THE FRANCISCAN MISSION BUILDINGS OF CALIFORNIA. BY GEORGE WHARTON JAMES

The article now offered upon the Missions of California, is one of a series to be written for The Craftsman by Mr. George Wharton James. This writer purposed at first to confine himself to the subject of the present article, but in consequence of the rapid rise of his enthusiasm, he decided to extend his limits to include the Missions of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. For nearly twenty years, Mr. James has been a student of these localities, but during the publication of his papers, he will revisit them in order that no detail of general or specific importance be omitted from his work.

The second article, to appear in the February issue of the magazine, will, of necessity, attract a wide circle of readers, both lay and professional, since it will treat:

“The Influence of the Mission Style upon the Modern Civic and Domestic Architecture of California.”

MANY and diverse are the elements, which have gone into the making of that “State of the Golden Gate” of which Americans generally are so proud. It has been the stage upon which strangely different actors have played their part—important or insignificant—and left their impress where they played. It has been a composite canvas upon which painters of every school have practised their art: a vivid mass of color here, a touch there, a single stroke of the brush yonder. Then, too, look at it as you will, stage or canvas, it had a marvellous natural setting. Curtains, side-wings, drops, scenes, accessories, suitable for every play, adequate for every requirement. Tragedy? Great mountains, awful snow storms, trackless sand-wastes, fearful deserts, limitless canyons, more ocean line than any other of the North American States, and the densest forests. Comedy? Semi-tropical verdure, orange blossoms, carpets of flowers, delicate waterfalls, the singing of a thousand varieties of birds, the gentlest zephyrs, the bluest of blue skies. What wonder, then, as its history is studied, as a whole or in parts, that it is unusually fascinating, and that it presents features of unique interest?

The country itself and its aboriginal population were long a source of attraction to the Spanish conquerors of the New World. Cabrillo and Viscaíno had sailed up its coast; Alarcon up its gulf and strange Eastern river, now known as the Colorado, and, just about the time the birth agony of a new country was beginning on the Western shores of the Atlantic, events were shaping on the Eastern shores of the Pacific which were materially to affect the ultimate destiny of the as yet unborn nation. It is well to remember these two simultaneous spheres of activity: each working unknown to the other, and separated by a vast continent which was eventually to be one undivided country: great battlefields, pregnant
Figure I. San Juan Capistrano: cloisters

Figure II. Santa Barbara: façade
events, majestic participants, totally differing consequences. On the Atlantic, Patrick Henry, Payne, Jefferson, Washington, Benedict Arnold, André, Howe, Cornwallis, Burgoyne, Continentals, English, Hessians, Bunker Hill, Boston Bay, Trenton, Yorktown, the Declaration of Independence, the abolition of the colonies, the birth of the United States: all these are keywords and names which bring before us the greatest history-making epochs of that century.

On the Pacific, names and events, less important, yet full of dignity and power: Serra, Crespi, Palou, Portala, Fages, San Diego, San Francisco, Monterey, San Gabriel Archangel, San Juan Capistrano, and the aborigines of a score of different linguistic families.

The briefest historical outline of the founding of the missions is all that can be given here. The Jesuits had planted missions in Baja (Lower) California, now known to us as the Peninsula, and belonging to Mexico. In the religious controversies of the time the Jesuits were expelled from Mexico. The Dominicans and Franciscans were allowed to remain. To them naturally fell the care of the deserted Missions, and the work of founding others already projected. To the Franciscans Alta (upper) California, or what is now the state of California, was allotted. In the search for a suitable president, the choice of the College of San Fernando, in the City of Mexico (the head of the Franciscan order in the new world), fell upon Padre Junipero Serra, a
Figure IV. San Luis Rey: façade showing a fine example of the “stepped” pediment
Spanish priest of great eloquence, intense fervor, missionary zeal and general capability. The expedition for the christianizing and colonizing of California set out by both land and sea in various divisions. Three vessels sailed respectively on January 9, February 15, and June 16, 1769, only two of which reached their destination; the third being lost and never again heard from. Two land expeditions started, in one of which was Serra, who, although suffering terribly from an ulcerated leg, persisted in walking all the way. On July 1, 1769, Serra reached San Diego, and on the 16th of the same month founded the mission of that name. Then, in as rapid succession as possible, the other missions were established, the Indians brought under control, and the active work of christianizing them was begun.

The picture is a fascinating one. A handful of priests, hampered by long gowns, in a far away, strange land, surrounded by a vast population of aborigines neither as wild and ferocious, nor as dull and stupid as various writers have described them, yet brave, courageous, liberty-loving and self-willed enough to render their subjugation a difficult matter. With a courage that was sublime in its very boldness, and which, better than ten thousand verbal eulogies, shows the self-centered confidence and mental poise of the men, this handful of priests grappled with their task, brought the vast horde of untamed Indians under subjection, trained them to systematic work, and, in a few short years, so thoroughly accomplished what they had determined, that the Mission building was erected by these former savages, who were made useful workers in a large diversity of fields.

