

The Carmel Mission in Art

by Julianne Burton-Carvajal

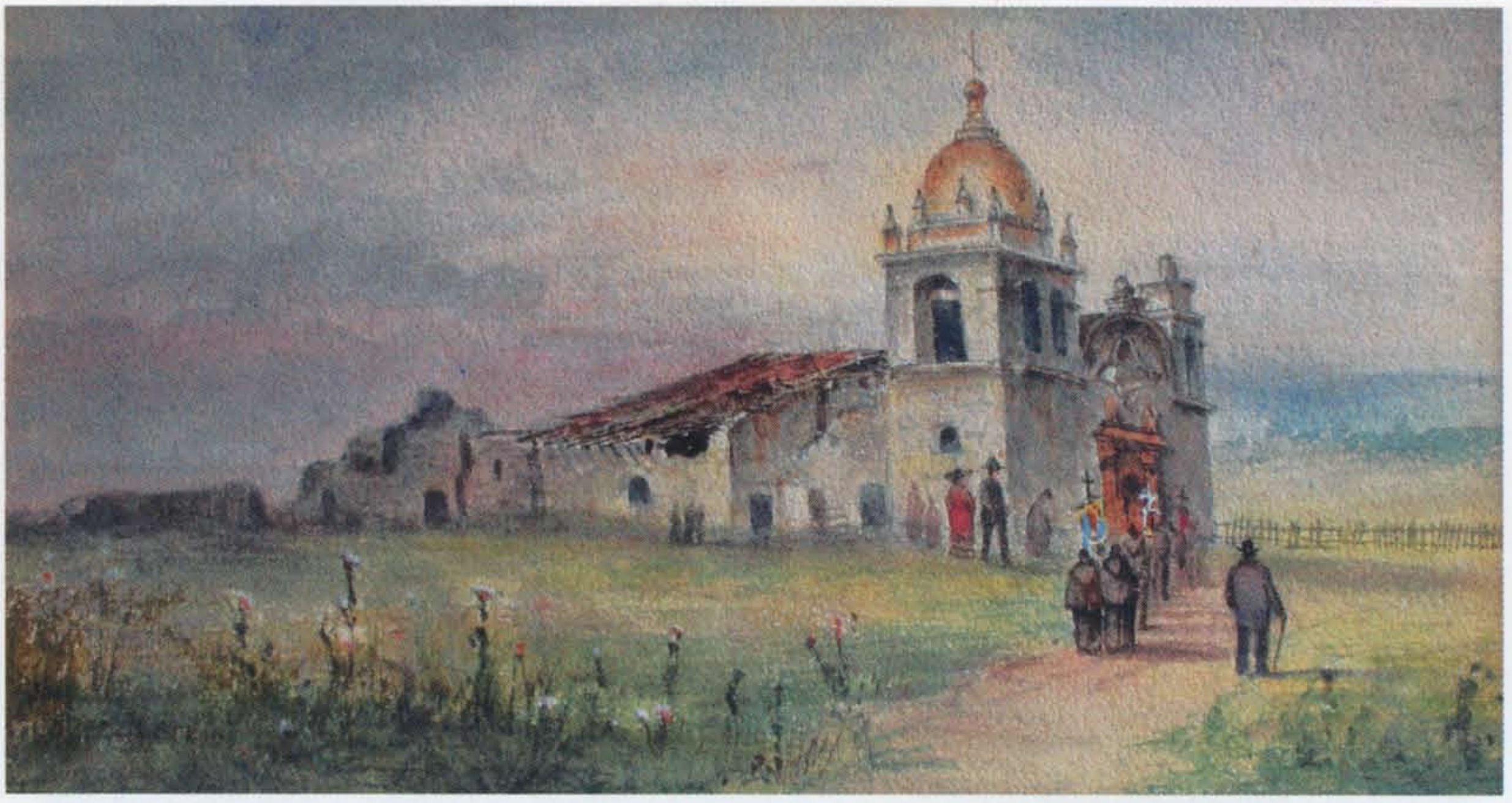
Overlooking the Carmel River estuary to the south, the verdant escarpment of the Santa Lucias to the east, and the surf-splashed craigs of Point Lobos to the west, the Carmel Mission complex occupies a magnificent site on the central Cal-

