



# HUNTINGTON FRONTIERS

FALL/WINTER 2013

The Changing Image of Junípero Serra

Extreme Makeovers in  
Late 18th-Century Portraiture

Law and Chaucer

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens







# Between a ROCK *and a* CRUCIFIX

FATHER JUNIPERO SERRA IN HIS OWN DAY

By Steven W. Hackel

Junípero Serra is among the most widely recognized figures in California history. And he is second to none for the period before 1850. Today, his image appears in comic books and on coins, on postcards and postage stamps, and his name has been given to highways and high schools, wine and gin, tequila and whiskey, a mountain peak, and yes—I kid you not—at one time it even graced a landfill in Colma on the San Francisco Peninsula.

In this 300th anniversary commemorating Serra's birth, it is worth considering the different ways he has been remembered over time. Because, ultimately, it appears there is an enormous gap between how we see Serra today and how his contemporaries saw him.

The most enduring image of Serra today quite possibly may be in sculpture. In 1931, a nine-foot statue of Serra was unveiled in the U.S. Capitol Building's Statuary Hall (see pg. 24). In truth, Serra stood only a bit taller than five feet and suffered from a chronically ulcerous leg. But he was indeed larger than life. The Mallorcan-born Franciscan played a crucial role in the settlement and colonization of Alta—that is, Upper—California, most notably as the founder of the chain of Catholic missions that eventually extended from San Diego to just north of San Francisco. For that accomplishment and many related to it, Serra has been given an exalted place in Washington.

From his marble pedestal, Serra's heavenly gaze and commanding posture suggest his confidence, inner strength, and higher purpose. On the day that the monumental work was installed in Statuary Hall, speaker after speaker extolled Serra's piety,

Opposite: A rendering of Junípero Serra by Francisco Palou, from *Relación histórica de la vida y apostólicas tareas del venerable padre fray Junípero Serra*, 1787. The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. Below: Father José Mosqueda's copy of the portrait of Father Junípero Serra from the Convent of Santa Cruz, Querétaro, date unknown, oil on canvas. Santa Bárbara Mission Archive-Library.







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his tireless work among Indians, and most important, his role as the "pioneer of pioneers" who brought civilization to California. In the words of Ray Lyman Wilbur, Secretary of the Department of the Interior at the time, Serra, "imbued with divine spirit, charged with an exalted mission and sustained by an unfaltering faith, faced with supreme courage, danger, privation, suffering, disease, to carry the message of salvation over unknown paths along the uncharted shores of the Pacific.... He was the torch bearer of civilization." Notably, Serra was also lauded for bringing to California the key components of the Pacific agricultural empire: oranges, lemons, olives, figs, grapes, and assorted vegetables, as well as cattle, sheep, goats, and horses. With all of this bounty, one might imagine that Serra came to California in an ark, not on a mule.

A generation later, in 1959, on the 175th anniversary of Serra's death, luminaries again gathered in Statuary Hall to offer similar tributes.

**SO, WHO WAS THIS MAN? MIQUEL JOSEPH** Serra was born in 1713, in the town of Petra on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. A community of 2,500 residents, Petra's rhythms, folkways, and institutions were those typical of rural 18th-century Europe, dictated by religion, climate, environment, and inherited social status. Most people in the Mallorcan countryside were poor, and Serra's family appears to have been no different. There was no guarantee of steady work; they typically had little or no savings and lived in full awareness that a season's wages could be wiped out during crop failures, and that they were just one stroke of bad luck away from destitution.

In the world of Serra's childhood and youth, Catholicism loomed large: it was a way of life, a way of ordering the world, the most powerful and pervasive institution Mallorcans knew. Serra's own zeal for the preservation and propagation of





*PETRA es una de las pri-  
Ysla, y llamada con este  
moros habitan en su dis-  
en el un molino y fá-  
ha es de granos, legum-  
meras poblaciones de la  
misimo nombre por los  
trito 604 vecinos, y tiene  
brica de papel, su cose-  
bres, vino, y ganado.*

the faith was honed early on as he came of age in a world where church and state distrusted one another even as they were partners in Bourbon expansionism.