For the buildings themselves—let the pictures, in the main, make their own explanation. It will be well, however, to call attention to some distinctive features. As a rule, the Missions were built in the form of a hollow square: the Church representing the façade, with the priests’ quarters and the houses for the Indians forming the wings. These quarters were generally colonnaded or cloistered, with a series of semicircular arches, and roofed with red tiles (See Figure I). In the interior was the patio or court, which often contained a fountain and a garden. Upon this patio opened all the apartments: those of the fathers and of the major-domo, and the guest-rooms, as well as the workshops, school-rooms and storehouses.

The Indians’ quarters were generally the most secluded parts of the premises. The young girls were separated rigidly from the boys and youths; the first named being under the guardianship of staid and trustworthy Indian women. The young charges were taught to weave, spin, sew, embroider, make bread, cook, and to engage generally in domestic tasks, and were not allowed to leave the “convent” until they married.

From Figure II, showing the façade of the Santa Barbara Mission, a few details may be noted. Here the engaged columns form a striking feature, there being six of them, three on either side of the main entrance. The capital here used is the Ionic volute. The entablature is somewhat Grecian, the decoration being a variant of the Greek fret. The pediment is simple, with heavy dentals under the cornice. A niche containing a statue occupies the center.
Figure V. Santa Inez: façade
The first story of the towers is a high, plain, solid wall with a simply molded cornice, composed of few, but heavy and simple members, upon which rest the second and third stories, each receding about half the thickness of the walls below. Each story is furnished with a cornice similar to the one below, and the two upper stories are pierced with semi-circular arches for bells. The walls of the second story are four feet three inches in thickness, and the lower walls are sustained by massive buttresses at the sides. Both towers are surmounted by semi-circular domes of masonry construction with cement finish, above which rests the lantern surmounted by the cross. This lantern is a marked feature of Mission construction. It is seen above the domes at San Buenaventura, San Luis Rey, San Xavier del Bac (Arizona), as well as on one or two of the old churches at San Antonio, Texas.

Another Mission feature is the addition to the pediment. This consists of a part of the main front wall raised above the pediment in pedestal form, and tapering in small steps to the center, upon which rests a large iron cross. This was undoubtedly a simple contrivance for effectively supporting and raising the Emblem of Salvation, in order thereby more impressively to attract the attention of the Indian beholder.

This illustration also shows the style of connecting the priests’ quarters in the manner before described. There is a colonnade with fourteen semi-circular arches, set back from the main façade, and tiled, as are the roofs of all the buildings.

The careful observer may note another distinctive feature which is seldom absent from the Mission domes. This is the series of steps at each “corner” of the half dome.

Several eminent architects have told me that the purpose of these steps is unknown, but to my simple, lay mind it is evident that they were placed there purposely by the clerical architects to afford easy access to the surmounting cross; so that any accident to this sacred symbol could be speedily remedied. It must be remembered that the fathers were skilled in reading some phases of the Indian mind. They knew that an accident to the Cross might work a complete revolution in the minds of the superstitious Indians whose conversion they sought. Hence common, practical sense demanded speedy and easy access to the cross in case such emergency arose.

Entirely different, yet clearly of the same school, is the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel. The Mission itself was founded in 1771, but the stone church here pictured was not completed until 1785. In this the striking feature is the campanile, from which the tower at the Glenwood Hotel, Riverside, was undoubtedly modeled. This construction consists of a solid wall, pierced at irregular intervals, with arches built to correspond to the size of the bells which were to be hung within them. The bells being of varying sizes, there could be no regularity in the arrangement of the arches, yet the whole bell tower is beautiful in outline and harmonious in general effect. On the left, the wall is stepped back irregularly up to the center bell-aperture, each step capped with a simple projecting molded cornice, as at Santa Barbara. The upper aperture is crowned with a plain masonry elliptical arch, upon which rests a wrought iron finial in the form of a cross.

The walls of San Gabriel are supported by ten buttresses with pyramidal copings.
Figure VI. Santa Inez: side wall showing buttress construction
(see Figure III). Projecting ledges divide the pyramids into three unequal portions. In some of these buttresses are niches, embellished with pilasters which support a complete entablature. At the base of these niches is a projecting sill, undoubtedly a device for the purpose of giving greater space or depth in which to place statues. On the concave surfaces of these niches and the entablatures it is possible that the architects designed to have frescoes, as such decoration is often found on both exterior and interior walls, although sometimes it has been covered by vandal white-washers. In several of the Missions, the spandrels of the arches show evidence of having been decorated with paintings, fragments of which still remain.

