



Juan Correa, *Saint Francis Xavier Baptising*, ca. 1700 (oil on canvas). Santa María de Cuevas Church Collection. Dr. Belisario Domínguez.

# The Art of the Missions Of Northern New Spain 1600-1821

Clara Bargellini\*

Beginning in the 1530s, Spanish explorers traveled to the northern reaches of what would become the viceroyalty of New Spain to search for gold and lands to colonize. They were accompanied by Nahuas, Tarascans and other indigenous people, who had ancient roots in the North. Franciscan friars also took part in the expeditions, and before the end of the century, they had founded missions to convert the New Mexico natives to Catholicism. In 1591, the Jesuits arrived in Sinaloa on the Pacific coast. In time, they established a network of missions covering all of northwestern New Spain. By 1750, there were hundreds of missions among the indigenous peoples throughout northern New Spain. The Franciscans were situated to the west and north of Zacatecas, all the way to New Mexico and Texas. The Jesuits were in charge of Sinaloa, Sonora, present-day Arizona, the Sierra Madre and its eastern slopes and Baja California from 1697 onward.



Anonymous, *A pair of burettes with varnish, end of the eighteenth century (silver).* Saint John the Baptist Parish Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.

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Photos courtesy of the Old San Ildefonso College.

When the Jesuits were expelled in 1767 by King Charles III, the Franciscans remained as missionaries throughout the North. In this last phase, the friars based in the Colleges of *Propaganda Fide* (the propagation of the faith) in Querétaro, Zacatecas and Mexico City replaced the Jesuits in many of the northwest missions and founded new ones in California.

Although the history and characteristics of these missions have been extensively studied from many perspectives, the works of art they hold have attracted surprisingly little attention. Yet all the missions were decorated with paintings, sculpture, furniture, liturgical objects and liturgical vestments. A great

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Juan Antonio Arriaga, altarpiece painted with Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Ann, 1740 (oil on canvas).  
Archdiocese Seminary Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.

many of these works were produced by prominent artists in Mexico City and elsewhere in New Spain, while others came from Europe and Asia. Among the missionaries themselves there were cartographers, authors and linguists who left fascinating books and documents —some illustrated— on their experiences. Indigenous artists also participated in making objects and decorating the missions. In short, there are extensive visual remains of a vast spiritual and cultural undertaking that is a crucial part of the history of both Mexico and the United States. The exhibition, “The Art of the Missions of Northern New Spain, 1600-1821,” curated by myself and Michael Komanecky, chief curator

and acting director of the Farnsworth Museum in Maine, is the first to comprehensively explore this little known visual heritage from both sides of the border. Comprised of approximately 130 objects drawn from collections in Mexico, the United States and Europe, it includes many pieces of excellent quality from the missions themselves that have never been seen before outside their places of origin. A fully illustrated catalogue in Spanish and English with essays by an international team of scholars accompanies the exhibition. The subjects explored are: pre-Columbian cultures in the region, the history of missions in northern New Spain, mission architecture, the formal and the-



Juan Antonio Arriaga, altarpiece painted with the Savior and St. Joaquin, 1740 (oil on canvas).  
Archdiocese Seminary Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.

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matic characteristics of art for and at the missions, the impact of the missions in indigenous cultures and the missions in the art and literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although the catalogue is the exhibition's more permanent record, the way the objects are displayed also deserves to be remembered. On view at the Old San Ildefonso College in Mexico City from April 15 to August 16, 2009, "The Art of the Missions of Northern New Spain" will also be shown at the San Antonio Museum of Art in Texas, the Tijuana Cultural Center, the Oakland Museum of California and one or two other venues. Each museum will make its own pre-



Horacio Carocho, S. J., *Compendium of the Art of the Mexican Language*. Eusebio Kino Library Collection.

sentation of the objects, of course, but the basic outline was formulated at San Ildefonso: an introduction, two main parts, and a coda, which are explained in this brief essay.

