

Summary of Work on Mission San Gabriel Exhibit

Creating “Mission San Gabriel Arcángel, 1771-1900: Natives, Missionaries, and the Birth of Catholicism in Los Angeles”

I offer these comments here and the document that follows to dispel any lingering notions that creating an exhibition in a museum gallery is anything other than rigorous intellectual work and somehow not “real history.” Books and articles by convention allow authors to explain the nature of the intellectual pursuit and the work that led to its creation. They have introductions, acknowledgments, and footnotes that collectively leave little doubt about the aims and execution of the intellectual project. In general, however, exhibitions do not have that sort of accompanying scholarly apparatus as they are intended to be consumed in an entirely different manner. Curators typically remain in the background except at the opening of the show. Curatorial work takes place backstage; the work is often by design invisible and often operates like a hidden hand guiding the viewer from room to room or object to object. But before any of that can happen curators must do their work as creators and team organizers, listeners and learners, designers and installers, and, most of all, researchers and writers.

Most historians know the steps involved in publishing an article or a book, but few have any idea what goes into creating a multimedia museum exhibition at a historic site, let alone at a non-profit with no staff, no archive, no registrar, no design team, and no money. I say no money because while the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA) spent millions restoring the Mission San Gabriel church after an arsonist nearly destroyed it in 2020, the ADLA did not expend a penny on this exhibition. The funds that went to building the intellectual infrastructure of the exhibition were those that I raised through grants I administered through UCR or at the mission or funds that the parish (not the ADLA) eventually committed towards the galleries once it was clear that the renovated museum would reopen in June 2023.

Founded 250 years ago and a registered California state landmark since 1935, Mission San Gabriel brought incredible change to the people today known variously as the Gabrieleno/Tongva or the Kizh. Today, the mission is among the most important historical sites in the nation’s second largest city. The mission was built by Native labor, is the site of 5,600 Gabrieleno/Tongva burials, and is a place of profound Native memory and religious observance. Yet, Native voice, Indigenous knowledge, and local history had never been incorporated into the mission museum’s curatorial practices or gallery displays. This project, therefore, sought to acknowledge a 250-year long erasure of the mission’s Native history and displace a Eurocentric understanding of the legacies of Spanish colonization and Catholic missionization.

While making an exhibition is a distinctly different exercise than publishing an article or a book, doing so involves many familiar processes and methodologies and thus there are clear and recognizable ways to measure its quality, significance, impact and dissemination.

Methodology:

My work on the exhibition used recognized historical methods to explore research questions, adhered to traditional academic standards and peer review, and built upon my previous research

and that of others. The community engagement that enhanced the research was built upon trust and strengthened through the creation of a collaborative and equitable research environment, sustainable archive, and shared narrative.

Quality:

- a. The five external grants that supported the scholarship underpinning the exhibition, the venue of its presentation (among the most important historical sites in Los Angeles), and the positive reception upon its opening are all clear indications of the quality of exhibition.
- b. The exhibition created new knowledge. This exhibition sheds new light on the life experiences of the Tongva who lived at Mission San Gabriel, the motivations of the missionaries who sought to overturn Native beliefs and brutalize their bodies, the culture that the Tongva brought to the mission, the central place of Mission San Gabriel in the history of Los Angeles, the origins and significance of the liturgical art at the mission, and the survivance of the Native descendants of the mission and their continued participation in the life of the mission today.
- c. The exhibition asks important intellectual, social, political, questions. It addresses the central questions of Indian population decline at the mission, the coercion of Native laborers at the mission, and the centrality of the practice of corporal punishment to the Franciscans' treatment of Natives. It asks why missionaries established missions in California, why Natives came to the missions, what both groups hoped to accomplish in the missions, how and why Natives resisted the missionaries and Catholic indoctrination, and what happened to Natives and mission lands once the mission was closed in the 1830s.
- d. The exhibition created new partnerships between the Tongva, historians, and Catholic spiritual leaders; they all worked together for the first time to create a shared and mutually agreed upon narrative about the history of Mission San Gabriel. This is transformational because it sets a new standard for how California missions can ask important and introspective questions about their past and embrace the Native understandings that are central to their history. This holds out the promise of bringing change to many other California missions. The exhibition created new partnerships between museum professionals and Mission San Gabriel. This is vital for the study and preservation of the historical site and its collection of paintings, Native baskets, books, and textiles.
- e. This research knowledge has been translated for external and public audiences. Since its opening in June, the exhibition has attracted media attention. On average 1,000 visitors have toured the exhibition each a month since its opening, and these figures do not include field trips of very large numbers of elementary age school children. Moreover, the museum has become a model for other California missions.

