Religious Art at San Buenaventura Mission  
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Welcome to San Buenaventura Mission, the ninth and last mission founded by Blessed Junipero Serra and one of six missions that he personally consecrated. For residents of San Buenaventura County, this mission is the nearest of the 21 missions to visit and might I add the Mother Church of the County. As such I take this opportunity to briefly acquaint with you our historic religious art so that one might better appreciate the work of human hands for the glory of the Triune God and the legacy of Blessed Junipero Serra. While I will highlight some of the religious artifacts, the real legacy is the lived faith of the 2000 parishioners who worship here.

The Spanish missions of California represent the state's oldest and richest historical legacy. Established in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century by Franciscan missionaries initially under the spiritual leadership of now Blessed Junipero Serra, the missions were designed by artisans from Mexico, and built and decorated largely by Native Americans.*

Initially the work of decorating the missions fell to the Franciscans or talented soldiers who were artistic and became the original artisans of the missions. Eventually master artisans arrived from Mexico to adorn the missions with a more trained representation of religious art and beauty.
These artisans trained the Native Americans who in turn became master artisans themselves.*

Secularized and generally abandoned in the 1830s and 1840s, the missions largely fell to ruin. Except for Missions San Miguel and Santa Ines, over the years the walls were white-washed and the original art work on the walls lost. You can see this on the west wall there where original art is painted over with white wash. We have a small piece of the original adobe with the artistic painting in our museum. Over the centuries only 11 original churches survived and six have their original contents remained intact.*

The missions seemingly were rediscovered in the late nineteenth century, when, following the publication of Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona*, their story was transformed into a romantic tale that came to define the image of California in the popular imagination. Practices in historic preservation have also evolved from reconstructions and restorations to more minimal interventions that are sensitive to the site's historical, architectural, artistic, spiritual, and religious values.*

Mission San Buenaventura was founded on Easter Sunday, March 31, 1782. Construction of the first church began soon thereafter and was destroyed by fire in 1793 according to documentation by the English Navigator George Vancouver who visited the area. A temporary structure served while construction on this second church began as early as 1795
and completed in 1809. Reconstruction was required in 1816 after an earthquake and buttresses added to stabilize the structure.

This mission is a stone and adobe structure with walls six and a half feet thick. The ceiling beams that you see and the rafters supporting the roof that you don’t see were hand crafted by ax from pine and oak trees growing in the San Cayetano mountain area. These were dragged and hauled to the mission site by oxen over the dirt and rocks that carts couldn’t manage. Once the beams and rafters were in place, they were covered by tiles fired from clay dug from the nearby hills and held in place by mortar and lime, as were the rocks and adobe bricks used in smaller structures. The mortar and lime were from the Cañada San Buenaventura. It took 17 years of hard labor and artistry to finish this building by 1809.

The high back altar and its reredos originated in Mexico and were installed when the church was dedicated in 1809. The pilasters, or columns, are painted to resemble marble in imitation of the Neoclassical style which, in turn, was an attempt to imitate the grandeur of the Roman Empire.

In 1893 Father Cyprian Rubio, influenced by the Victorian era, "modernized" the interior of the church, painting over the original artwork. When he finished, little of the original church was untouched. The windows were lengthened and the beamed ceiling and tile floor were covered.
In a major restoration under the supervision of Father Aubrey J. O’Reilly in 1956-1957 the windows were reconstructed to their original size, and the ceiling and floor were uncovered. Thanks in great part to the California Mission Foundation and private benefactors we are continually restoring our historic religious art; the missions today are a testament to the legacy of Serra and the Franciscan padres of the mission era.

Under the supervision of the South Coast Fine Arts Conservation Center located in Santa Barbara our **statue of San Buenaventura** (San Buenaventura 1221-1274 mission patron) is receiving a makeover…an 18\textsuperscript{th} century Mexican Spanish Colonial; carved wood, gesso, paint, gilding and glass eyes was covered with two layers of overpaint, common household paint, which is now being removed to reveal the original beauty of Mexican master artisans. You may follow this process on our Mission Facebook.

