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*The missions are California's cultural treasures. Working together we can ensure their future.*



California Missions Foundation

May-June 2011

## Latest News from California Missions Foundation

Dear Friends,

We've talked a lot lately about the architectural preservation of California's missions: everything from masonry and roof repair to earthquake retrofitting. But the cultural riches of our state's missions lie in more than bricks and mortar, and architectural preservation is only one part of the CMF story. In this newsletter, we're going to focus on another fascinating topic with obvious importance to the state's missions -- art conservation.

As you know, the state's missions house many invaluable artistic treasures -- intricate metalwork, colorful frescoes, historic statuary, and more -- and CMF is every bit as committed to preserving these artworks as the buildings that shelter them.

The age, size, and construction of many of these artworks make it challenging just to transport them for restoration work, as we saw firsthand during a recent visit to Mission San Antonio, where they recently undertook the restoration of this magnificent half-round painting.



*Left: The painting hanging on site at Mission San Antonio.  
Top: The painting lowered to the floor with the gilt frame removed.  
Bottom: The reverse of the painting, showing the strainers and back of the canvas.*

Furthermore, art conservation must be undertaken by specialists with extensive training and experience.

Below, you will find [an article written by one such individual](#) -- CMF Board Member Carol Kenyon, who (as the former director of the South Coast Fine Arts Conservation Center in Santa Barbara) has supervised and performed many painstaking projects to preserve the beauty of these cultural treasures. I am very grateful to Carol for taking the time to share her insights with us, and I hope you will enjoy learning a bit about her field of expertise.

Also below, you'll find [information about an exhibition currently on display](#) at Mission San Juan Capistrano, featuring some of the most glorious and intriguing pieces from that mission's collection of art and artifacts. If you're in the vicinity of Mission SJC, I hope you'll take the time to stop and experience it for yourself.

As always, please feel free to [share this email with a friend](#). And if you have questions, comments, or ideas for topics you'd like us to address in future newsletters, please don't hesitate to reply to this email. We love hearing from you!



-Knox

Dr. Knox Mellon  
Executive Director  
California Missions Foundation

## Conservation of Mission Artwork

by Carol Kenyon, former director, South Coast Fine Arts Conservation Center



Preservation of the California missions includes not just buildings but also the artwork contained within. For more than 25 years, my primary and most loved work has been conservation of paintings and sculptures in the California missions. I feel their art is analogous to a heart.

The preponderance of artworks belonging to California's missions are Spanish colonial in style and arrived at the missions during the late 1700s and early 1800s. When the construction of a mission building was completed, its Friar would convey an order to studio workshops in Mexico City for the required artwork, including statues (Santos), paintings, and altars.

As with all artwork, deterioration was inevitable. Fires, leaks in the roof, worms in the wood, vandalism -- all took their toll. Well-meaning but inadequately informed attempts at conservation were sometimes attempted. Unfortunately, according to today's art conservation standards, most of this past work was inappropriately done, and in some cases it actually caused more harm than help. Possibly, however, some of these uneducated attempts prevented the piece from being discarded. Current estimates indicate that close to 15% of mission artwork is properly conserved and preserved.



*Detail view of a statue of Saint Joseph belonging to Mission San Antonio. Above: before conservation work by SCFACC. Below: after conservation.*



*Before & after conservation by SCFACC: "Immaculate Conception" from Mission Santa Barbara.*

What is "proper conservation" work? A conservator's first and most important rule is that all materials used must be non-damaging to the piece, and any repairs or additions must be reversible. A normal conservation process includes several steps. First, documentation photos are taken. Then, after testing the artwork, a "required conservation treatment plan" is developed. Anything deemed not original is removed and, again, photo-documented. Damaged areas are repaired. If it is not possible to repair an area, or if some portion is missing, it is recreated. Now it's time for these areas to be conserved. This includes cosmetic treatment (restoration) such as inpainting a hole that was "patched." The piece is once again photographed. Upon completion, this photographic record is presented to the artwork's holder, along with a written report detailing the entire process.

## Here's a brief overview of one of our favorite conservation projects:



*Statue of San Luis Obispo during conservation, showing original fabric pattern on the sides and two layers of overpaint on the back.*

A statue of San Luis Obispo arrived at our studio from Mission San Luis Obispo. Its condition: very poor. This Santo is a 17th-century Mexican statue primarily composed of carved wood. The cape hanging from his shoulders was made of draped fabric. In construction, the entire surface was first covered with gesso\*, then gilded and painted. His eyes were made of blown glass. He had suffered fire damage, fabric from the cape was destroyed, fingers had been lost, and the paint layer was quite damaged. Someone had attempted a total restoration and, among other additions, a new cape was added. We discovered this when it became evident the fabric was composed of denim, a fabric material not yet in existence when he was carved. Missing fingers had been replaced with poorly carved ones. The surface was totally overpainted.

Our conservation plan included a cleaning and removal of all overpaint, added parts, the denim cape, and anything else not original to the statue. Cleaning exposed the original fabric design -- one that proved to be much more detailed and sensitive, rich and lustrous. It also revealed the fact that his hands were gloved. To a conservator, this was very exciting!

A new cape was created, gessoed, and painted to match the original design. Fingers were added, and the remainder of the damaged areas repaired. A new miter (hat) was created as the documented original was gone. To finalize

our work, a protective coat of acrylic varnish (a type that won't yellow with age) was applied. Then this favorite guest departed, returning to his mission.

Much more conservation needs to be completed on mission artworks, but given time and funds, it will be achieved. If you would like further information, or if you can imagine a way to assist further conservation efforts, please contact Patty West, Director, South Coast Fine Arts Conservation Center, 805-965-2273 or email [Pattywest@cox.net](mailto:Pattywest@cox.net).

\* Trivia -- "Gesso" is a mixture of binding agents, chalk, gypsum, and/or white pigment. It is used to prepare various types of surfaces (wood, fabric, etc.) for painting.



*Two before & after views, showing the draped fabric that was removed from the statue of San Luis Obispo beside the newly painted fabric that replaced it.*

## "Historical Collection Revealed" at Mission San Juan Capistrano

Now through September 5, Mission San Juan Capistrano is providing an opportunity to view some of its most precious artworks in the exhibit "Mission Treasures: Historical Collection Revealed." Featuring rare paintings, religious artifacts, and documents related to the mission's history, the exhibit is open daily from 10am to 5pm. You can get more information by calling the event hotline at (949) 234-1315 or by visiting [www.missionsjc.com](http://www.missionsjc.com).





*Fabricated in the late 1700s, the vestment set displayed in this exhibit is believed to have been used by Father Serra, the first president of the California Missions.*

You can help us preserve California's historic missions and all their cultural treasures!

Call our office at (831) 622-7500, or click the button below to [donate](#) via PayPal!

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### About California Missions Foundation

Nothing defines California's heritage as significantly or emotionally as do the 21 missions that were founded along the coast from San Diego to Sonoma. Their beauty, stature, and character underlie the formation of California. All 21 missions are California Historical Landmarks; many have also been designated National Historic Landmarks. The missions are among the most popular tourist destinations in the state, attracting millions of visitors each year.

Founded in 1998, the California Missions Foundation was established with the objective of preserving and protecting the missions. The Foundation is the only organization dedicated to the long-term preservation and restoration needs of all California missions and their associated historic and cultural resources for public benefit.

Visit us online at [www.californiamissionsfoundation.org](http://www.californiamissionsfoundation.org).