The following narrative captures my work creating from the ground up the Mission San Gabriel museum exhibition that opened in June 2023. Some of the work took place before 2020 as I had been working on this project on and off since 2014 when the mission exhibit at the Huntington closed, but most of my curatorial work was undertaken during the 36 months between July 2020 and late June 2023. This work was I think among the most challenging of my career. The exhibition is on the grounds of an institution that has often denied its own history and that for centuries has had an antagonistic relationship with its own Native stakeholders, who for good reason themselves have looked with suspicion upon a Catholic Church that erased them from the history of Mission San Gabriel and excluded them from the management of its historic collection. My work on this exhibition involved not only trying to create professionalized museum practices within an institution that had none, but it also involved initiating and fostering dialogue and conversations among and between historians, Native stakeholders, and church officials to achieve a shared narrative that could tell the history of Mission San Gabriel and the Natives who lived there and remain anchored in its historic collections and the voices of the Native community. Thus, the fundamental goal of this project was to fully engage Native consultants and a range of experts in the research, interpretation, conservation, and presentation of the history of Mission San Gabriel.

The exhibition's eight galleries present for the first time a full discussion of Native life at Mission San Gabriel during the colonial period (including discussions of corporal punishment and coerced labor at the hands of the Franciscans); the persistence of Native culture at the mission; Franciscan motivations for coming to California; the role of paintings, sculpture, and music in the Franciscan missions; Native resistance at Mission San Gabriel; the mission's role in the establishment of Los Angeles in 1781; the collapse of the mission during the mid-19th century; the rise of the romantic myth of the missions; and the persistence of a Native community at the mission today.

Note: I have created hyperlinks to more fully document the creation of the exhibition. Those are presented here solely for the purposes of this review and are not to be downloaded or circulated.

Phase 1: 2018 through November 2020

Initial Material Culture Survey of the Mission, Covid, and the Fire

2018 to February 2020

- Began work on material cultural survey at Mission San Gabriel (MSG).
- At this point in time the mission museum was itself a decrepit relic of the past with no modern displays and a collection in a serious state of degradation. See for yourself [here](#).
- With a small start-up grant from the mission, I hired curatorial intern (**Diva Sumaya from LACMA**) to survey and inventory the works of art and involved **Holly Moore (Head of Conservation at the Huntington Library)** and **Laura Stalker (Deputy Director of the Huntington Library)** in the survey of the book collection.

March 2020

- Covid closed the mission and its museum indefinitely and briefly halted our work.

May 2020

- While Covid forced us to work alone at the mission, we continued working on a preliminary survey, inventory and condition report of the books (160), sculptures (15), paintings (120), baskets (23), and textiles (200) of the mission in anticipation of a new object-based museum exhibition.

July 2020 The Fire and the Deinstallation of the Existing Museum

- In the early morning of July 11, Verdugo Fire Communications received a notification of an automatic fire alarm at the Mission San Gabriel. Firefighters from the San Gabriel Fire Department were dispatched at 4:24 a.m. With the assistance of aid from surrounding cities, firefighters fought to stop the spread of the [fire](#) to the altar area and the Mission's museum but the [mission church was nearly destroyed](#). The fire was knocked down at 6:45 a.m. More than 80 members and 30 pieces of apparatus from Arcadia, Alhambra, Monrovia, Monterey Park, San Marino and South Pasadena provided assistance to this incident - including 15 engines, five ladder trucks, six battalion chiefs, three rescue ambulances and one air utility.
- I arrived at the mission at 8:30 AM the day of the fire and carried paintings and other historical artifacts from the museum for safekeeping in the rectory.
- As chair of the Mission San Gabriel museum committee, I coordinated the rescue and conservation of the paintings, sculpture, books, baskets, and textiles in the museum collection and the church in the wake of the blaze. With much of the museum's collection moved to storage onsite and smoke and water in the museum, it was a wreck as you can see [here](#).
- I interviewed and recommended the hiring of Rosa Lowinger (RLA and Associates) to oversee the restoration and identified Cooks Crating and Fine Arts Transportation in downtown Los Angeles as the offsite repository for the collection.
- Using the preliminary inventory we had created of the collection, we deinstalled the old exhibition and moved to Cook's storage the mission's entire collection of paintings, sculpture, books, baskets and other artifacts to prevent further smoke and water damage to the collection. This process took a week as all objects had to be crated and labeled.
- In November 2020, with all of the items in storage and in one place, we completed the [inventory](#) of the collection.

