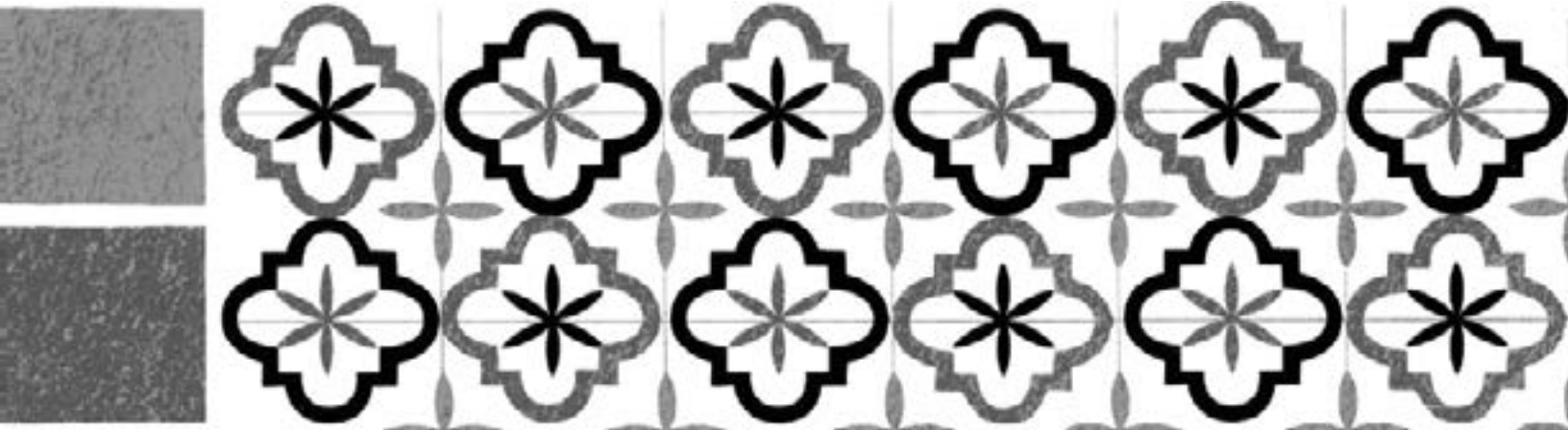




Mission Wall Art



Amid their struggle to conquer the frontier of New Spain, the Franciscans planned extravagant beauty for the mission churches. Colorful murals covered both the exterior and interior of the church and the *convento* (priest's residence) at Missions Concepción and San José. The thick, weathered church and convento walls of Mission Concepción still stand tall 250 years later, one of the oldest original stone church buildings in the United States today. If you look closely at these faded walls, you will find remnants of their colorful past.

The Nature of Fresco



Fresco is one of the most permanent ways of decorating. Pigment is applied to wet lime plaster, which absorbs the color. The paints used on the mission churches contained limestone and goat's milk as binders. As it dries, the plaster hardens back into limestone, and the colors soften into permanency.

The Color of Fresco

Four colors were used on the churches. Yellow is hydrated ferric oxide, also called ochre or sienna. Red is iron oxide, also known as red ochre or burnt sienna. The oxides occur naturally in nearby sandstone formations and clay deposits. Black is a carbon pigment. The blue pigment is of plant origin, most likely indigo, which was listed in mission inventories.