The church also provided some measure of security. Economic hardship must have helped provide at least some incentive to Serra to begin his formal training for the priesthood. At age 17, Serra joined the Franciscan order; at that time he chose for himself the name Junípero, inspired by the life of St. Francis' companion, Brother Juniper.

It was not unusual for a promising young boy from Petra to take holy orders. Nor was it unusual for a Mallorcan priest to leave the island for life as a missionary. But it was unexpected for a Franciscan priest to give up a university professorship for the uncertain life of a missionary in the New World.

Serra left Mallorca at age 35 after spending more than a decade preaching throughout Mallorca and nearly as long teaching philosophy and theology

at the university in Palma. He understood he was making a life commitment and would never cross the Atlantic again. There could be no doubts: he was enacting God's will, just as he had heard it through a voice in his heart.

Soon after his arrival in New Spain, as colonial Mexico was known in those days, Serra was assigned to oversee five missions in the Sierra Gorda, a region about 100 miles north of the capital city. There he stayed until 1758, after which he spent 10 years dividing his time between his duties at the College of San Fernando in Mexico City and preaching throughout the countryside. In 1767 he ventured north to reorganize the formerly Jesuit missions of Baja California, and less than two years later he was the spiritual leader of the overland expeditions that took possession of Alta California for Spain. He would devote the remaining 15 years of his life to the establishment of missions in Alta California, to indoctrinating Indians into Catholicism, and to ensuring that the Franciscans—not the military—had control over Indian lives.

Opposite: The statue of Serra by the sculptor Ettore Cadorin (American, 1876–1952) in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol Building. Serra holds a plain cross and a miniature model of Mission San Carlos. Photo courtesy U.S. Capitol.

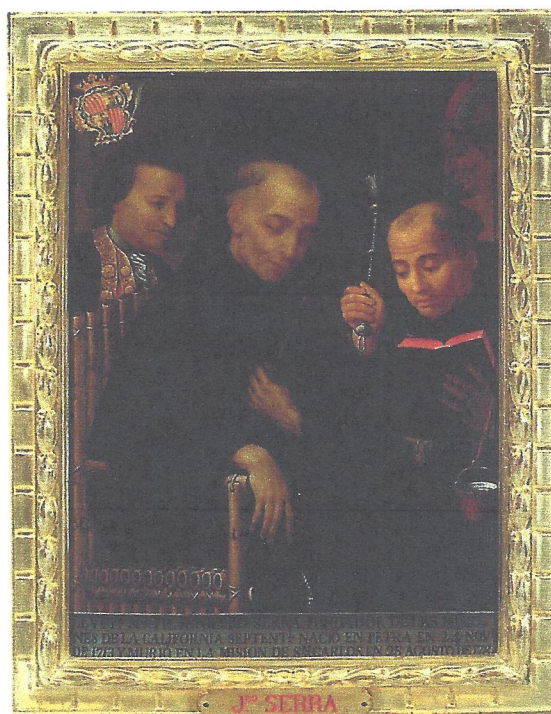
Left: A man working the land outside the village of Petra, Serra's birthplace. Serra would encourage Indians in Mexico and California to adopt similar forms of agriculture. Detail of map created by Cardinal Antonio Despuig y Darneto, ca. 1785. Museu de Mallorca.





Above: The ailing Serra is surrounded by Indians and soldiers as he receives the sacrament of Final Communion from his devoted colleague and first biographer, Francisco Palou. Mariano Guerrero, *Fray Junípero Serra recibe el viático*, 1785, oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Historia, INAH-CONACULTA.

Right: In this portrait, the elderly Serra is praying in his final days with Palou. Father Francesc Caimari Rotger, *Portrait of Fray Junípero Serra*, 1790, oil on canvas. Ayuntamiento de Palma, Mallorca.



