



# The Merry Fertiliser

It's not exactly an assembly-line factory, but making over 10,000 caganers for the Yule season keeps a body busy. **By Tom Lillie**

**T**he caganer is a figure that is a fundamental part of the *pessebre*, the Catalan Christmas scene.

Many homes and businesses will display a small Nativity scene that includes all the usual characters: the baby Jesus, the three wise men, the shepherds and their flock. While this may present a seemingly typical festive setting, closer inspection uncovers a twist in the tale that is peculiar (indeed) to Catalunya. Usually situated half-hidden behind a rock or a tree, squats a man whose role is as enigmatic as his business is obvious. With his traditional dress and pensive pose, the caganer may look like a rustic version of *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin, however the uninformed visitor is left scratching his head in confusion on noticing the *pièce de résistance* of the scenario. A view from behind reveals a rear view of the caganer, his trousers at half-mast, proudly displaying the spiral form that evidently he has just deposited on the ground beneath him. The obvious question: what on earth is this caganer doing (metaphorically speaking) in this most sacred of scenes?

To get to the bottom of the matter there is no better place to visit than the studio of celebrated *pessebrista* and caganer-maker, Ana Maria Pla. For over 30 years she lived and worked in Barcelona as a more conventional potter, often joking with the caganer maker Francesc Godia that when he retired she would take his moulds and keep the tradition going. About 12 years ago, he did, indeed, pass her the baton. Today, she still uses many of his original moulds in her new studios in the idyllic setting of L'Estartit on the Costa Brava.

Just 100 metres from the sea that overlooks the illes Medes marine park and surrounded by fields and mountains, Pla's studios seem the perfect place to blend the natural elements of clay, water and fire in this traditional folk art form. The caganer in his most classic style, the 'bog standard', if you will, has the appearance of a typical rural worker of the region, the *pagès Català*, complete with red *barretina* beret,

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white shirt and dark trousers. Since this tradesman made his entrance into the Nativity scene during the 18th century, he has become one of the most popular elements of the seasonal festivities. As well as the 8,000 caganers she produces and sells annually herself, this year Pla took an order for 3,000 more from a Catalan company, which intends to send all their clients a unique present this Christmas. The whole family gets drafted in to attend the stalls at the *Fira de Santa Llúcia* Christmas market, held outside Barcelona's Cathedral every year, as well as those next to the *Sagrada Família* and the one in Sabadell. In fact, business is so good that her son Marc Alos recently came to work with her full-time in the studio, exchanging the rat-race of Barcelona for the pleasure of working with more natural elements. He is one of very few *pessebristes* representing the younger

generation, according to his mother, who said most of the craftspeople making caganers today are of a more advanced age.

Together, they design and make over 50 types of caganer, both male and female, in a variety of costumes. Professionals, religious figures, devils, athletes and caricatures of famous people and local figures are all included. The worktops in their studio resemble a miniature version of the famous Xi'an terracotta army in China, with rank on rank of the 'merry fertiliser' as he is sometimes known.

This leads us rather neatly to the nitty-gritty of the matter in question. Ana María Pla explained that the job of the caganer is simply to do what we all must do, a crude but natural part of every human life. Also known as *l'hom que fa les seves feines*, the man who does his business, the caganer does his, just like rural workers throughout history have always done, in the natural surroundings of the countryside. By making his contribution to the land he improves the fertility of the soil and therefore ensures a bumper harvest during the coming year. For this reason, the caganer is seen as a positive figure that brings good fortune and happiness to the family. Placed in the Nativity scene, he is actually considered to be a lucky charm.

Pla's view of the caganer's role is certainly down to earth, if perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek. However, some of the members of *L'Associació Amics del Caganer*, the Association of the Friends of the Caganer, whose membership extends to the US and Japan, make more ethereal claims for the caganer in their literature, including that he represents, "A cosmic indifference which contrasts with the spiritual motivation that is awoken by the greatest mystery of human kind—a counterpoint which adds a human side to the representation of the mystery of Christmas."

If this sounds like so much hot air, association members have even loftier ambitions for the caganer. They are pushing for a motion to have a permanent statue of the caganer erected in Barcelona, in the hope that he will become the Catalan equivalent of the



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*manekin pis*, the famous fountain in the form of a little boy that has become Brussels' number-one tourist attraction. Unfortunately, they are finding it difficult to find anyone at a government level willing to stand behind the movement (perhaps unsurprisingly).

A member of the association, Ana María Pla hopes that the caganers she has created this election year in the forms of current politicians (José María Aznar, Jordi Pujol, *et. al.*) will generate some interest in the statue higher up. She explained that, because the caganer is seen as such a positive character, having one made in your image is actually a way of honouring the individual rather than a sign of disrespect. This is borne out by the fact that the caganer she has created for the neighbouring village of Torroella de Montgrí (birthplace of her mother) bears an uncanny resemblance to her own father. It also explains why Barça fan Marc is reluctant to create a caganer in the form of Real Madrid

player David Beckham even though, in terms of business, he so often represents the 'goose that lays the golden egg'.

Every year, caganer makers create new figures in novel and topical forms whose identity they keep secret until the start of the Fira de Santa Llúcia when all is revealed. For the caganer fans, part of the fun is guessing the identity of this year's caganer and to discover him in his hiding place. It's fair to say that the committed caganophile could be considered slightly potty. However whether you choose to celebrate his contribution to the festivities or simply turn your nose up at him, it is impossible to completely pooh-pooh the humble caganer. ■

Fira de Santa Llúcia 29th November-23rd December  
[www.amicsdelcaganer.org](http://www.amicsdelcaganer.org)  
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