ifornia coast. Selected by Father Junípero Serra in 1771, one year after founding the nearby settlement at Monterey, it has been a magnet for visitors during the past 227 years. Constructed of native shale as the seventh house of worship on the site, Carmel Mission Church may be the most frequently depicted structure in Califor-

nia—if not the entire far west. Artists have variously chosen to draw it with ink, graphite, or pastels; paint it in watercolor, oils, or acrylics; render it through drypoint, woodblock, or lithograph; and photograph it using conventional or digital equipment.

The very first dated depiction made in California was a pen-and-ink wash of the in-





The Carmel Mission in Painting, 1826-2008, Phase II, is on view through April 30, 2008, at the Jo Mora Chapel Gallery, Carmel Mission, 3080 Rio Road, Carmel, California, 93923, 831-624-1271, carmel-mission.org. The exhibition is part of a three phase project, *The Carmel Mission in Art Retrospective Exhibition*. Phase I, *The Carmel Mission in Art: Photography, 1879-2007*, concluded on October 1, 2007. Phase III, *The Carmel Mission: Works on Paper, 1786-2008*, will be on view from late May through November 2008.

ABOVE: Cornelis Botke, *Carmel Mission Before [1936] Restoration*, etching, 87/8 x 81/8, Paula and Terry Trotter.

ABOVE RIGHT: Meyer Strauss, *San Carlos Day at Carmel Mission*, w/c, 75/8 x 143/8, Paula and Terry Trotter.

RIGHT: Manuel Valencia, *Inside the Ruins of Carmel Mission Church*, o/c, 30 x 20, De Ru's Fine Arts.

LEFT: Edwin Deakin, *Mission San Carlos Borromeo*, before 1899, o/c, 40 x 48, Mission Santa Barbara Library.

ipient Carmel Mission complex. Drawn in 1786 by Gaspard Duché de Vancy, it recorded the welcome given to Count Jean François de la Pérouse and members of his round-the-world scientific expedition. Five years later, in 1791, an equally ambitious maritime venture arrived on the scene, sponsored by the Spanish Crown. Alejandro Malaspina's two ships, *Sutil* and *Mexicana*, dropped anchor at Monterey at the same time as Sir George Vancouver's *Discovery*. Both Vancouver and Malaspina oversaw the production of copious documentation by accompanying artists and scientists, although the unfortunate Malaspina



LEFT: Lewis Josselyn, *Carmel Mission Looking South toward Point Lobos*, June 14, 1925, film negative, 6 x 8, Pat Hathaway's California Views Collection.

BELOW LEFT: Jules Tavernier, *Carmel Mission*, c. 1875, o/c, 14 x 24, private collection courtesy of Garzoli Gallery.

RIGHT: Oriana Weatherbee Day, *Mission San Carlos Borromeo*, o/c, 16 x 28, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Eleanor Martin.

BELOW RIGHT: Jules Tavernier, *Carmel Mission on San Carlos Day*, 1875, o/c, 18 x 29, Merilee and William Karges.



The great multinational floodtide of humanity coursing through the Golden Gate carried with it the occasional artist. Among that questing group, a few intrepid souls gravitated southward to the Monterey Peninsula. Some artists who visited briefly in the 1860s and 1870s were the German-born Albert Bierstadt, the English-born Thomas Hill and Juan Buckingham Wandesforde, and the Americans Gideon Jacques Denny and John Ross Key.

The first artist to reside locally was French-born Jules Tavernier (1844-1889) who had not only set up his studio in Monterey by 1875, but was encouraging fellow members of San Francisco's Bohemian Club to follow his lead. Two years earlier, this talented Parisian had journeyed from New York to San Francisco by rail and horseback. Having worn out his welcome in both San Francisco and Monterey, he would relocate to Hawaii in 1884, where debt and drink contributed to his early demise.

