

The fiesta of biblical colour that saved a Basque country village



The tiny village of Antezana de Foronda in the green countryside of the Basque country, Spain, has only 100 inhabitants but its sixteenth-century church St Michael the Archangel has made news headlines by undergoing a miraculous transformation from a dull neglected space into a palace illuminated from floor to ceiling with vibrant biblical and historical murals.

Four years ago St Michael's very existence was threatened by a possible extension to nearby Vitoria airport but with grim persistence the villagers succeeded in averting this. Then the Mayor Jose Luis Alonso had the idea of making it into a lively place of religious worship and pilgrimage where art, music, dance and other events could take place. He asked **Xavier Egana, a Franciscan** friar well known for his church murals and exhibitions in Spain, Germany and South America to lead the project.

When people, including the bishop, were initially sceptical about the viability of the project Egana painted the portico walls with a colourful picture of a local fiesta, with people carrying the Virgin of Armola, dancing and playing traditional instruments, as a taste of what was to come. This convinced everyone to get on board with the project. It has taken several years of hard work involving the whole village, who have put up scaffolding, cleaned and prepared surfaces and supplied and carried the silicon paints.

Egana's interpretation of Biblical events is simple and devotional. He paints lively narrative scenes in beautiful colours so that everyone can appreciate them on different levels. He uses allegory and symbolism to tell the stories – a horse knocking down a man in the street represents St Paul's conversion, for example.

Now the scaffolding has come down, the paint has dried and last St Stephen's Day a packed audience, wrapped warmly in heavy coats, scarves and gloves, sat enjoying a classical concert there to celebrate this rebirth of spiritual, religious and social life.

Egana now 73, has refused any payment. When he finished the work he observed: "My intent was not to preach but to inspire reflection. I hope this becomes a spiritual space where anyone of any religion or any faith can contemplate the mysteries of life."

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