Actually most of the statues are 18\textsuperscript{th}/19\textsuperscript{th} century Mexican Spanish Colonial; carved wood, gesso, paint, gilding and glass eyes covered with overpaint.

The statue to the left is of **Mary, the Immaculate Conception**, late 18\textsuperscript{th} or early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mexican Spanish Colonial. Carved wood, gesso, paint, fabric soaked in gesso, glass eyes, metal crown with gold paint. The wood surface is completely overpainted.
The statue of **St. Joseph**, with the Infant Jesus is 18\textsuperscript{th} century carved wood, gesso, gilding, glass eyes and fabric clothing on the Christ Child. Artist unknown.

The **six back altar candlesticks**, brass with silver plating, as are the crucifix and the sanctuary lamp, were brought from Spain in the early 1840’s and replaced the original wood candlesticks now on display in the Mission Museum. All of the flat pavers or stones that we see as flooring are original to the early mission.

The “**Altar Tabernacle with the Good Sheppard**” , painted on the door, artist unknown, 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mexican Spanish Colonial.

The handsomely-carved and artistically-painted **pulpit or ambo** which formerly projected from the east wall was removed by Fr. Cyprian Rubio in 1893. Sections of the pulpit were acquired from various sources and reassembled in the sanctuary by Fred Rolla in 1976.

The **faldstool, choir stalls and kneeler** were carved from native California woods by Eugene Alker for Saint Vibiana’s Cathedral in 1912. They were gifted to San Buenaventura Mission in 1976 by Cardinal Timothy Manning.

The small statue nearest the pews at the west wall portrays **St. Anthony of Padua** (1195-1291). A Franciscan like Serra, and famous as a preacher during his life, but more famous today for being the finder of lost articles. This is an 18\textsuperscript{th} or early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mexican Spanish
Colonial carved wood, gesso, paint and glass eyes with a fabric clothing the Christ Child. (“St. Anthony, St. Anthony, please come around. Something is lost and must be found.”)

The antiquity of the “Shrine of the Crucifixion” on the west side of the church is disputed. Some art historians believe it to be a four hundred-year old bulto or statue from Spanish occupied Philippines while others date it early 19th century. Regardless, this work was sent to the Mission in 1808 from the Philippines. The backdrop scene, although copied from the original, was recently done by artist Mary Moran in 1976. The crucifix was restored in the last decade. The shrine depicts the crucifixion scene described in the Gospel of John 19:25-29 (Woman behold your son; Son behold your mother).

Santo “Mother of Sorrows” is a late 18th or early 19th century Mexican Spanish Colonial, carved wood, gesso and paint with a silver halo and fabric dress with glass eyes. This 5’ statue was restored about seven years ago.

On the other side of the crucifix is a statue of St. John the Apostle. Similar Mexican Spanish Colonial and construction. Renovated the fall of 2013.

The other small statue portrays St. Thomas Aquinas (scholar prolific writer of Theology, 1225-1274). He was a Dominican friar known as the Angelic Doctor because of the scope of his knowledge, and openness, and
generosity to those whom studied with him. Late 19th century Mexican Spanish Colonial. The statue is not an authentic depiction of Thomas who was known to be quite obese and had to have his table cut to accommodate his rather large midsection.

On the east side we see The **Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe**. Both the shrines of the Crucifixion and Our Lady of Guadalupe were originally side altars with the altar railing extending to the far side where the front pew now rests. One of the side altar tabernacles is displayed in the Mission Museum and the other is in what is now a priest chapel in the rectory. One of the original side altars is still in use in the Mission Adoration Chapel in the new building.

The Shrine of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe features the celebrated 1747 painting by Francisco Cabrero which predates the founding of San Buenaventura Mission. 18th century Mexican Spanish Colonial, oil on canvas relined to a solid support, frame probably original to the painting.