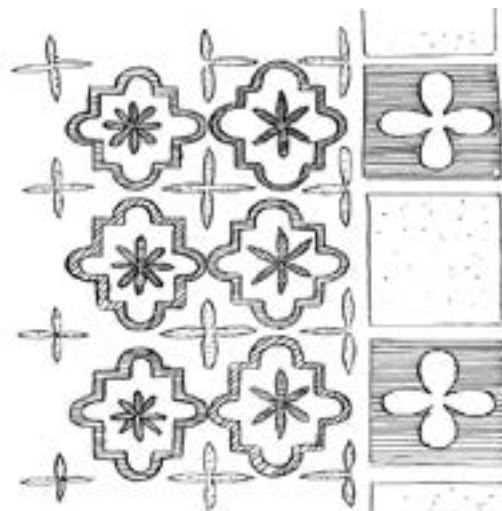
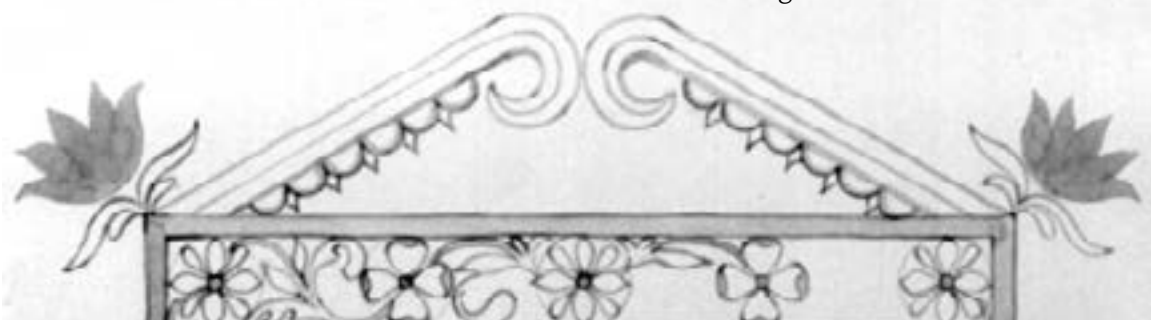


Illustration courtesy of Junior League of San Antonio

The Art of Fresco

The art of frescoing was a trade taught to mission Indians. A design was created that could be transferred in one of two ways. One method was to make a pattern that was then perforated. Laying the pattern against the wet plaster, the perforations were *pounded* with the fine dust of charcoal to leave an impression.

The second method was more common at Mission Concepción. Lines were scored in the wet plaster to outline the design. Then, in order to give each feature a colorful life, the mission artisans swiftly but carefully applied paint between these "guide" lines before the plaster dried. The art of frescoing was very tedious and time-consuming.



Original work of Ernst Schuchard, courtesy of Daughters of the Republic of Texas Alamo Library, San Antonio

The Purpose of Fresco

Wall art at the missions served several purposes. Some were used to highlight architectural features, others to hide construction flaws. Some were symbolic and provided a tool for teaching Catholicism to the mission Indians. Many were simply decorative. In any case, the art must have been quite impressive. Father Juan Morfi, a Franciscan friar who visited the San Antonio missions in 1778, gives us a hint of this when he wrote, “In a word, no one could have imagined that there were such good artists in so desolate a place.”



The Legacy of Fresco

The library at Mission Concepción exhibits the best known examples of frescos. Preservation in 2010 by the Catholic Church exposed additional artwork in the chapel and the baptistry located at the base of the two belltowers. In 2010, the Archdiocese of San Antonio and the parish undertook preservation of the frescos in the sanctuary and sacristy, uncovering even more original plaster and paint.