Phase 2: May 2021 through August 2022

Assessing the Collection, Early Designs, Funding a Research Program, and Community Outreach during COVID

- In May of 2021 Using [Ortelia Curator](#) (an exhibition design software program that I purchased and taught myself to use) I created very preliminary [elevations](#) and plans for the exhibition. (Elevations are essentially blueprints of the walls of exhibition space showing precisely what objects go where.)

2021 Building a Research Program

With COVID-19 closures and restrictions preventing travel and the museum's collections in storage, I designed a research program to keep the project going.

- I wrote a successful [proposal](#) requesting \$31,500 grant from the **California Catholic Conference (CCC)** to create a dialogue between the Tongva and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and to photograph the whole collection while it was in storage offsite. This money had been earmarked to enhance the interpretation of Native life in the missions. (Funds administered by Hackel at MSG)
- I wrote a successful [grant](#) to the **National Trust for History Preservation (NTHP)** for \$25,000 to begin to plan an exhibition at the mission that would be anchored in the material culture of the mission and tell the full story of Native life at the mission. This grant program, the [Telling the Full History Preservation Fund](#), a special NEH-funded initiative in the wake of the George Floyd social protests, was a one-time grant program to interpret and preserve historic places of importance to underrepresented communities across the U.S. The funding rate for the program was 18% or 80 out of 446 proposals funded. (Funds administered by UCR). The grant is explained here in this UCR [Press Story](#).
- UCR received a \$10,000 grant from the **Leavy Foundation** to support the creation of Native centered exhibit at the mission. (Funds administered by UCR)

With these grants I began a series of community engagement conversations with the Tongva and the ADLA and shared with them my plans for a renovated gallery that would highlight the collection and center Native life at the mission.

August 2021

- [Preservation Assessment](#) of the museum that I commissioned completed.

February, 2022

- Hired professional photographer (**John Sullivan, Head of Reprographic Services at the Huntington**) to photograph the entire mission collection offsite; this allowed scholars to study the collection from afar during COVID.

March to August 2022

- With an inventory, but without a registrar, I set out to design a Collection Management System (CMS) for MSG to catalog every item in its collection. This CMS would be central to our study of the collection and the creation and installation of an exhibit during COVID. I explored different systems and then selected [Past Perfect](#) for the mission, and customized the system based on our existing inventory. This system allows us to track each item in the collection and to create a check list for the exhibition, and to keep track of what items in the collection are on display and for how long.

- In the spring of 2022, I drafted a 15,000 word preliminary narrative for the exhibition, sketching out major themes that formed the foundation for our community engagement going forward.
- With these community conversations launched, we received the go-ahead in June 2022 to plan the new exhibition.
- In July, I proofed the 880 photographs that we had made of the entirety of the collection while it was in storage. Then, I manually uploaded the photos of all of the objects into the CMS, being certain to match them to the correct object in the previous inventory.
- The [MSG CMS](#) was up and running by the first week of July 2022 with a web version that allows historical consultants to examine specific aspects of the collection remotely.
- As of August 24, 2022, the MSG CMS contained [541 objects](#) with some 880 photos. I added another 159 historic books in the inventory, and those had another 607 associated photographs.
- I hired **Emma Thorne-Christy** as a coordinator to create a set of deadlines for the exhibition.
- Using the CMS, I identified some [35](#) objects at the mission for potential display in the exhibition. Ultimately, the show would look very different and contain few of these items.
- I also began to secure permissions to reproduce various items that are held by other institutions.
- With the NTHP grant funds at UCR I hired consultants to use the CMS and its images to study the mission's books, textiles, paintings, and Native baskets, and to help identify those that should be displayed and those that needed conservation.
- I rehired an expert on early modern books (**Holly Moore, the Huntington**), and then with the NTHP funds commissioned a series of collection reports with a leading expert on the textiles of the missions (**Maya Stansfield-Mazzi, University of Florida**), art historian (**Yve Chavez [Tongva, University of Oklahoma]**), and leading authorities on Native Baskets (**Jan Timbrook, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, and Kimberly Morales-Johnson [Tongva]**).
- I formally brought in Yve Chavez, of the Gabrielino Tongva Band of Mission Indians, as Associate Curator of the exhibition.
- I had discussions with several institutions—the **Autry Museum of the American West**, the **Santa Barbara Mission Archive-Library**, and the **Archive of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles**—about borrowing key items from their collection.
- I began to draft early versions of the didactic wall text as well as the object labels for the exhibition.

