

you have a 17 cm St. Joseph and you're looking for another ox, for example, look for one that is described as 17 cm, although the figure itself will not be this size. It simply means that the figure is scaled to go with a 17 cm St. Joseph.

Larger figures will have more detail, of course, but even small figures made in Spain are carefully painted and finished. You can even find very tiny Nativity sets that are only an inch or so in height – but detailed down to the eyebrows!

Another approach is the large, simple scene, which can be quite elegant (although it's not exactly a belén, since it doesn't show the whole village). These figures are in the style of figures that are traditional in the churches and Holy Week floats of Andalucía.

Visiting Belenes – in churches, public buildings and even city plazas and movie theaters – is a favorite Christmas activity.



But suppose you're not a Spaniard and don't have that dusty box of Nativity figures from many Christmases past stored on the top shelf of your closet? How do you begin?

Some people build dioramas, and some people build open scenes of various sizes, depending on how much room they have. In the photo, we see a large open scene built by the Madrid association, next to a row of dioramas also built by its members.



Even the tiny dioramas are very detailed, even though the figures used in them are generally only 3 or 4 inches tall - and often smaller!



However, for a larger Nativity scene, a true belén, there are two important concepts: one is **perspective**, and the other is **scale**.

The first concept is familiar to most people and refers to the way that artists create the impression of distance on a flat surface. You won't be working with a flat surface, but you will be working with a fairly small area. Do you have a backdrop of mountains or plains behind your figures, and want to give the impression that the shepherds are out there fairly far away, watching their sheep? Then buy smaller shepherds – say 8-10 cm, and even smaller sheep. If your shepherds are really far away, get tiny 3 cm figures.

Scale is the proportional relationship of the figures to the real model on which they are based and thus to each other. A 12 cm figure of St. Joseph would be dwarfed by a 19 cm ox or shepherd, for example. So keep figures that are to be placed next to each other in the same size range. Vary the size of figures that are not next to each other to create the impression of distance.

But regardless of the size, the *Misterio* is always placed so that it is the focal point of the entire scene.



Ref.: http://www.spanishnativity.com/Building_Your_Belen.html