**VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF JUNÍPERO SERRA ACROSS THE CENTURIES**

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**Resumen**: A lo largo de las centurias las representaciones de fray Junípero Serra, se han venido reproduciendo tanto en Estados Unidos, como en México y Mallorca. Por ello, se plantea analizar algunas de esas representaciones, así como las descripciones que las primeras biografías realizaron de Serra.

**Palabras clave**: Junípero Serra, México, California, misiones, colonización.

**Summary**: Throughout the centuries, representations of Father Junípero Serra have been reproduced in the United States, Mexico and Mallorca. Therefore, it is proposed to analyze some of these representations, as well as the descriptions that the first biographies made of Serra.

**Keywords**: Junípero Serra, Mexico, California, missions, colonization.

Today, Junípero Serra is among the most widely recognized figures in California history. He is second to none for the period before 1850. Representations of Serra appear in astounding places: comic books and coins, postcards and postage stamps, highways and high schools, and spirits, namely, wine and gin, tequila and whiskey. His name is also attached to a mountain peak, and yes, even, for a while, to a municipal landfill on the San Francisco Peninsula. Landfills and whiskey, are ephemeral, but other representations, such as in sculpture and paintings, are meant to endure, and for more than two centuries Serra has been represented and remembered in stone and bronze and on canvas. Curiously though, while historians know a lot about Serra’s life, we know very little about what he looked like. The only precise description of Serra’s actual physical appearance comes from the documents approving his travel to Mexico from Spain in 1749. At that time he was described as “thirty-five years old, of medium height, dark complexion, scant beard, and dark eyes and dark hair.”[[1]](#footnote-1)There is no evidence that he ever sat for a portrait or that upon his death anyone created a mask of his face or a sketch of his features, even though some have speculated that that was the case. Thus, as far as is known, no existing “portraits” of Serra can be said to represent a true likeness of the physical features of the man. Nevertheless, key examples from the last 230 years of art that depict Serra indicate changing notions of Serra over time and how successive generations of Serra sculptures and paintings have presented vastly different ideals to very different audiences. As I am going to suggest, there is an enormous and growing difference between the images of Serra created in his day and those of the last century and those of today. Put simply, the Serra that we see today in sculpture and on canvas is not how his contemporaries saw him in real life and depicted him for posterity. More important, the more recent the representations of Serra, the further removed they are from the actual man they seek to memorialize.

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The basic chronology of Serra’s life is clear and has been the subject of numerous biographies.[[2]](#footnote-2)Miquel Joseph Serra was born in Mallorca on November 24, 1713. At an early age, Serra moved to Palma and a began studying for the priesthood. When he joined the Franciscans as a young man he took the name Junípero in honor of one of the great followers of Saint Francis of Assisi. Serra rose quickly through the ranks of the Franciscans in Mallorca and before long held an important professorship at the Lullian University in Palma. But in 1749, Serra felt called to the life of an apostolic missionary, and he soon left Spain for Mexico, where he arrived on January 1, 1750. He spent nearly a decade in the New Spain’s Serra Gorda mountains evangelizing and building missions. In 1768 he was posted in Baja California where the Franciscans took over missions after the Jesuit’s expulsion. He soon had his eyes set on lands further north, and in the summer of 1769 he was at the head of a colonizing party that sought to claim Alta California for Spain. Before his death in 1784, he would oversee the establishment of nine missions in Alta California and create the momentum for the eventual creation of a dozen more. Under his supervision, missionaries baptized thousands of Indians, but a huge number died of diseases, setting off a catastrophic population decline among California’s natives. For his evangelical work, Serra was canonized by the Pope in September of 2015.

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The first painting of Serra, *Fray Junípero Serra recibe el viático*, was created in 1785, just one year after his death. Two weeks after Serra died in late August, 1784, his devoted follower, friend, and fellow Mallorcan and Franciscan, Francisco Palou, who was with Serra when he died, wrote to Fray Juan Sancho, a Mallorcan and the Guardian of the College of San Fernando. Palou proposed to Sancho that a painting be created of Serra, and he was quite specific about what it should contain: “The most edifying scene would be to have him wearing his stole and kneeling before the altar of Our Lady, with the Child in her arms, and a priest vested with a cape before the altar, with a small host for giving him the viaticum, and coming from the lips of the dead father in verse *Tantum Ergo*, with many Indians and Leather-jackets with their candles in their hands.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Sancho looked with favor upon the project, and he enlisted an another Mallorcan, Rafael Verger, who was at that time Bishop of Nuevo León, to pay for the painting. The artist was Mariano Guerrero, about whom little is known today. The painting currently hangs in Mexico City, in the country’s Museo Nacional de Historia.

In this image, Serra is depicted as he was in his last years: small, sickly, anticipating death. This paintingshows Serra as he no doubt wished to be remembered and how commemorated him in his hagiographical account: publically 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 death bed, walked to the mission chapel, and, as we see, in a final act of public devotion, received Final Communion. This representation of his final days before his death 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.