Among many memorable Monterey scenes, this founder of the area's first art colony left two haunting views of Carmel Mission. The first depicts the abandoned complex as a distant blue apparition, castle-like and beckoning. In the second, a small procession wends its way into the roofless sanctuary, suffused inside and out with sunset afterglow. Embers from a tiny campfire recall crimson highlights on canvases by Corot, signaling Tavernier's debt to the Barbizon tradition and suggesting that it required a Continental sensibility to manifest the Mission's full pictorial potential.

In 1879, four years after Tavernier's depiction of the annual San Carlos Day mass, Robert Louis Stevenson, an aspiring writer, witnessed the same autumn ritual in the same decaying monument to California's missionary origins. He concluded his

would be jailed upon his return by the ever-suspicious Spanish Crown, his treasure-trove of discoveries suppressed for more than a century.

The Carmel Mission Church was completed in 1797 and the large southern quadrangle two decades later. In 1826 and again in 1827, while the warship *Blossom* was anchored at Monterey, Young British seamen Richard Brydges Beechey and his contemporary William Smyth rendered Carmel Mission at the peak of its development. Their romanticized watercolors were widely, and often rather loosely, reproduced as prints.

In 1834, economy measures adopted by the fledgling Republic of Mexico, which had acquired the provinces of Upper and Lower California upon winning independence from Spain in 1821, reduced the

missions of Upper California to parish churches. Spanish priests were subject to expulsion, and native-born authorities promptly granted choice mission lands to Californio families, inaugurating the rancho era. Neglect of the missions quickly blossomed into despoliation, as documented by the 1837 painting by François Edmond de Paris. Concerned priests and parishoners relocated Carmel Mission's treasured artworks to Alta California's first stone church, the Royal Presidio Chapel at Monterey, capital of the territory under both Spanish and Mexican regimes, and to residential attics customarily used for grain storage.

Thanks to the lure of California gold and Nevada silver barely a decade later, a scattering of mud-brick homesteads known as Yerba Buena mushroomed into the tent-and-timber metropolis of San Francisco.



essay on “The Old Pacific Capital” by evoking a parallel incandescence:

The church is roofless and ruinous—sea-breezes and sea-fogs, and the alternation of rain and sunshine, daily widening the breeches and casting the crockets from the wall... The little sacristy, which is the only covered portion, is filled with seats and decorated for the service. The Indians troop together, their bright dresses contrasting with their dark and melancholy faces. And there, among a crowd of somewhat unsympathetic holiday-makers, you may hear God served with perhaps more touching circumstances than in any other temple under heaven. An Indian, stoneblind and about eighty years of age, conducts the singing; other Indians compose the choir. Yet they have the Gregorian music at their finger ends, and pronounce the Latin so correctly that I could follow the meaning as they sang. I have never seen faces more lit up with joy....

The blatant disparities between the three resident cultures distressed the young Scot. Aware that the Indians had been displaced by denizens of the Spanish empire, he noted how the Spanish-speaking population was in turn being swept aside by “enterprising” Yankee newcomers. Out-



numbered many times over by treasure-seekers from across the continent and around the globe, the proud Californios had become strangers in their own land—a discriminated, rapidly impoverished underclass stubbornly holding tradition and honor above progress and profit.

Present knowledge credits only one painter of Californio heritage with an important depiction of the Carmel Mission. Manuel Valencia (1856-1935), born just six years after California attained statehood, traced his lineage to 1776, when

Captain Juan Bautista Anza led 200 settlers and double that number of hoofed animals across the daunting Sonoran desert and inland mountain ranges. Valencia’s ancestors helped to found the village of Yerba Buena, forerunner of today’s San Francisco.

