JUNIPERO SERRA and the LEGACIES of the CALIFORNIA MISSIONS


THE HUNTINGTON Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
The Virginia Steele Scott Galleries, Erburu Wing
Coinciding with the 300th anniversary of Serra’s birth, “Junípero Serra and the Legacies of the California Missions” provides a full portrait of the man, the period during which he worked, and the meaning of the missions for a range of California Indians. The exhibition consists of nearly 250 objects from The Huntington’s collections and 60 lenders in the United States, Mexico, and Spain and relies on historical evidence—paintings, maps, letters, drawings, Indian artifacts, and other materials from Serra’s homeland, the mission period, and the many years following secularization and Americanization—to provide context and narrative.

Learning about California’s missions is a rite of passage for California’s fourth graders and their parents. Yet few might realize that Junípero Serra, the Franciscan priest who founded many of the missions, was already 55 years old by the time he came to California in 1769, a milestone preceded by decades of service in Spain and Mexico.

The exhibition also provides the backdrop against which the missions emerged: early California was home to numerous and diverse groups of Indians for millennia before the Spanish arrived. Culture and customs varied from village to village; Indians in California spoke more than 100 languages; and Indians in the parts of California colonized by Spain numbered nearly 70,000.

Serra, under the auspices of the Catholic Church and the Spanish flag and in keeping with a centuries-old tradition of Spanish missionaries coming to the Americas, believed his life’s work was to convert Indians to Christianity. The missions were vibrant outposts of European culture and an expression of a Catholic spiritual ideal. But they also were shaped by the Indians who lived in them. Further still, missions had a darker side. In many ways they were coercive, and Serra’s work encouraging California Indians to relocate to the missions ultimately led thousands to early graves, as diseases killed many who came to live there as well as many more born in the Franciscan establishments.
Serra’s Early Years and Journeys

Junípero Serra was born Miquel Joseph Serra on Nov. 24, 1713, in the village of Petra on the island of Mallorca in the Western Mediterranean. The son of a farmer, Serra spent his early childhood working the family’s land and attending a Franciscan school; Catholicism loomed large in both his home and in the greater community of Petra. At an early age Serra began studying for the priesthood, and when he joined the Franciscan Order, he took the name Junípero, in honor of one of the early followers of Saint Francis of Assisi. Serra rose quickly through the ranks of the Franciscan hierarchy in Mallorca and soon held an important position as a professor of theology at the Lullian University in the Mallorcan capital of Palma.

In 1749, Serra and several other Mallorcan Franciscans made the decision to go to Mexico as missionaries. Serra arrived in Mexico City on Jan. 1, 1750. Then for the following eight years he worked in the Sierra Gorda region of northern Mexico, overseeing five preexisting missions and supervising the building of permanent mission structures. As part of his work in central Mexico, Serra served as a field agent for the Inquisition, investigating individuals accused of witchcraft. He also traveled widely throughout the countryside trying to instill greater religious fervor in Catholics.
By the time Serra died in Mission San Carlos (Carmel) in 1784, he had shepherded the building of nine missions. Another 12 would be initiated before all were secularized and the mission effort abandoned in the 1830s under Mexico. As the missions were being dismantled, and the majority of their assets and property distributed to non-Indians, the status of California Indians was becoming increasingly imperiled. Then, with the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the advent of the Gold Rush, the incorporation of California into the Union in 1850, and the exclusionary attitudes of the great numbers of U.S. citizens who flooded into the region, the remaining Indian population was decimated and dispossessed, forced onto the most unproductive land and into an intensely exploitative wage labor system. Indians were stripped of nearly all the rights they had retained under Spanish and then Mexican rule. Decades later, in the late 19th and into the 20th century, through the efforts of local boosters and promoters, the decaying missions would become tourist attractions and a defining architectural motif for California, influencing the look of commercial, religious, and residential structures. From red tile roofs to *The Mission Play* and the story of Ramona, missions took on a different, and highly romanticized, meaning—creating a Spanish fantasy past for the state and many of its inhabitants.
By 1768 Serra was in Baja California, reorganizing missions in the wake of the expulsion of the Jesuits the previous year. Spanish officials soon became worried that Russians or other Europeans might attempt to settle the coastal region north of Baja California and thereby threaten Spain’s interests in northern Mexico. Thus, Spain was eager to lay full claim to the area that would become California. It called on Serra to help establish and oversee missions in San Diego, Monterey, and points in between. Serra, in the company of other Franciscans and dozens of soldiers, worked his way north from Baja California and established Mission San Diego in the summer of 1769. One year later, Serra established a mission in Monterey, and he and Gaspar de Portolá, the leader of the military in California, took possession of Alta California for Spain.

