



Detail of facade
Saint Joseph holding Baby Jesus

Teaching With Stone

It has a beautiful cupola, though it is overcrowded with unnecessary ornaments with which it is heavily decorated, detracting somewhat from its natural beauty. In a word, no one could have imagined that there were such good artists in so desolate a place.

Father Juan Agustín Morfi
describing Mission San José in 1778

The beauty of Mission San José's church has been recognized for centuries. Today, visitors enjoy the artistry that remains on this magnificent structure. In the past, the colorful frescoes and elaborate stone work served a functional purpose as well. Franciscan missionaries and mission Indians came from diverse cultures, with very different languages. These differences may have made it difficult for missionaries to communicate the concepts of Christianity. The decorations adorning the church were a tool for teaching the faith. Symbols could have helped close the gaps between cultures.

Interpreting the Symbols

Within the intricate stonework of the facade, the colonial artist placed symbols of Catholicism and Spanish culture. Some symbols may have had meaning only to the artist or the inhabitants of the mission. Most, however, are rooted in the long tradition of the Christian faith.



Heart

The human heart, when associated with saints, is symbolic of love, piety, understanding, courage, devotion, sorrow, and joy. The three hearts found on the facade represent the Holy Family. This heart, enclosed in thorns, is the *sacred heart*, the symbol of Christ's love for humanity revealed through his suffering for all. The heart with the lily personifies Joseph, while the one with the dagger indicates the Archangel's prediction that the events in her life would be as a dagger through Mary's heart.



Pomegranate

The pomegranate symbolizes the church because of the inner unity of countless seeds in one fruit. A traditional symbol of fertility, the pomegranate and its seeds symbolized the countless and growing number of converts. The juice's deep red color symbolizes the blood of Christ. Most of the flowers seen on the facade are of the pomegranate.



Shell

The shell symbolizes baptism, the induction into the faith. Large shells were often used to pour the water upon the person being baptized. It is believed that John the Baptist used a shell to baptize Jesus. Shell designs are frequently found above doorways and windows, symbolizing baptism as the entry into Christianity.



Rose

The red rose represents martyrdom, the white rose purity. St. Ambrose taught that roses grew in paradise without thorns. After humanity's fall from grace, roses grew thorns, while their beauty and fragrance remind us of the splendor of paradise.



Angels

As heavenly messengers, angels serve as a link between God and Man, heaven and earth. While there are several classes of angels, the most familiar are the archangels, including Michael and Gabriel. San José's angels are cherubs and bear Native American features in their design.



Pinjante

The pinjantes replicate cut paper ornaments used to decorate for festive occasions. Some speculate that this design was also used to symbolize the keyhole in the gate of heaven.

Images Cut in Stone

Within an elaborately carved setting, six saints have stood watch over the entrance to Mission San José's church for more than two centuries. Little is known about the construction of this church; we do know that it was almost complete by 1785. That year, Father Josef Augustin Falcon described the church as having "a well-done carved entranceway with six statues carved from the same stone."