If Valencia was more than twenty-eight years old when he painted *Inside the Ruins of Carmel Mission Church*, a striking interior view of the “roofless and ruinous” Carmel Mission church, it is likely that he worked from an earlier photograph or sketch, because a new roof was in place by

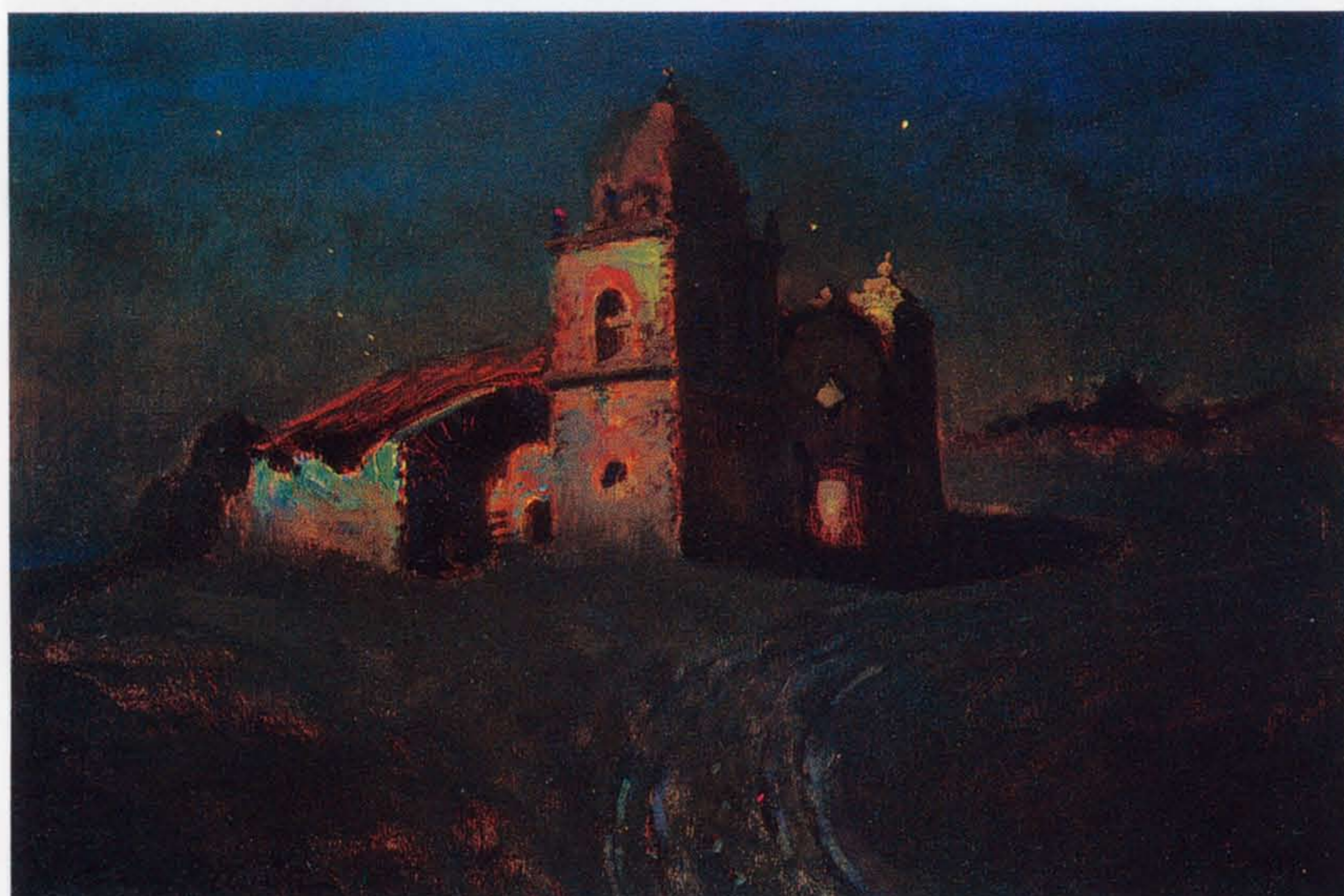


LEFT: Richard Brydges Beechey, *The Mission of San Carlos, Monterey*, 1826, w/c, 9 x 15 1/2, private collection.

BELOW LEFT: Charles Rollo Peters, *Starlit Mission Carmel*, o/c, 16 x 24, The Irvine Museum.

RIGHT: William Smyth, *Mission of San Carlos—Upper California*, 1827, w/c, 14 x 19, The Peabody Museum, Harvard University, David L. Bushnell Collection.