(fig.1)

The second 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 hagiography of Serra written by his devoted Mallorcan colleague, Francisco Palou.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of the visual representations of Serra that survive from the 18th century, this one is by far the grittiest, the most accurate, and the most complicated. But before we discuss its details, a bit of context is in order. These sorts of engravings were typical of chronicles of the lives of missionaries published in Spain and Mexico in the 17th and 18th centuries. There are numerous examples of this genre, and among the most iconic is the representation of Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús, a Spanish missionary who was among the first Franciscans to establish missions in Texas and other frontier regions of New Spain.[[5]](#footnote-5)In this engraving Margil de Jesús brandishes a crucifix in his right hand and gestures with his left hand towards the Indian who surround him; the Indians clutch their own breasts, spiritually moved and awakened it seems by the padre’s words and gestures. Other leading figures of the evangelization of New Spain, such as María de Jesús de Ágreda and Saint Francis Solano[[6]](#footnote-6) were represented in a very similar manner, with a crucifix in one hand and gesturing towards the unconverted with the other.

(fig.2)

In the 1787 engraving of Serra that opens Palou’s hagiography, 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 own era 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. But unlike the aforementioned image of Solano, wherein he holds a baptismal shell, Serra here grips 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--the 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 realize that they are small, sinful, and worthless. They clutch their hearts. They avert their eyes. Serra rises above them all, head in the clouds. Above him circle birds, perhaps representations of saved souls. Serra here is the savior. His tunic surrounds him and he appears impenetrable, a metaphor for the strength of his inner faith. Serra stands ready--rock in one hand, crucifix in the other--and chains and tapers at this feet--to punish his own body to atone for the sins of others, all in the name of the crucified Christ. Palou’s hagiography of Serra was widely read in Mallorca and the missionary colleges of New Spain, and it helped to foster a new generation of Franciscans who came to the missions of California.

A few years after Serra’s death, and perhaps largely inspired by Palou’s writings about Serra, the city of Palma commissioned a painting for its town hall, where it hangs today along with the portraits of other illustrious Mallorcans. Here we see the elderly Serra in his final days, praying with his Palou.

(fig.3)

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During the nineteenth century, Serra fell into relative obscurity in his homeland, in Mexico, and in California, and thus he was the subject of few if any portraits or sculptures. Finely worked sculptural representations of Serra, however, began to appear in the late nineteenth century and reached their heyday in the first decades of the 20th century when Serra was achieving great fame and renewed notoriety across California. The very first public sculpture and memorial devoted to Serra in California was installed in Monterey in 1891. It was commissioned in 1889 by Jane Stanford, wife of railroad tycoon and leading politician Leland Stanford. The Stanfords were frequent visitors to the Monterey region and thus were familiar with Serra’s work and his years there. When in Monterey the Stanfords stayed at the luxurious Hotel Del Monte, which had been opened in 1880 by Charles Crocker, one of Stanford’s business associates. In the 1880s Jane Stanford, like many visitors to the region, took frequent trips to the nearby ruins of Mission San Carlos, and as a result of those visits she became an early benefactor of efforts to restore Mission San Carlos and make known the life of Serra, who was buried in the mission’s ruined chapel.

At some point Mrs. Stanford became interested not only in rebuilding the mission but in commemorating Serra with a granite statue. Most likely, through her association with Father Angelo D. Casanova at the mission, she learned of the story of Serra’s arrival in Monterey in early June 1770. And she seems to have decided not to commemorate Serra as the Catholic missionary priest he was but rather as a courageous American pioneer. This choice is revealed in where she wanted the monument placed--she chose to place the monument not at the mission, but rather at Serra’s landing place in Monterey, where he established a presidio-mission complex on June 3, 1770.

According to Serra’s own writings, on that day in 1770, the padre performed a Mass and took possession of Monterey in the name of the Spanish Crown.[[7]](#footnote-7) To commemorate Serra’s arrival in Monterey, and his taking possession of Alta California along with Gaspár de Portola, Jane Stanford contracted with the Western Granite & Marble Company, paying them $5,000 in gold coin to create a life-size figure of Father Junípero Serra. Serra, when he arrived in Monterey, was 56, and not in great health. He was a small man, suffering from an ulcerated leg and occasional chest pain. The statue, however, depicts a healthy, youthful man, around six-feet tall emerging from a boat. Oddly, it is as if Serra has made the journey to Monterey alone, and he seems to have a blank stare and a placid smile. Serra wears his ceremonial vestments, just as he did on June 3, 1770. With his left hand he holds his bible against his heart and with his right hand makes a peaceful gesture. Part of the stone sculpture was a large cross, inscribed June 3, 1770; notably, it remained in the boat. The base of the monument listed missions founded by Serra, and it was dedicated to Serra, “A PHILANTHROPIST SEEKING THE WELFARE OF THE HUMBLEST, A HERO DARING AND READY TO SACRIFICE HIMSELF FOR THE GOOD OF HIS FELLOW BEINGS, A FAITHFUL SERVANT OF HIS MASTER.”