Under the watchful eye of Serra, who was as dedicated a missionary as he was a skilled administrator, missions soon began to dot the California coast. Thousands of Indians accepted baptism and relocated to the missions. In keeping with Franciscan practice, Serra believed that Indians should accept Catholicism as the one true religion and adopt European agriculture to sustain themselves. To these ends, the Franciscans sometimes used coercion and punishment to enforce discipline and to keep Indians at the mission year round. While some Indians no doubt were taken by Serra’s vision, others resisted. Still, there was a blending of cultures in the missions. For instance, Indians brought their own cultural traditions of music, art, and basketry, elements of which made their way into Catholic liturgical music, paintings, and decorative arts. But disease undermined much of what Serra hoped to accomplish and what Indians sought to gain from the missions. Nevertheless, many Indians survived the missions; their persistence is a testament to human strength and courage and allows added insight into what missions meant for California Indians.
Today, Californians continue to reinterpret the mission period and wrestle with the contemporary legacies of Serra. These include efforts by some to embrace many aspects of Serra’s labors in California as well as work by others to revitalize indigenous cultural traditions in language, song, and artistry that had been near obliteration. Clearly, the mission period was a defining era in California’s history, and in the years since, Serra has become its most visible symbol. But the era of the Franciscan missions symbolized by Serra is, in fact, an even larger story, one of conflicting, blending, and overlapping cultures, of imperial expansion and human drama and loss, and then, finally, of the perseverance and survival of not only European institutions in California, but of the California Indians who were the focus of so much of Serra’s energy.

The exhibition was curated by Steven Hackel and Catherine Gudis, both associate professors of history at the University of California, Riverside.

Linda Yamane (Rumsen Ohlone), Ohlone ceremonial basket, 2012. Courtesy of the artist, supported by a grant from the Creative Work Fund.

This exhibition is presented by Wells Fargo.

Major exhibition support is provided by the Dan Murphy Foundation, the Milias Foundation, the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Foundation, the Steinmetz Foundation, Scott Jordan, and the Turicchi Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by Heather and Paul Haaga, the William H. Hannon Foundation, the Walter Lantz Foundation, the Carrie Estelle Doheny Foundation, the Bill Hannon Foundation, the Sahagian Foundation, John and Dorothy Shea, and the United States-Mexico Cultural & Educational Foundation.
OF RELATED INTEREST

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

A Taste of Art: California Mission Foods
Sept. 7 (Saturday) 9 a.m.–12:30 p.m.
Join chef and educator Maite Gomez-Rejón from ArtBites and discover how Spanish and Native cultures blended together in the California missions. Participants will tour the exhibition and prepare a meal blending Old and New World flavors. Members: $85. Non-Members: $95.

Curator Tour
Sept. 11 (Wednesday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.
Join co-curators Steven Hackel and Catherine Gudis for a private tour of the exhibition and gain insights into the life and legacies of one of the most influential, yet least understood, figures in California history. Members: $15. Non-Members: $20. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Children’s Workshop: Exploring the Missions
Sept. 21 (Saturday) 9:30–11:30 a.m.
What materials were used to build the California missions? And who lived there? With instructor Laura Moede, children will peek into the past to hear stories and learn how bricks and baskets were made before making their own adobe bricks and woven art to take home. Ages 5-8. Fee includes one accompanying adult. Members: $25. Non-Members: $30. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Family Cooking Class: Californio Cuisine
Nov. 23 (Saturday) 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.
Step back in time with chef Ernest Miller to prepare some authentic dishes from the earliest days of the California missions. What foods were available and how did early Californians adapt to new fruits and vegetables? Includes a visit to the exhibition. Ages 7–12. Fee includes one accompanying adult. Members: $30. Non-Members: $35. Registration: 626-405-2128.

CONFERENCE

“Junípero Serra: Context and Representation, 1713 to 2013”
Sept. 20–21 (Friday-Saturday), 2013
“Junípero Serra: Context and Representation,” brings together an international group of scholars to explore the larger contexts within which Serra lived and the various ways he has been represented to allow a greater understanding of a man whose life was even more expansive and complex than the missions he established in California. Presented by The Huntington in association with the Academy of American Franciscan History and the USC-Huntington Early Modern Studies Institute.

BOOK

A new biography, Junípero Serra: California’s Founding Father, by exhibition co-curator Steven Hackel, is slated for release in September. Published by Hill and Wang, a subsidiary of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux; 352 pages; $27. Available at The Huntington’s gift shop and at major booksellers.

WEB RESOURCE FOR TEACHING

The Huntington has developed a primary-source-based website relating to the exhibition. Based on California’s Common Core State Standards in support of fourth-grade curricula, “Exploring the California Missions” is available at Huntington.org/missionhistory.