BELOW RIGHT: Carleton E. Watkins, *Mission San Carlos Borromeo*, before 1888, original photographic print, hand-colored by an anonymous artist, 5 x 8, Pat Hathaway's California Views Collection.



During the last decades of the nineteenth century, pilgrimages along the California Mission Trail from San Diego to Sonoma became an artistic rite of passage. English-born Edwin Deakin (1838-1923) pioneered the theme as early as 1870, compiling three sets of mission paintings, two in oils and one in watercolor, by the end of the century. Henry Chapman Ford, a decade older, became known for his oil paintings of mission sites and the etchings he enhanced by hand, many of which fell victim to fire on one occasion or another. At the behest of pioneering promoter and publisher Charles Lummis, Pasadena philanthropist Eva Scott Fenyes traversed the state for thirty years recording the deteriorating architectural heritage of Spanish and Mexican California in watercolor. During the same period, Norwegian-born Christian August Jorgensen produced a complete set of oils and eighty watercolors of the California missions.

1884. Backed by appeals from aspiring novelists Robert Louis Stevenson and Helen Hunt Jackson, as well as Jane Stanford and other civic leaders, Father Angelo Casanova organized a successful statewide campaign. The goal was to repair the final resting place of Father Junípero Serra, founder of the Alta California mission chain, in time to commemorate the centennial of his death and burial in 1774. In the process, the church's original tile-covered roof with its unusual catenary arch was transformed into a shingled gothic peak—an incongruity that drove many artists back to their photo albums and sketchbooks.

Not long after the “the engineering feat of the century” connected the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard by rail in 1869, passenger cars began disgorging flocks of curious easterners at the Oakland terminus who came

to experience California first-hand. Some of the visitors were established artists who would set up studios in the city across the bay; others would pursue their studies at the San Francisco Academy of Design atop elegant Nob Hill. Whatever their level of proficiency, they made frequent excursions to the Monterey Peninsula where the landscape, architectural legacy, and “Old California” faces were a continuing inspiration.

By 1875, the appeal of Yosemite and other grand Sierra panoramas by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Hill had declined. Already inspired by the intimist example of the Barbizon school, many artists would find Monterey Peninsula scenes even more attractive after 1880, when the Southern Pacific Railway began service from San Francisco to the newly inaugurated Hotel Del Monte, America's first all-season resort.

By the 1880s, many formerly prominent Californios were entering their final years. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, widely revered by the Americans, shared his early memories of Carmel Mission with Massachusetts-born Oriana Weatherbee Day (1838-1886). No depiction of Carmel Mission teems with more “local color” than her rendering of the mission in its heyday under an opalescent sunset—with ladies in ox-drawn carts, caballeros astride covered mounts, uniformed military officers, and Mission Indians wrapped in serapes. After traveling El Camino Real between 1877 and 1884, recording all the disintegrating missions, Mrs. Day set up her studio in San Francisco and dedicated her scant remaining years to recreating the lost Californio era in genre paintings.