Phase 3: September 2022 to February 2023

Final Exhibition Design

- Prepared a 40 minute 3-D video demonstration of the proposed exhibition for the ADLA and submitted a comprehensive draft proposal to stakeholders (ADLA and Tongva) on September 21, 2022. A brief impasse followed. Yet, after further dialogue the ADLA agreed that a contemporary exhibition on the California missions had to discuss disease in the missions, corporal punishment, and coerced labor, and acknowledge the presence

of the Native community today at the mission. As a result of these discussions, I created multiple revisions of exhibition design after discussions with the ADLA, Native consultants, and academic researchers. Met with stakeholders to refine the narrative, the objects in the exhibition, and the historical interpretations.

- As debate swirled around the restoration work on the mission's altarpiece by RLA, I hired **Elsa Arroyo of UNAM** to study the mission's altarpiece and to determine if the current "restoration" was in any way anchored in a historical understanding of the piece as it appeared when it was sent to California in 1809.
- With my revised [elevations \(October 2022\)](#), Emma Thorne-Christie, the exhibition coordinator, created a scale [3-D model](#) of the galleries.
- Over four months, led two more complete revisions of the exhibition labels and wall text and content.
- Worked with UCR graduate student **Mary Casey** to obtain permissions to reproduce items in the show held by other institutions and to make sure that we had high-resolution images for reproduction.
- Traveled to Chancery Archives at Mission San Fernando twice to photograph documents for the exhibition.
- Worked with researchers in **Mexico's National Archive (AGN)** and the **Bancroft Library (UC Berkeley)** to obtain reproductions of primary source documents for the exhibition, especially those relating to the trial and prosecution of Toypurina a Native woman who was a co-leader of the rebellion at the mission in 1785.
- Worked with **Erik Steiner (Stanford Spatial History Lab/University of Oregon)** to create special features for the exhibition: Wall of Names memorial; Tongvaar Map, and Pobladores/LA Plaza Church visualizations.
- Updated for installation in the exhibition, a video ([From Villages to Missions: The Transformation of California's native Settlement Geography](#)) showing the movement of Natives from surrounding villages to Mission San Gabriel between 1771 and 1840.
- Initiated discussions with **Professor Adam Gilbert, Chair of USC Dept. of Musicology**, on the creation of a Sound Walk and audio enhancement of the museum galleries.
- Secured a \$2,500 grant from USC to create the Sound Walk.
- Created a timeline of the history of Mission San Gabriel's churches for inclusion in the exhibition.
- Received the collection reports from Chavez (paintings), Arroyo ([altarpiece](#)), Timbrook ([baskets](#)), Gilbert (music), and Stansfield-Mazzi ([textiles](#)).

Phase 4 March to May 2023: Final Design and Planning

- Intensified outreach, engagement, collaboration with principal stakeholders as the exhibition plans solidified.
- Selected the [exhibition display cases](#) (Zone cases) for the exhibition.
- Authored the mutually agreed upon narrative anchored in the mission's collections and the historical understandings of leaders of the Tongva Native community as well as the ADLA. (12,000 words)

- Hired **Jean Patterson (Huntington Library)** to edit and bring consistency to the narrative.
- Hired **Debi van Zyl** to oversee graphic design of the exhibit.
- Subjected that agreed upon narrative to **three more rounds of editing** to verify all the facts in the narrative and to standardize the spellings and format of the wall text and the labels. Every word in the exhibition was approved by both the ADLA and the Tongva and a board of scholars who read specific parts of the label copy for accuracy (Robert Senkewicz [University of Santa Clara, Julia Lewandoski [UCSD], David Rex Galindo [University of North Texas], John Macias [Cerritos College, and Adam Gilbert USC]
- Once the editing of the English version of the narrative was complete—all labels and wall text—I submitted it back to ADLA for a preliminary Spanish-language translation. Upon receipt of [English-Spanish version](#), I proofed two more versions of the narrative, made substantive suggestions regarding the translation, and engaged Spanish-language experts **David Rex Galindo (University of North Texas) and Rose Marie Beebe (University of Santa Clara)** to proof the text.
- With the Spanish-language text perfected, I submitted the Spanish version of the translated text to **Debi van Zyl** for layout.
- Consulted with Stansfield-Mazzi to determine which chasuble we should display.
- Identified, hired and met with **Ann Svenson**, a textile conservator to write a [treatment plan](#) to stabilize the chasuble for display and even future use by the mission during services.
- Secured funding to assist in the interpretation of the retablo.
- Began conversations with Yve Chavez, of the University of Oklahoma and the Gabrielino Tongva Band of Mission Indians on the design and installation of the [video](#) that featured contemporary images of the Native community.
- Using Ortelia Curator again I created new elevations and plans for the redesigned exhibition that facilitated the work of Emma, our exhibition coordinator, who then created [high quality elevations](#) to be used during installation of the exhibit.
- Continued to work with UCR graduate student Mary Casey to obtain permissions to reproduce items in the show that are held by other institutions and to make sure that we had high-resolution images for reproduction.
- Worked with John Sullivan to obtain museum quality images of documents to be included in the exhibition as well as photographic images of all of the baptism, marriage, and burial records of Mission San Gabriel held at MSF for the MSG's own future archival collection.
- With Erik Steiner finalized maps and infographics: [Colonial California, 1823](#) for gallery 2, [Tongvaar Map](#) for gallery 2, and [Origins of the Pobladores/LA Plaza Church infographic](#) for gallery 4.
- With Adam Gilbert, mapped out and recorded the audio components of the exhibition. With Gilbert's musicians, we recorded Spanish sacred music performed live for us at the mission for use in the mission exhibition: [Lauda Sion](#) (a 13th c. hymn written by St. Thomas Aquinas), [Missa Catalana](#) (Mass composed in 18th c. California for the missions), [Para dar Luz](#) (18th century Spanish guitar ballad), and [Vexilla Regis](#) (a 6th-century Latin hymn). Remastered an early 20th century version of the [Alabado](#) (Song of Praise) recorded in the late 19th century.