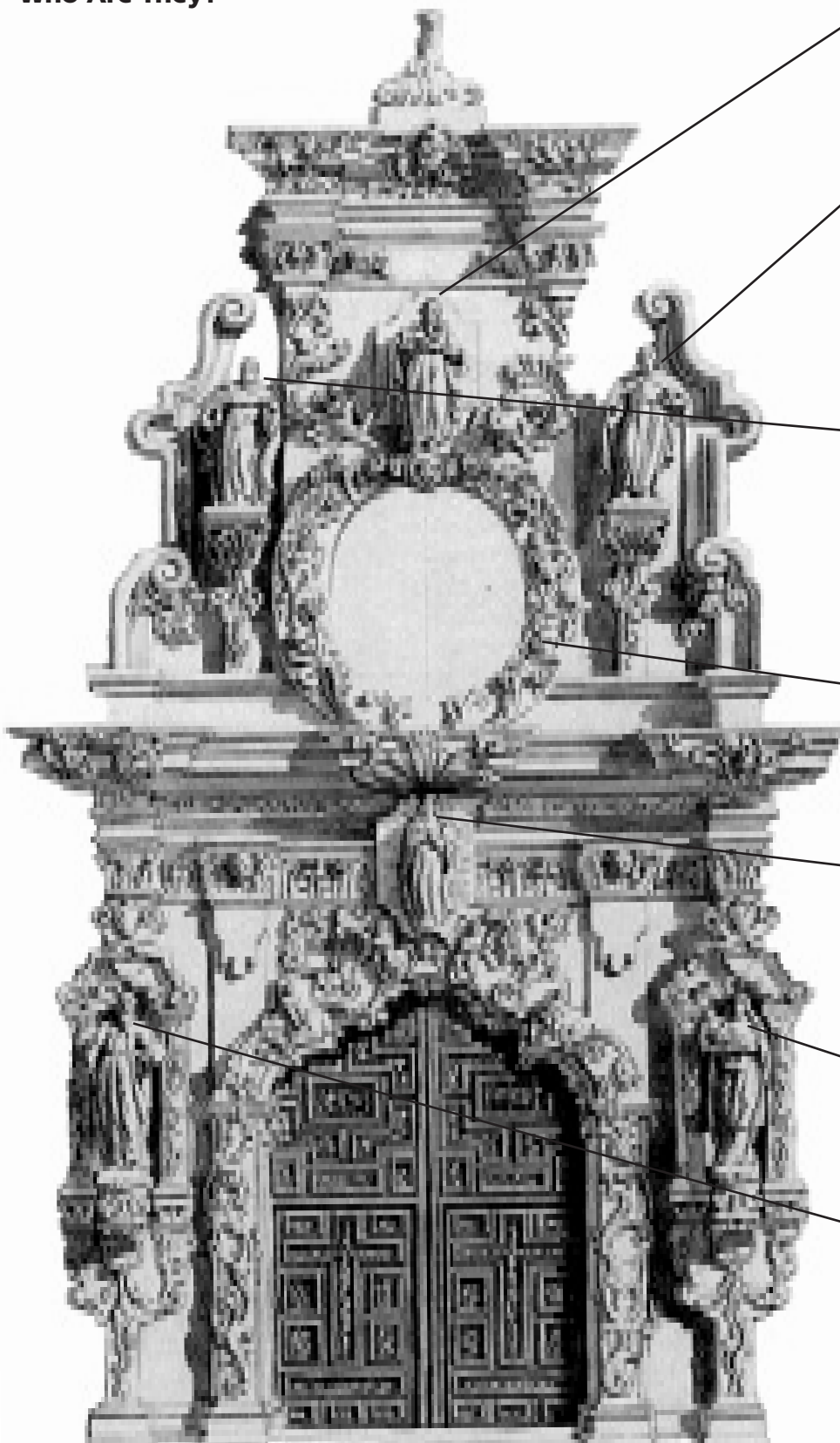
Why these symbolic figures were chosen is also unknown. As patron saint of the mission, Saint Joseph (*San José*) holds the highest spot among the statues. Some speculate that the images of Saint Joachim and Saint Anne, who is holding the infant Mary, were used to demonstrate the ideal family to the new converts.

Preservation

Weathering and time take a heavy toll. While some reconstruction took place in the 1930s and extensive preservation in the early 2010s, most of the original facade remains intact. Today, you can see the handiwork of the early, as of yet unknown, craftsmen.

Unfortunately, the facade and church will continue to deteriorate. The Archdiocese of San Antonio is committed through an endowment to maintain San José Church, so descendants of those who labored in this mission may continue to worship here.

Who Are They?



Saint Joseph - *San José*

The patron saint of Mission San José. Joseph was the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus, who he is holding. Patron Saint of the Laborer.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Founder of the Franciscan Order, he and his followers were pledged to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. Francis exhibited the Stigmata. He was called Brother Death for trying to take the fear out of a Christian death and is often shown with a skull.

Saint Dominic

Born in 1170, he was a contemporary of Saint Francis. He founded an order of preachers, and his followers pledged themselves to lives of poverty and simplicity. Mary instructed him to preach the Rosary among the people as an antidote to heresy and sin.

Rose Window

An architectural term for the decorative window above the main door of a church. This is not Rosa's Window, which is found on the south wall of the sacristy.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

In this manifestation, the Virgin Mary became the patron saint of the Americas. She was the first new world saint, appearing to an Indian peasant as a native herself.

Saint Anne

The mother of Mary. Very little is known about Anne, or her husband Joachim. She is holding Mary as an infant.

Saint Joaquin

The father of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. With Anne and Mary, the Catholic Church looked upon them as a perfect family.

detail from a San Jose rendering by Ernst Schuchard

Protect these historic stone structures by not climbing, standing, or sitting on them. Watch your head and feet – walkways are uneven and doorways are low. Fireants and other stinging insects are common. Yuccas and other plants have sharp points.