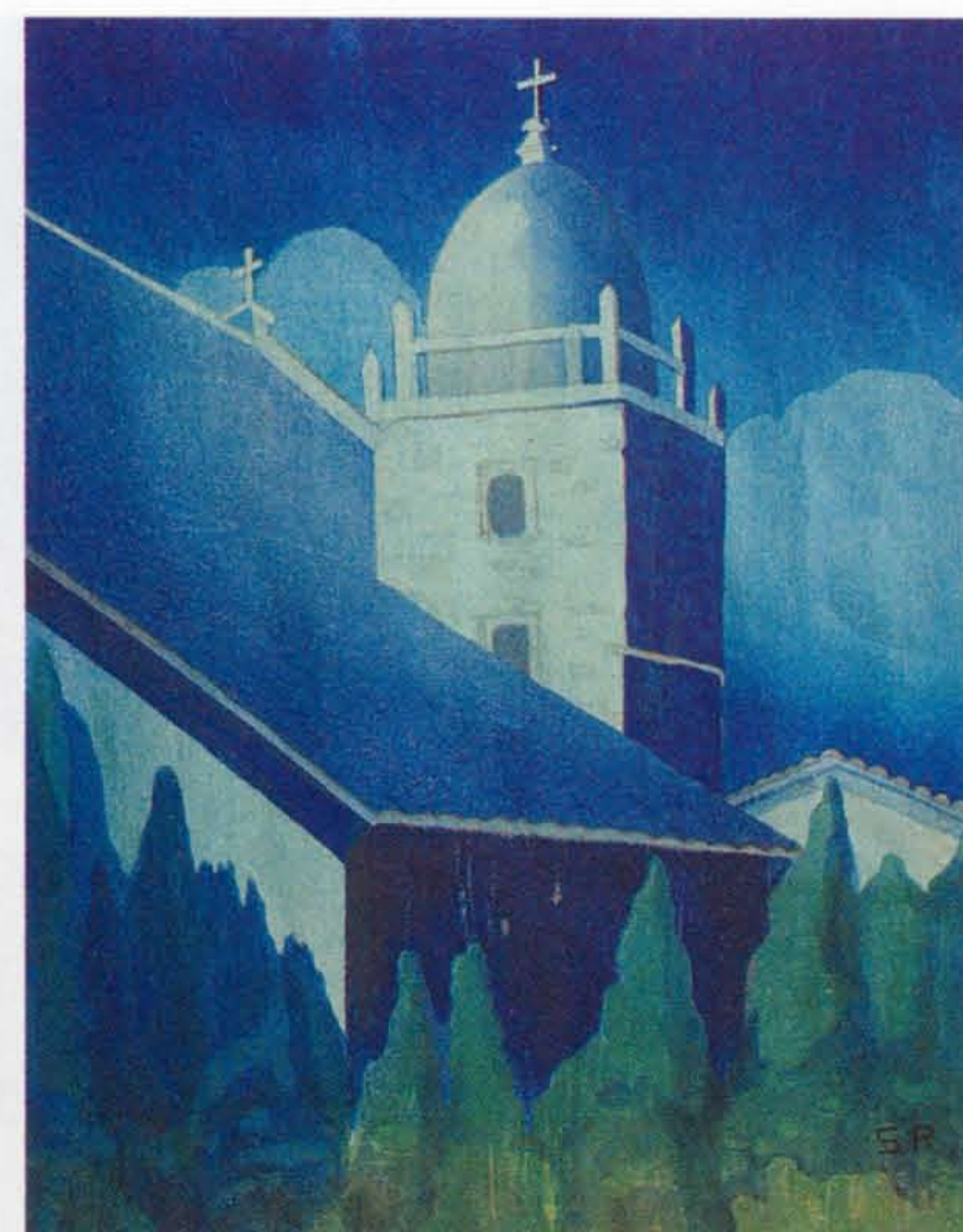
Uruguayan-born sculptor Joseph Jacinto Mora (1876-1947) traversed the Mission Trail on horseback at the turn of the twentieth century, beginning his album of sketches and watercolors at Velicatá in Baja California. In 1921, Father Ramón Mestres commissioned Jo Mora to create a commemorative sculpture of Father Serra. Building a temporary woodframe workshop on the Mission grounds, Jo Mora undertook what sensed would be “the supreme professional effort of my life.” Realizing that the project was growing too large for placement on the altar, as originally envisioned, Father Mestres encouraged him to design and build a separate chapel, the second reconstructed outbuilding in the mission complex. Mora’s bronze and travertine grouping of the Franciscan on his bier surrounded by three friars in prayer is now recognized as one of the great works of American sculpture.

The village of Carmel-by-the-Sea was founded at the dawn of the twentieth century as a unique community for artists, writers, and professors from not-too-distant Stanford University. The style and philosophy of the Arts & Crafts movement resounded with year-round and seasonal



residents alike. Eschewing streetlights, pavement, and other trappings of modernity, the inhabitants of Carmel cultivated a nature-focused lifestyle with plenty of leisure for creativity. In the summer of 1914, nationally acclaimed painter and teacher William Merritt Chase journeyed westward to offer painting classes on Carmel Beach.