- Worked with Adam Gilbert and Yve Chavez to engage Tongva consultants to voice various elements of the exhibition. Recorded at the mission an original [Tongva vocabulary](#) and the [Lord's Prayer in Tongva](#). Remastered a Native [Toki Toki](#) song from the 19th century perhaps in Gabrielino.
- Worked with the [Autry Native Voices](#) program to hire Native American equity actors to voice my translation of Toypurina's trial transcript in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) for audio for the exhibition.
- Contracted with **Fernando Feliu-Moggi (University of Colorado)** to voice letters of Serra with a proper [Mallorcan](#) accent and in [English](#).
- Oversaw the [conservation](#) and framing of the liturgical manuscript.
- Oversaw the [restoration](#) and [repair](#) of the 18th century confessional booth.
- Organized and oversaw the [conservation](#) of the books to be displayed in the exhibition.
- Oversaw the creation of [cradles](#) for books to be displayed.
- Organized and oversaw the conservation of the [baskets](#) to be displayed in the exhibition, and the [mounts](#).
- Organized and oversaw the cleaning and conservation work on the paintings to be displayed in the exhibition.
- Working with Erik Steiner, I redesigned the [Wall of Names](#) for Gallery 2 and created the [Basket of Names](#) commemorative video installation for the Native American room, and all the maps and infographics for the exhibition.
- Organized and funded a [mini-conference](#) on the material culture of Mission San Gabriel where consultants presented their findings in advance of the opening.

Phase 5 June 2023: Installation

- As of June 1, 2023, Emma the exhibition coordinator was out of contract and off the project.
- In her absence, I supervised the installation during the entire month of June. This entailed supervising the hanging of paintings, the installation of the chasuble, baskets, bell and branding iron, the books, the labels, the reproductions, and all wall text in all 8 galleries. I also supervised the installation of three videos. There are 8 galleries encompassing 1,500 square feet and the exhibition includes 36 reproductions, three videos, two infographics, 30 original artifacts, 12 audio components and all text is in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.
- Worked with Yve Chavez and Wilson Cetina group to reprint items in the show and to make last minute changes demanded by the Tongva.
- Oversaw the printing and [final graphics](#) of the show ([Wilson Cetina Group](#)).
- Worked to obtain lighting and then to properly light the exhibition.
- Oversaw the translation of all label and wall text into Vietnamese.
- Installed the audio files and the translated labels on QR files.
- Helped plan the opening events attended by Tongva representatives and the Archbishop of Los Angeles.

Phase 6 June 17 to September 30, 2023: Opening and Press

- **“Mission San Gabriel Arcángel, 1771-1900: Natives, Missionaries, and the Birth of Catholicism in Los Angeles”** opened June 27, 2023.
- Worked extensively with local media to tell the story of the mission and the rebirth of the museum.
- [Extensive press coverage of the show](#) in the days following its opening. Feature stories in the [Los Angeles Times](#), [UCR Today](#) in print and on [Video](#), and numerous other outlets.
- Oversaw the creation of a [photographic record](#) of the exhibit once fully installed.
- In July, August, and September the exhibition counted nearly 6,000 individual visitors not including tour groups of 4th grade children and their teacher.