Figure IV represents San Luis Rey, by many regarded as the king of California Mission structures. In this illustration will be seen one of the strongest features of this style, and one that, as I shall show, in my following article, has had a wide influence upon our modern architecture. This feature consists of the stepped and curved sides of the pediment.

I know no commonly received architectural term to designate this, yet it is found at San Luis Rey, San Antonio de Padua, Santa Inez, and at other places. At San Luis Rey, it is the dominant feature of the extension wall to the right of the façade of the main building.

On this San Luis pediment occurs a lantern which architects regard as misplaced.
Figure VII. Church of San Carlos Borromeo: El Carmel Valley, near Monterey
Yet the Fathers’ motive for its presence is clear: that is, the uplifting of the Sign whereby the Indians could alone find salvation.

In the façade at San Luis there are three niches for statues: one on either side of the doorway, and one in the center of the pediment. It will be noticed that the façade is divided into three unequal portions. The ends of the two outer walls of the main building are faced with pilasters which support the cornice of the pediment. Below the cornice and above the entablature is a circular window. The entablature is supported by engaged columns, upon which rests a heavily molded cornice; the whole forming a pleasing architectural effect about the doorway, the semi-circular arch of which is especially fine.

It will be noticed by reference to Figure IV that on the towers at Santa Barbara there is a chamfer at each corner. At San Luis Rey this detail is different, in that the chamfer is replaced by an entire flat surface. The tower thus becomes an irregular octagon, with four greater and four lesser sides. These smaller sides answer the same decorative purpose as the chamfer at Santa Barbara. The same idea is also worked out in the dome, which is not a hemisphere, but which prolongs the exaggerated chamfers of the stories below.

There is little doubt that the original design provided for a second tower to be erected at San Luis Rey, uniform with the existing one.

Santa Inez, shown in Figures V and VI, presents pleasing features. Here the façade is exceedingly simple; the bell tower being a plain wall pierced as at San Gabriel. The same pyramidal feature, used here as an ornament for the four corners, and the curved pediment please the eye, and satisfy the desire for strength and grace. The rear view, Figure VI, shows the massiveness of the walls and the extra reinforcement of them by means of the buttresses.

While simple and chaste, the two churches of San Carlos Borromeo—one in the ancient town of Monterey, and the other seven miles away in El Carmelo Valley—have a peculiar interest and fascination, since they were the home-churches of the saintly Serra himself. At the Valley church, Figure VII, lovingly called Carmelo by the neighboring people, Serra lived, worked, prayed, died and was buried. By Padre Casanova it was restored some fifteen years ago, and the body of Serra was sought, identified and recovered. Here the egg-shaped dome, surmounted by an ornament holding up the cross, is the principal architectural attraction, although the starred window of the façade, under the semi-circular cornice, and the ornamental doorway are also striking and pleasing features.

At San Carlos de Monterey the façade and tower are of entirely different character, although superficial observers remark upon the similarity of these features to those of the Valley church. The tiled pyramidal covering of the tower is especially pleasing as is seen in Figure VIII.

Padre Mestris, the lineal successor of Padre Serra in the control of the spiritual and temporal affairs of this Mission, is now contemplating an addition to the church at Monterey. His plan is to build a house for himself and his associates, and to connect it with the church by means of an arched and tiled corridor; the whole to be in harmony with the existing architecture. A distin-
guished firm of architects has submitted a plan showing the new buildings on a front line with the old Mission. It is probable, however, that the additional buildings will be thrown back, in order that the church façade may not be impaired in effect. If erected as the architects have suggested, in line with the church façade, the result would be to decrease the importance of the main structure. As this would be an unfortunate condition, Padre Mestrís is resolved to lose space by retreating the new buildings, as he can thereby retain the charm and dignity of the old Mission.

I have thus, in a hasty, and in my judgment—inadequate manner, given to the readers of The Craftsman a glance into the mere existence of these Mission structures. Later articles will, I trust, enlarge the horizon.

In conclusion, let me ask a few moments in which to make reply to those who ignorantly reproach the work of those wise and devoted priests.

It is often asked by those who would resent classification with superficial thinkers: "What good did the Mission Fathers accomplish? Their aim, perhaps, was high, but what actual work did they perform? Where are the Indians? How were they benefited?" And these questions are as often carelessly answered as thoughtlessly asked. It is contended that the uselessness of the work of the Mission Fathers is clearly shown by the rapid abasement of the Indians into the frightful mire of sensuality and intemperance, as soon as restraining hands were removed from them.