THE SERRA WHOSE LIFE WAS HONORED IN 1931 in the U.S. Capitol is not the Serra I have just described. Eighteenth-century depictions of Serra stand in stark contrast to those from the 20th. In a 1785 painting by Mariano Guerrero (at left, top), we see Serra how he was in his last years: small, sickly, anticipating death. The painting shows Serra as he wished to be remembered: publicly acting out what Franciscans and devout Catholics of his day would have considered a good death. According to those with him when he died at Mission San Carlos, Serra, having already confessed, rose from his deathbed, walked to the mission chapel, and, as we see here, in his last act of public devotion, received Final Communion. This representation of his final days is heroic and didactic; it was an image that would have been intelligible and acceptable to his contemporaries and to a wide range of Spanish and Mexican Catholics, and perhaps that is one reason why for generations it has been displayed in the Museo Nacional de Historia in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park.

Another image that captures Serra's life as he lived it appeared in 1787. It is an engraving that served as the frontispiece for the seminal biography of Serra written by his devoted student, friend, colleague, and fellow Mallorcan, Francisco Palou (see pg. 22). This one is by far the grittiest, the most complicated, and likely to be the most accurate image that exists of Serra.

Here, Serra holds in his left hand a crucifix upon which we can see the body of Christ crucified, the central object of Franciscan devotion and the symbol of man's potential redemption through the physical suffering and death of God's only son. To Franciscans of Serra's day it was Christ's death, rather than his life, that was inspiring.

Serra in his right hand holds a symbol of his own religious devotion and practice: a rock, the sort of pounding stone that he was known to have used to strike his chest during his fiery sermons. Arrayed at Serra's feet are the instruments—props, if you will—of the traveling missionary and itinerant preacher of 18th-century Mexico: a broken skull—a warning to those who had not yet repented their sins that death is always near—and his tools for dramatic and public self-mortification: the chain and burning taper.



All around Serra are sinners being moved to repentance. These people seem overwhelmed by his presence. They clutch their hearts. They avert their eyes. Serra rises above them all, presiding from on high. In a sense he is as enormous here as he is in the 1931 statue. Above him circle birds, perhaps representations of saved souls. Serra here is the savior. He appears impenetrable. Serra stands ready—rock in one hand, crucifix in the other, and chains and tapers at his feet—to punish his own body to atone for the sins of others, all in the name of the crucified Christ.

Jump now to 1931, to the statue in the Capitol. Gone is the crucifix, the object of Franciscan devotion, replaced by a more generic cross. And missing from Serra's other hand is the rock, the symbol of his self-mortification and the intensity of his faith; the stone has been replaced by a model of Mission San Carlos, not as it stood in Serra's day, when it was still composed of crude huts, but as it appeared a century later. There is no trace of Indians or anyone else or of the angst and soul-searching that Serra intended to inspire in those who attended his sermons. The Serra here is not the small and sickly Serra of the 18th century but the polar opposite; here we have a big man whose body projects strength, not mortality.

Similar erasures and substitutions characterize Serra in a medal that was stamped in 1963 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of his birth (see pg. 28, bottom). Here, as in Statuary Hall, Serra holds aloft with one hand a large cross, while the other displays a miniature of Mission San Carlos. As in 1931, Serra comes across as physically quite impressive. He appears tall and robust, even though he was neither. The main difference between the medal and the statue is that in the medal Serra's left leg now peeks through his heavy wool tunic, a reminder of the ulcerous wound that dogged him for more than 35 years as he traveled on foot throughout central Mexico, into Baja California, and then on up through Alta California.

In the background of the scene is a Spanish ship that suggests Serra as the pioneer of pioneers, the man who brought civilization to the "uncharted shores of the Pacific." Serra here stands alone on the shores of Monterey Bay. The bay, the coast, and the mountains—all are devoid of people and man's handiwork. It is a simple and simplifying image—just like the 1931 statue: the unadorned

cross presents a non-Catholic form of Christianity; it spoke to an age that did not acknowledge the complexities of California's colonial past or what we now see as the various and contested legacies of the encounters between Indians and Spaniards in Alta California.

Perhaps it was only as a rugged pioneer, as a cross-wielding Lewis and Clark-like figure, and as a generic Christian, that Serra could have made it into Statuary Hall and the curriculum of every fourth-grade classroom in California. But

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this makeover did not come without a cost. What we end up with—in the statue and on the coin—is an ahistorical figure disconnected from the larger issues and struggles of his own age.