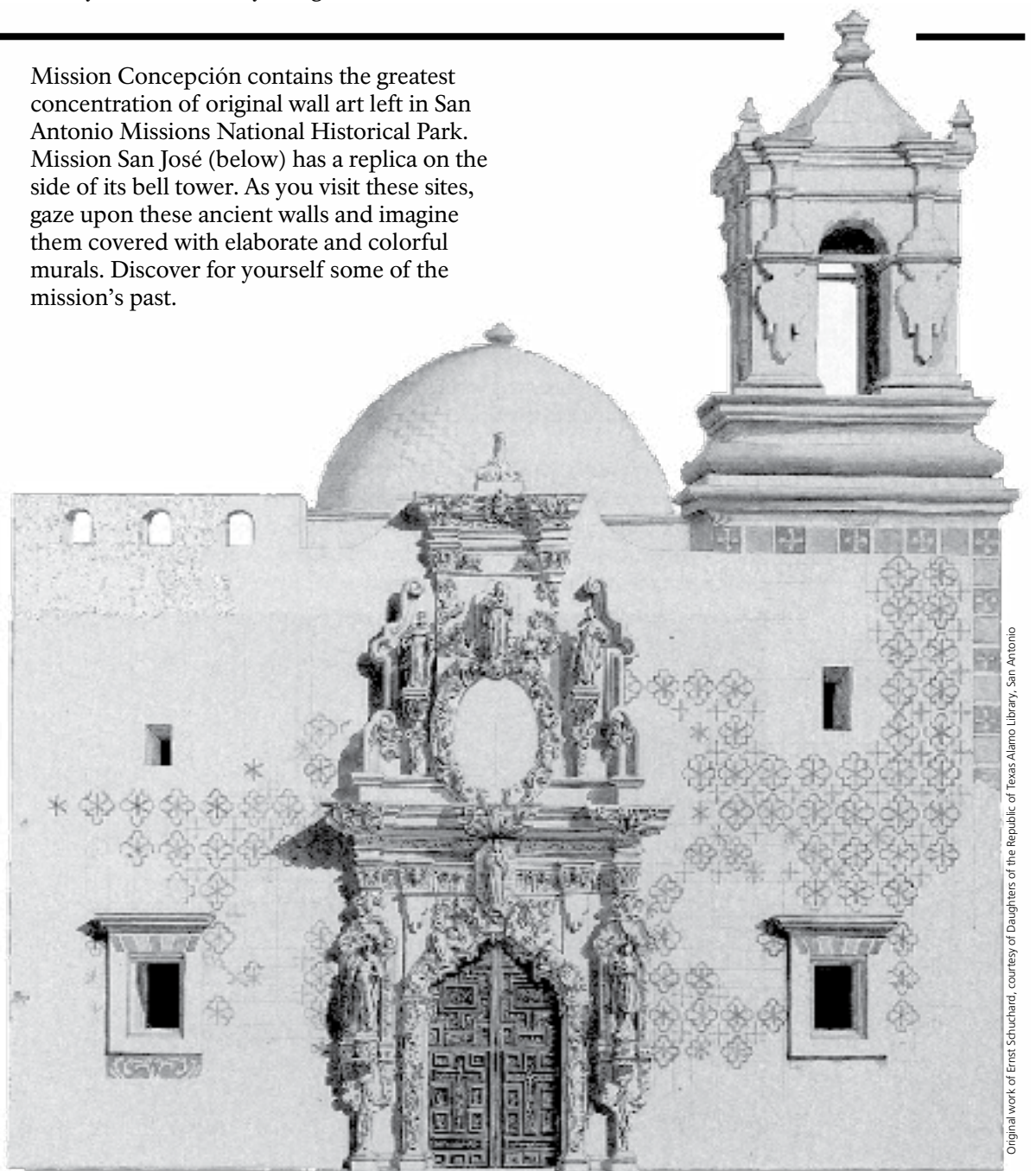
When the park undertook to preserve the library frescos in 1988, an international renowned crew of art conservators tediously removed 250 years' worth of dirt and non-original plaster. To the surprise of many, the second eye, a mustache, and goatee were revealed on the ceiling sunburst (right)! For decades, the only visible portions had been one eye and several rays. Legends labeled it



the “Eye of God” or “All Seeing Eye.” With the appearance of the facial hair, historians now believe this was not a religious symbol, but rather a Spanish medallion. As is often the case, the meaning of some frescos remains a mystery.

The Imagination of Fresco

Mission Concepción contains the greatest concentration of original wall art left in San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. Mission San José (below) has a replica on the side of its bell tower. As you visit these sites, gaze upon these ancient walls and imagine them covered with elaborate and colorful murals. Discover for yourself some of the mission's past.



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San Antonio Missions
inscribed on the World
Heritage List in 2015

Original work of Ernst Schuchard, courtesy of Daughters of the Republic of Texas Alamo Library, San Antonio