According to the most conservative estimates, there must have been many thousand
Indians under the control of the Missions, at the beginning of this century. To-day, how many are there? I have spent long days in the different Mission localities, arduously searching for Indians, but oftentimes only to fail of my purpose. In and about San Francisco, there is not one to be found. At San Carlos Borromeo, in both Monterey and the Carmelo Valley, except for a few half-breeds, no one of Indian blood can be discovered. It is the same at San Miguel, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara. At Pala, that romantic chapel, where once the visiting priest from San Luis Rey found a congregation of several hundreds awaiting his ministrations, the land was recently purchased from white men, by the United States Indian Commission, as a new home for the evicted Palatingwa Indians of Warner’s Ranch. These latter Indians, in recent interviews with me, have pertinently asked: “Where did the white men get this land, so they could sell it to the Government for us? Indians lived here many centuries before a white man had ever seen the ‘land of the sundown sea.’ When the ‘long gowns’ first came here, there were many Indians at Pala. Now they are all gone. Where? And do we know that before long we shall not be driven out, and be gone, as they were driven out and are gone?”

At San Luis Rey and San Diego, there are a few scattered families, but very few, and most of these have fled far back into the desert, or to the high mountains, as far as possible out of reach of the civilization that demoralizes and exterminates them.

A few scattered remnants are all that remain.

Let us discover why.

The system of the Mission Fathers was patriarchal, paternal. Certain it is that the Indians were largely treated as if they were children. No one questions or denies this statement. Few question that the Indians were happy under this system, and all will concede that they made wonderful progress in the so-called arts of civilization. From crude savagery they were lifted by the training of the Fathers into usefulness and productiveness. They retained their health, vigor and virility. They were, by necessity perhaps, but still undeniably, chaste, virtuous, temperate, honest and reasonably truthful. They were good fathers and mothers, obedient sons and daughters, amenable to authority, and respectful to the counsels of old age.

All this and more, may unreservedly be said for the Indians while they were under the control of the Fathers. That there were occasionally individual cases of harsh treatment is possible. The most loving and indulgent parents are now and again ill-tempered, fretful or nervous. The Fathers were men subject to all the limitations of other men. Granting these limitations and making due allowance for human imperfection, the rule of the Fathers must still be admired for its wisdom and commended for its immediate results.

Now comes the order of secularization, and a little later the domination of the Americans. Those opposed to the control of the Fathers are to see the Indians free. They are to be “removed from under the irksome restraint of cold-blooded priests who have held them in bondage not far removed from slavery.” They are to have unrestrained liberty, the broadest and fullest intercourse with the great American people,
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the white, Caucasian American, not the dark-skinned Mexican.

The authority of the priesthood being abolished, this beneficent intercourse begins. Now see the rapid elevation in morals, honor, chastity, integrity and all the virtues! Gaze with amazement and delight upon the glorious blessings conferred upon the weak by the strong race! Thank God, with up-lifted eyes and hand, for all the mental and spiritual graces that begin to pour into the minds and souls of those benighted heathen, when they are removed from the benumbing influences of superstitious and ignorant Catholicism. Yes, indeed, let us sing paeans of joyous praises for the good that the aborigines now hold in free and absolute mastery.

Ah! hypocrites and vile! How I could wish for the power of Shakspere to show you in your true light. How would I pour upon you such curses as should make tame and insipid those which Lady Anne, Queen Margaret and the Duchess of York pronounced upon Richard of Gloster. Richard was not so vile a murderer, so ruthless a destroyer, so black-hearted a villain, so contemptible a plotter, so mean a layer of snares as the white race has been whereby to trap, entangle and exterminate the dusky race whose lands they coveted and determined to possess.

Had they been left in the hands of the Mission Fathers, the Indians would slowly but surely have progressed to racial manhood. Given over to our own tender mercies, they have been hurried down an incline smeared by white men with every known form of slippery evil, in order that their destruction might be the more rapid and complete. Until we are able, nationally, to cleanse our own skirts from the blood of these trustful, weak, helpless aborigines, let us not insult the memory of the Mission Fathers by asking, parrot-like: “For what end?”

IN connection with Mr. James’s article upon the Spanish Missions of California, it seems fitting to print the verses of Bret Harte, which, at one time often heard upon the tongues of the people, are now scarcely ever recalled. Written by a true child of Nature, with small care for literary art or precision, their harmonious quality attracted the attention of the great French composer, Charles Gounod, who set them to music.

THE MISSION BELLS OF MONTEREY

O bells that rang, O bells that sang
Above the martyr’s wilderness,
Till from that reddened coast-line sprang
The Gospel seed to cheer and bless.
What are your garnered sheaves to-day?
O Mission bells! Eleison bells!
O Mission bells of Monterey!

O bells that die, so far, so nigh,
Come back once more across the sea;
Not with the zealot’s furious cry,
Not with the creed’s austerity;
Come with His love alone to stay,
O Mission bells! Eleison bells!
O Mission bells of Monterey!