

### The Story of Cusco's *Niño Manuelito*



As you tread the streets of Cusco during the days leading up to Christmas, you will notice something unique to Peru's Nativity celebrations: local handicrafts featuring sculptures of a baby, or a young boy, mostly with tears in his eyes and a sad expression. He is known as *Niño Manuelito*. Moreover, there are also stands that fix *Manuelitos*, and others where you can buy different clothes for him!

According to records from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish priests introduced Christianity in the New World and taught Peruvian native communities the story of the prophet Isaiah, who announced the birth of a child by a virgin mother. The Holy child was named Emmanuel. Over the centuries, the original name of Emmanuel colloquially evolved to *Manuelito* (sweet diminutive

commonly used in Peru when speaking of small children), a name that still prevails in our days.

#### **The Birth of *Manuelito***

Peruvian sculptor Antonio Olave Palomino is one of the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century artisans from Cusco, and has travelled around the world to attend numerous exhibitions of his best-known work: he is the creator of the first *Niño Manuelito*, also known as the *Child with a Thorn*.

In 1975, representatives from the Vilcabamba community knocked at Olave Palomino's door. They asked him to restore a wooden image of Baby Jesus that had been rescued from the depths of an abyss. After travelling three days by bus and horseback, he arrived to the highlands of Vilcabamba, where he stayed for a week to work on the image and on the altar of the local church.

During his stay, the artist heard the moving story of Q'alito. He was a shepherd boy

who liked to play with other shepherds. One day, a fellow kid burst into tears because a thorn got embedded in his foot. When he saw the child crying, Q'alito placed a thorn in his own foot and comforted the other child. He said to him: "Don't cry! I also have a thorn!"

Olave Palomino was moved by the local story and it became his inspiration in the creation of *Niño Manuelito*, a Baby Jesus with a thorn in his foot, as a remembrance of Q'alito. This image rapidly became part of Cusco's culture and now adorns the vast majority of the *Nacimientos* (nativity scenes) in Peru, both in homes and in churches.

*Niño Manuelito* is white or copper-skinned and has red cheeks, glass eyes, teeth made from the shaft of a condor feather, natural curly hair, a mirror palate and in some instances, finely crafted crystal tears. The artisans use wood, plaster, sticker cloth and techniques that transcend generations. They imagine him in different moods: tired, thoughtful, smiling, boasting a sly and suggestive look, with open arms or crawling.

When staying at Inkaterra La Casona, you will find in your suite a wood-carved ornament of tender *Manuelito* in a crib. Feel free to place it outside your door: it is a 'Do Not Disturb' sign. Please contact Guest Services if you are interested in purchasing one for your own home.