The introduction presents maps, documents and works of art providing basic information about the missions. The maps, both colonial and modern, show the areas covered by the two religious orders and locate the sites of some of the principal missions, especially those represented by objects in the exhibition. The two orders' founders, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola, are also introduced. The vastness and variety of the territory covered by the missions are exemplified in photographs of landscapes and architecture taken by Chihuahua's Libertad Villarreal. The remainder of the introduction is about two fundamental conditions of mission work. A selection of books in various languages written by missionaries suggests the communication problem between European and Amerindian traditions. The contradictions of doing spiritual work within the context of the Spanish conquest, based on a providential view of history in which Spain was called upon to protect and spread Christianity, is illustrated in paintings of the death of missionaries and the destruction of missions by angry Native Americans.

The first part of the body of the exhibition is titled "The Dreams of the Missionaries." It delves into the missionaries' personalities, the varieties and



**A selection of books in various languages written by missionaries suggests the communication problem between European and Amerindian traditions.**

José de la Mota, *Virgin of Joys*, 1711 (oil on canvas). Jesuit House Collection, San Ignacio Saltillo, Coahuila.

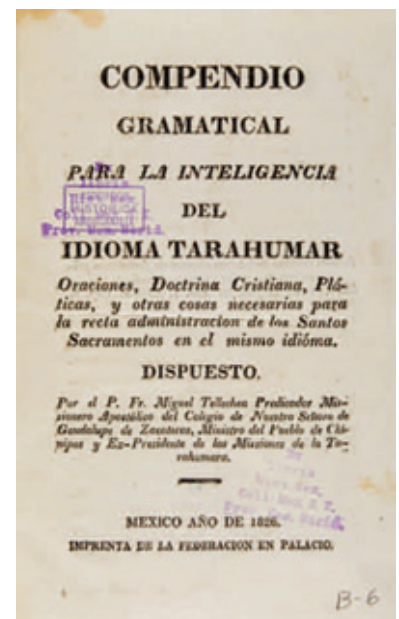
Franciscan works of art often refer to the fact that the friars were the first Christian missionaries in the New World, situating their efforts within a universal history of salvation.



*Saint Joseph Recognizes the Innocence of Mary*, seventeenth century (oil on canvas). Iberoamerican University Collection, Coahuila.

challenges of mission work throughout the world and the artistic genres in sculpture and painting that presented the missions to the general public of their time. Thus, we see portraits and narrative depictions of specific individuals who were important for mission history in New Spain, such as the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier, who was the model for all Roman Catholic missionaries of the Counterreformation period, and the Franciscan St. Philip of Jesus, born in Mexico City and martyred in Japan in 1597. Franciscan works of art often refer to the fact that the friars were the first Christian missionaries in the New World, and depict allegories and symbols situating their efforts within a universal history of salvation. The Jesuits proclaimed the heroism of their individual saints, pictured as inspired, tireless, triumphant individuals.

The second and principal part of the exhibition displays art works from mission territories. These are shown in a sequence that presents different categories of mission art and its great variety. The first of these is what can be called “missionary images”: images that traveled with the missionaries and were considered miraculous. These paintings and sculptures themselves were thought of as missionaries, because it was believed that they protected Christians and played an active role in converting the Amerindians and sustaining the missions. The crucified Christ predominated among the Franciscans, but all the mission-



Friar Miguel Tellechoa, *Grammatical Compendium for the Intelligence of the Tarahumara Language*, 1826, Eusebio Kino Library Collection, Mexico City.



Luis Barrueco, *Martyrs of Gorkum*, 1731 (oil on canvas). San Francisco Church Collection, Puebla, Puebla.

aries carried with them images of the Virgin Mary, whose comforting presence helped them continue their work. The Jesuits, in particular, introduced European miraculous images, such as the Virgins of *el Pópulo* (the Santa Maria Maggiore icon), Loreto, *la Luz* and *el Refugio*. Indigenous groups appropriated for themselves the images of the Virgin and Christ, as well as of some of the saints. They integrated them into their world views, which include masculine and feminine principles that govern life.