After the great San Francisco earthquake and fires of April 1906 robbed countless artists of their life’s work, many decided to start anew on the Monterey Peninsula. The first anniversary of the catastrophe was marked by the inauguration of the Hotel Del Monte Art Gallery—the first anywhere to feature California artists exclusively. Enduring until the United States en-



ABOVE: Shirley Russell, *Carmel Mission*, woodcut, 14 1/4 x 11 1/4, Paula and Terry Trotter.

LEFT: Martin Baer, *Carmel Mission*, 1946, tempera, 11 x 14, Paula and Terry Trotter.

BELOW LEFT: François Edmond Paris, *Mission de Notre-Dame du Carmel*, 1837, w/c, private collection.

RIGHT: Mary DeNeale Morgan, *Carmel Mission Procession*, oil on board, 24 x 28, Teresa and Eric Del Piero.

BELOW RIGHT: Josef Jacinto (Jo) Mora, *Sketch of Proposed Restoration, Mission San Carlos Del Carmelo*, 1921, pen and ink, 3 x 9, Carmel Mission Museum Collection.



tered World War II, when the hotel complex was requisitioned for a flight-training school, the gallery not only attracted a growing number of artists but also dispersed images of the Monterey Peninsula and its landmark Carmel Mission across the nation and around the world.

The year-long Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915—designed to show the world a resurrected San Francisco, offer a western showcase for achievements from far and wide, and celebrate the linkage of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via the Panama Canal—prompted California artists to take their first tentative steps toward modernism. Leaving behind the restricted, tea-drenched palette of tonalism,

so resonant with the Arts & Crafts sensibility, many painters began to embrace impressionist-style brushwork and color.

An undated oil painting by Mary DeNeale Morgan (1868-1948), lifelong protégé of artist William Keith who settled in Carmel in 1909, anticipated the new trends in its almost expressionistic use of color and texture.

The renaissance of American printmaking that spanned the first half of the twentieth century flourished on the Monterey Peninsula thanks in large part to the charismatic leadership of Armin Hansen, renowned painter of Monterey Bay seascapes and fishermen. Trained in northern Europe in etching methods used by Rem-

brandt, Hansen shared his skill and oversize press with members of the “Monterey Group” and perhaps as well with Dutch-born Cornelius Botke (1887-1954), a resident of Carmel from 1919 to 1927, who produced a moody, even lugubrious impression. Botke’s undated etching depicts the Mission before restoration.

In her uncommonly large, exquisitely colored woodblock of the Carmel mission bell tower, Shirley Hopper Russell (1886-1985) revisited the tonalist tradition of depicting missions by moonlight, emphasizing the steep-pitched roof shunned by other artists. This was probably done before 1936, when the original barrel-vaulted tile roof was recreated by master craftsman Harry Downie, who dedicated half a century to restoring Carmel Mission to what it had been at its zenith.

Paintings, prints and sculptures have always been intrinsic to the “mission of the



missions” because the conversion enterprise depended upon art to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. In 1770, when Father Serra came by ship from the first Alta California mission site at San Diego to meet military commander Gaspar de Portolá and his foot soldiers on the shore of Monterey Bay, pious artworks were immediately displayed on an improvised altar to reinforce the devotion of the exhausted soldiers as well as to inspire that of the curious Indians. Painting and carving were among the skills taught to members of the numerous native tribelets, although relatively few examples of their work have been preserved.

A few mid-twentieth century artists attempted to evoke the mission’s many-layered spiritual heritage. In 1946 the widely



traveled Martin Baer (1894-1961) created an otherworldly composition by setting Carmel Mission church in a lush valley bounded by rocky headlands. Denizens of both the heavenly and earthly kingdoms meet in Baer’s watercolor, which whimsically combines Plains Indians, spiky maguey cactus, and Renaissance-style “putti” with

the more predictable cowled Franciscans, doves, and wind-sculpted Monterey cypress. Like countless works being created by twenty-first century artists, Baer’s whimsically allegorical vision affirms the power of this timeless monument to speak to and through artists across eras and cultures.