To the left of the painting is the statue of **St. Dominic** (1170-1221 and founder of the Order of Preachers). This statue is 18th century Mexican Spanish Colonial, carved wood, gesso, paint gilding and glass eyes. The Santo is completely overpainted.

The Santo “**St. Gertrude**” (1256-1302 a Benedictine nun known for her writings explaining the love of Jesus for his followers because of His
Sacred Heart. 18th century Mexican Spanish Colonial; carved wood, gesso, paint, gilding and glass eyes.

**St. Isidore,** (1070-1130 a layman and patron of farmers married Maria de la Cubeza who also was canonized a saint). 18th century Mexican Spanish Colonial; carved wood, gesso, paint, gilding and glass eyes.

The last statue portrays **St. Francis of Assisi** (late 1100’s -1226 founder of the Franciscans and Church reformer) . 18th century Mexican Spanish Colonial; carved wood, gesso, paint, gilding and glass eyes.

Finally, it should be noted that most of the art and statuary we see in this mission church was collected by Fr. Jose Senan who was pastor from 1806-1826.

Directly opposite of the side doors is a painting of **St. Francis and Angel** with no apparent signature. It is an 18th century Mexican Spanish Colonial oil on canvas with a painted and gilded wood molding attached to the edge and a round wood painted dowel with carved knobs attached to the bottom.

Opposite the painting of Francis and the Angel is a painting of St. Vibiana. Unknown artist, questionable 19th century Mexican Spanish Colonial, oval shaped, oil on canvas. The surface of the painting is completely overpainted.

According to the oldest inventories, the fourteen paintings of the **Stations of the Cross** (unsigned, Mexican Spanish Colonial, oil on
canvas) were erected in 1809. The paintings came from an unknown Spanish master between 1735 and 1750. One of them bears the name of Jose Francisco Servin, who apparently attempted to restore several of the canvases in his studios at Cordoba (Mexico) in 1808. By 1966, most of the stations were covered with dust and grease, twisted by warped and broken frames and damaged by the humid walls, salt air and amateurish attempts at restoration. The talented Franz A Trevors spent many months working on the Via Crucis and bringing them back to their pristine condition.

The famed Harry Downie, curator of Mission San Carlos, fashioned the wooden chandeliers at his studio in Carmel. They replaced two gilded light fixtures which had been ruined when they were wired for electricity. The replicas are considerably more typical than those they replaced.

When you walk to the rear of the church, on your right side before you exit is the Fray Serra Chapel that is used for baptisms. The large hand-hammered copper baptismal bowl or font is probably the product of a local Native American craftsman. It has much of the character common to the native copper work from the area of Patzcuaro, Mexico.

The Baptistery also house several relics most of them First Class:
♦ Relic of the True Cross
♦ St. Mary of the Incarnation (found behind the Main Altar in 1957)
♦Saint Joseph, Husband of Mary (3rd Class)
♦Saint Vincent de Paul
♦Saint John Neumann
♦Saint Bonaventure/San Buenaventura
♦Saint Bonaventure and Saint Bernard
♦Blessed Junipero Serra
♦Saint Catherine Laboure (2)
♦Saint Jude Thaddeus

The baptistery is rarely open to the public and is available to you this evening following the presentations.

Getty Conservation Institute
Francis Weber, A history of San Buenaventura Mission

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

The mission had its own troubles in 1812. There were earthquakes during that year and the bell tower collapsed damaging the roof. Piles of rubble were all around the quadrangle and the threat of a tidal wave, what we call a Tsunami today, was so real that the entire mission population moved up into the hills and camped there for three months. It took more than a year to repair the damage and to reinforce the mission walls with the buttress of stone and mortar to the left of the entrance as you walk up the stairs.