The second category of images and objects are those that were used in the liturgy and religious celebrations. Some of these, necessary for saying mass, were essential and precious, often made of silver or luxurious textiles. In time, other objects were added as the missions became more permanent and celebrations were expanded. Many of these objects were imported from Mexico City and other parts of the viceroyalty, while others were made at the missions by local artists with local materials and techniques. Rites and celebrations mark personal and communal time and are associated with the subjects of particular paintings or sculptures. The individual begins life as a Christian with baptism. The community celebrates its patron saints and the liturgical year, divided into two cycles, one centered on the birth of Jesus at Christmas, and the other on his death and resurrection in Holy Week. Two video presentations complement this part of the exhibition: one documents the yearly celebration of St. Francis Xavier at the Jesuit mission dedicated to him in Baja California; the other is of the mission of St. Charles Borromeo, in Carmel, California, where Fray Junípero Serra, founder of the California missions, spent his last years.

The missionaries made every effort to adorn their churches as best they could. There was always some sort of altarpiece to dignify at least the main altar and the representation of the patron saint, and these make up the exhibition's third category of mission objects. When funds were available, carved and gilded altarpieces were purchased in Mexico City or other urban centers



Anonymous, *Pietà* (polychromatic, ornamented wood). Archdiocese Seminary Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.

and were shipped to the missions, but most frequently, altarpieces were made up of a central painting or sculpture, framed by various elements. To satisfy the great demand for altarpieces at the missions and elsewhere, some Mexico City artists made imitation altarpieces painted on canvas, which were easy to transport and not very expensive. Famous Mexico City artists also provided other paintings, especially in the eighteenth century, when regular parish life was already established. For example, Juan Correa, Antonio de Torres, Francisco Martínez, Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez, Miguel Cabrera and José de Páez produced significant numbers of works.

Although most of the art in the missions came from Mexico City, the architecture was the work of indigenous people, under the supervision of a missionary or of building specialists from elsewhere. Sculptures and paintings were also made in northern New Spain, and these are another important category of mission art. In New Mexico, for example, and probably also in Sonora, Christian images were painted on animal hides. This was an indigenous tradition turned to Christian use. Sculptures, too, often came from Mexico City, but the new Christians soon learned to use European tools to carve wood to

The introduction presents maps, documents and works of art providing basic information about the missions.



Fernando Consag (Ferdinand Konskak, S. J.) map of California, seventeenth century (engraving, print on paper). Jesuit Archives Collection.



Arellano, *Saint Rosa of Lima* (oil on canvas). Sacred Art Museum Collection, Diocesan Center, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.





Although most of the art in the missions came from Mexico City, the architecture was the work of indigenous people,

Anonymous, *Trinity*, 1711 (oil on canvas). Saint John the Baptist Parish Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.

make furniture, altarpieces and images. Sonora boasts stone sculptures probably made by Amerindians. Finally, the exhibition also includes baskets made in California by Chumash artists.

The finale of the exhibition is about the conservation and restoration of the pieces on display. To date, about 70 works been treated and some procedures are still unfinished. The Manuel del Castillo Negrete National School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the Old San Ildefonso College itself and individual conservators have participated in this task, with the support of contributions by the Getty Foundation, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, Protego, A.C. of Chihuahua and a few private individuals. This rescue work must continue, since mission art has largely been ignored in the past.

The exhibition is the result of years of research and work with students of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, supported in part by a university grant. It also received support at different stages of its development from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the School for American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico and the Terra Foundation. These as well as the lending institutions, and, especially, the Old San Ildefonso College



Anonymous, *chalice*, eighteenth century (silver). Saint John the Baptist Parish Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.

made it all possible, even in difficult times. Finally, the constant and generous collaboration of colleagues and friends at universities, museums, cultural institutions and at the missions themselves, both in Mexico and the United States, have demonstrated the necessity and advantages of working together for a better understanding of a common cultural heritage. Previously unknown art works from the missions and fresh, comparative views of mission culture have been presented and published. The exhibition and its catalogue can —and should— now serve as a basis for future work. **MM**



Anonymous, *Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, ca. 1700 (polychromatic wood and cloth). Saint Ignatius of Loyola Vizcaínas Museum Collection.



Anonymous, *Saint Joseph's Workshop* (oil on canvas). Archdiocese Seminary Collection, Chihuahua, Chihuahua.