When the Catholic Church moved forward in 1988 with Serra's beatification, the beatified Serra had to have a visual representation, and what emerged 25 years ago was a rather bland, historically inaccurate image (see pg. 28, top). In rendering his official Vatican beatification portrait of Serra, Lorenzo Ghiglieri said that the face was a composite constructed from the other known portraits of Serra, but others have suggested that Ghiglieri was inspired by Father Noel Francis Moholy, who commissioned the portrait and for decades was the official leader of the effort to canonize Serra.

To me this Serra looks nothing like a man intent on telling anyone who would listen about the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell. No crucifix here, and the familiar cross Serra held in 1931 is now replaced by a walking stick. Hanging from Serra's neck is an enlarged version of the cross that Serra wore throughout his adult life and that was buried with him in 1784. The mission model is gone, and the Pacific coast has been replaced by the mountains. There is no trace of Indians or anyone else in the portrait. The beatified padre walks alone, seemingly climbing to heaven.

What all of these 20th-century images have in common is their highly selective portrayal of the man, presumably so that he might appeal to new





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and diverse constituencies. But in losing all of the details that would have properly contextualized Serra, we lose the sense of who the man was during his own life and what California was during the colonial period. We fail to see Serra's importance in his own day, and, of course, we do not understand how different Serra's world was from our own.

THAT IS NOT AT ALL TO SAY THAT SERRA ONLY SHOULD BE represented with a rock in one hand and a crucifix in the other. But I do think that we need to make an effort to understand Serra as those in his day saw him. And what exactly do we gain by seeing Serra with the rock and the crucifix? One answer is that we are forced to see that Serra's full adult life involved much more than evangelical work among Indians in California. Today, rightly so, we see him as a builder of missions and as a man devoted to converting California Indians to Catholicism, but in the Palou engraving he appears as most people saw him during his adult life: as the quintessential Spanish missionary preaching to Catholics, leading them to confession and ultimately to salvation.

This larger perspective on Serra's life and work is important because, while we think of Serra as devoting his life to the conversion of Indians in California, in central Mexico he preached before tens of thousands of Catholics over two decades, and before that he had done similar work on the island of Mallorca. That is what most missionaries did in Serra's day. They spent most of their time preaching to the faithful. Perhaps fewer than 10 percent of the 8,000 Franciscans in 17th- and 18th-century Mexico actually went to a frontier.

Yes, Serra was a missionary to Indians, and in that part of his work he embodies a larger history of Indian-Catholic missionary relations that is hemispheric in scope. But that Serra—the one who worked in California from 1769 to 1784—should not be our only understanding of the man or of the missionaries of his age.

Even after his various makeovers, there really is no denying that Serra lived in a distant and foreign past, one that is remote and radically different from ours. Serra is in many ways an ironic icon for today's California: he lived a life in opposition to what the state has become—a dynamic region defined by its political, social, economic, ethnic, and religious diversity. Moreover, Serra was a man replete with tensions, even paradoxes. He wrote that he was always obedient to his superiors, but as he grew in stature and seniority, he did largely as he pleased, with few checks on his own authority or actions beyond the substantial ones imposed by his own order and mission. He had a domineering personality but actually was bereft of an individual self in a modern sense; he was opinionated, strong-willed, determined, short-tempered, and passionately devoted to his life's work, especially