Within four years, by 1816, the mission peoples had continued to be very active in agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade with coastal seafarers, and the padre’s task of religious education. Very important to the mission’s agricultural success, was the seven-mile long aqueduct that was the source of an extensive irrigation system that brought water to a reservoir in the hills behind the mission. This project was begun very early in mission history, in 1782, under the direction of Fray Benito Cambon, a contemporary of Serra. (We can still see the stones of the aqueduct behind some of the old homes off Ventura Avenue and we still have the walls of a settling tank behind the church.) This remarkable system allowed the development of wheat, corn, and barley for the granaries; orchards of apples, peaches, plums, and even bananas for trade with seafarers. By 1822, mission reports to Spanish officials in Mexico claimed
10,000 sheep, 13,000 cattle, and 150 mules on a mission ranch covering many acres to the four points of the compass, all spreading from the center point of this mission building and the mission quadrangle.

The Chumash history at San Buenaventura was considerably different than that of the Mojave. As mentioned, the Chumash territory extended from today’s Ventura County, north through Santa Barbara, to San Luis Obispo. Speaking only of the historical events of the San Buenaventura Mission lands, we know the following: in the beginning, the padres befriended the local Indians and together they began a new life for the Indians based on the Spanish Colonial rule that placed the padres in charge. However, remember that only those Indians who chose to do so, came to work, live, and study under the Padres. Large numbers chose to remain away but those of the mission were taught the art of making adobe and from that “small brick” marked the beginning of a labor force that built the mission’s foundation, outer walls, and the shaping of giant timbers for the rafters, as well as the roofing and ceilings of today’s mission.

Beyond construction labor, the Chumash were taught the farming skills to plant and grow crops for food—something they earlier had no need to learn as a gathering culture. This agricultural community expanded rapidly from grains like corn, a basic crop, to exotic fruit trees such as bananas. The growth of grain crops were originally used as feed for animals that, in turn, provided meat, milk, cheese, and clothing. Later they became food staples in their own right.

Clothing, as it was used by the Spanish, was a totally new cultural direction for the Chumash and best symbolized the totally different life that was being imposed upon them by the Spanish. Also, over the early and middle years of the mission system, the Spanish organized a work schedule that began with the ringing of church bells an hour after sunrise, stopping work at noon, again the bells, then, a short work period in the afternoon.

Along with labor education was a vigorous indoctrination into the Christian religion. Over the years, a large number of Chumash were converted and that led to their leaving their villages to build new adobe houses near the mission and to adopt a Spanish colonial life style.

Yet, the worst that was to happen came unexpectedly. European diseases like small pox and measles infected the native population that had no immunity to this new attack. The Chumash population began to die out rapidly and, by the time of the Mission Mexican period. The Chumash were a much smaller entity who had lost much of their united strength. This Mexican period was also the time of the disbanding of the mission system to secularism, leaving the Chumash with no center of life. Many sought jobs as cowboys or as domestic servants employed by the new Mexican landowners. Those who did seek to return to the Chumash ways moved away from the coast to the southern San Joaquin Valley, where they joined with the Yokuts and Kitanemuk Indians to live a life incorporating all that could be remembered of the old ways. (*There is much more that can be learned of the Chumash in the books at the libraries and museums of Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.*)

Meanwhile, let us turn our attention once again to this Mission Church. What may surprise some of you are the many statues and paintings that are in front of and to the side of the alter area. The use of paintings and statuary is actually a method of teaching that should be explained. It must be remembered that centuries ago, before man had any forms of writing, he
taught the history and beliefs of his ancestors to his children by the use of paintings on the walls of caves or on the skins of animals hanging in the wigwams or lodge houses of his tribe. The Chumash, for example, had hundreds of rock paintings, or pictographs in caves and remote areas from Morro Bay south to Malibu. These are symbolic designs of beliefs or supernatural beings that were most important to the Chumash. The same can be said of most paintings and statues that you see in museums and national buildings all over the world. They are a way of reminding the people of their national stories and history.