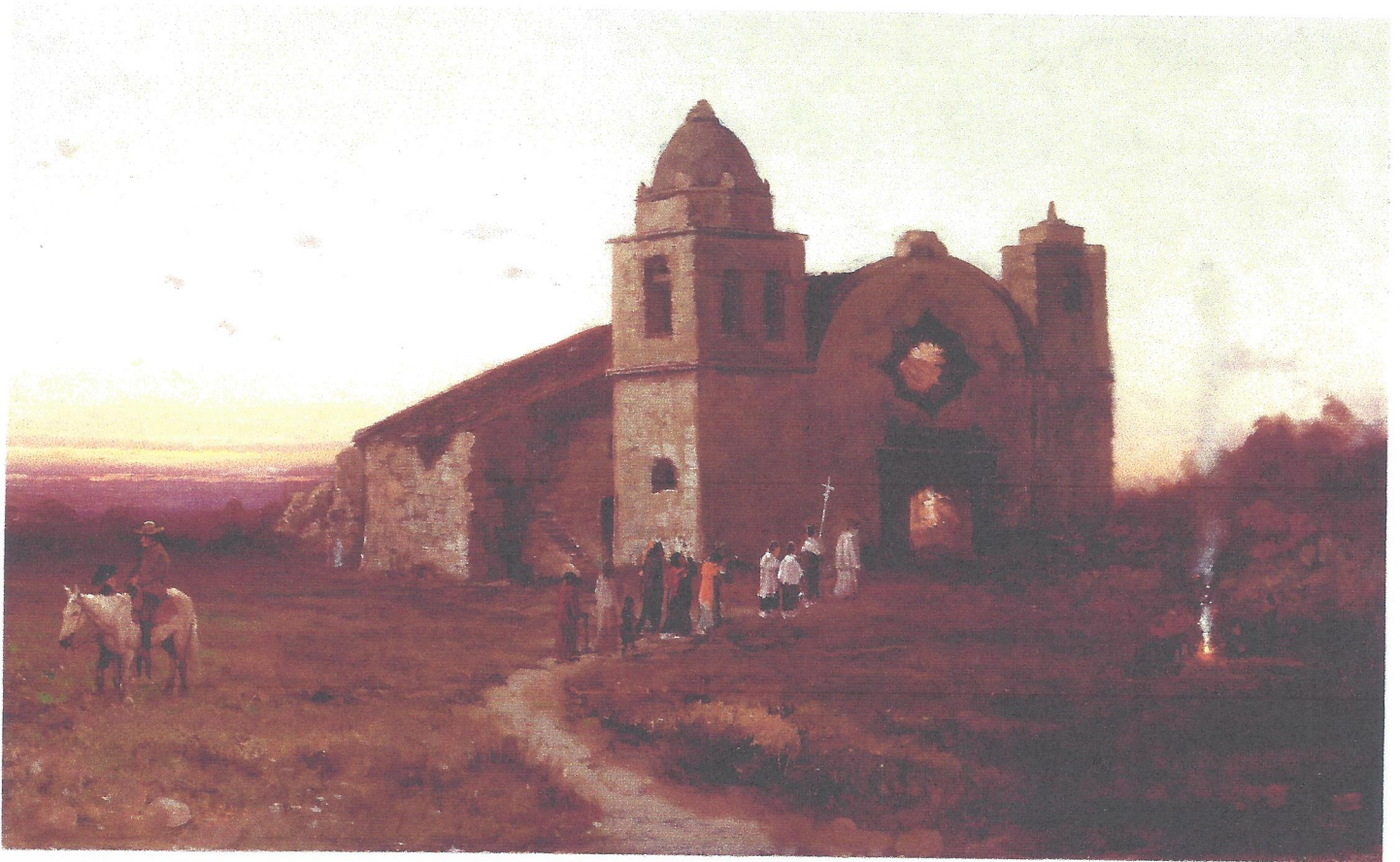


Two later renderings of Serra fail to capture his essence. Top: The first image of Serra authorized by the Catholic Church for public veneration. Lorenzo Ghiglieri (American, born 1931), *Adelante (Onward)*, 1988, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Cause for the Sainthood of Blessed Junípero Serra. Bottom: A 1963 commemorative medallion produced by the U.S. Mint on the 250th anniversary of Serra's birth. Photograph by Patrick Tregenza.

Opposite, top: Jules Tavernier (French, 1844–1889), *Carmel Mission on San Carlos Day*, 1875, oil on canvas. Courtesy of William and Merrily Karges.

Opposite, bottom: Music and dance were central to California Indian culture, and they continued under the supervision of the Franciscans, as shown here at Mission San Francisco. From Louis Choris, *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*, 1822. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of Carol L. Valentine.





his years in colonial California, which is why, 300 years later, he matters, and why we care about who he was and how this unique Franciscan lived his life and forever shaped California.

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