(fig.4)

The actual model for this Serra here was a local Franciscan priest, Father Clementine Deymann, who was assigned to an orphanage in nearby Watsonville. Deymann was not just a Serra enthusiast, but he was an impressive physical specimen. On June 3, 1891, the day the statue was unveiled, thousands of people thronged to Monterey.

(fig.5)

No doubt many of the 5,000 people who attended were encouraged by the special excursion rate of $3.00 for a roundtrip fare between San Francisco and Monterey offered by Stanford’s Southern Pacific Railroad. Immediately, the monument drew criticism: it was poorly located, and too small, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which would have preferred “a marble monument large enough to be discernable from out at sea.” In the words of a sculptor whose views were printed in the *Chronicle*, “It is unworthy of being classed as a work of art. . . . The expression of the face of the father as portrayed in the statue can only be described as vacuous. It is absolutely devoid of intelligent expression and suggests more the Easter-island monolith that the face of a man whose noble soul must have given evidence of its greatness in his countenance. The head, especially at the back, is very poorly formed; the neck is too long and there is no room for brains.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

While the statue in Monterey may have been bad art, the program for the monument’s dedication was more successfully executed. It unambiguously linked Serra to the United States’ Founding Fathers. Notably, there were no leading Catholics in the ceremony; there was no Spanish or Mexican band, nothing to complicate Serra’s arrival on the American stage when he left that boat and stepped into the spotlight as aFounding Father. A United States flag was draped over the statue before it was shown to the public. When the flag was pulled back and the monument was unveiled the band played “Hail Columbia!,” a highly popular and patriotic song that was composed in 1789 for the first inauguration of George Washington. The first lines of the hymn are as follows:

Hail Columbia, happy land!

Hail, ye heroes, heav'n-born band,

Who fought and bled in freedom's cause,

Who fought and bled in freedom's cause,

Those are stirring words, but not ones that had anything at all to do with Serra’s own life. His mission in June, 1770, was to secure Monterey, not for liberty, but for the absolute monarchy of Charles III. True to form, the festivities concluded with the playing of the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Serra’s Catholicism was little emphasized that day, and it is almost as if the sculptural Serra, being not nearly as brainless as the *Chronicle’s* art critic thought, looked around before emerging from the boat, read his audience well, adopted that blank stare in incomprehension of the spectacle of his unveiling, and wisely decided to leave his large cross in the boat.

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Over the first two decades of the twentieth century, a whole series of additional monuments were raised in honor of Serra. The most important Serra sculpture installed in those years was a very dramatic representation of Serra placed in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in 1907. It was the work of Douglas Tilden, a deaf-mute sculptor who won several important commissions in the San Francisco Bay Area at the turn of the twentieth century. Tilden seems to have had as a patron James D. Phelan, the wealthy and Catholic San Franciscan, who was mayor between 1897 and 1902. Unlike the poorly received statue in Monterey that was criticized for its small size, this statue is larger than life. Serra stands nine-and-a half feet tall, and is elevated by a twenty-foot pedestal. And unlike the Serra monument in Monterey, this one clearly commemorates Serra the priest. Serra here carries a cross and seems to be delivering a religious benediction; his face suggests nothing if not religious exaltation. Three thousand people attended its unveiling, and speaker after speaker noted that Serra was the first and greatest of pioneers and that he, through his dedication and courage, had saved California from barbarism. Archbishop Patrick William Riordan declared that the statue was magnificent, and the ceremonies concluded with a prayer by a Franciscan.[[9]](#footnote-9)

(fig. 6)

As big and bold as this statue was, within a decade at least one artist in San Francisco was calling for an even bigger and bolder commemoration of Serra. In 1915, San Francisco was the site of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, a sort of World’s Fair. The exposition had many purposes: among the most important was to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal and demonstrate that San Francisco had rebounded from the destruction of the catastrophic 1906 earthquake and fire. Thinking big--supersizing if you will--was part of these fairs. In 1911, one local artist, Lewis Rothe, proposed a colossal Serra statue based on Tilden’s recently installed work; this was a statue so gigantic that it would have towered over the exhibition. Rothe proposed that the statue rise from a group of buildings dedicated to the California missions and that it should be equal if not greater in size than the colossus of Rhodes or “the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor.” It would be cast in bronze.

(fig.7)

A ring of powerful lights would illuminate the cross, form a halo for Serra, and serve as a beacon for ships out at sea. Stairways within the statue would allow visitors to ascend to the top of the statue and gain a magnificent view of the ocean and the city. In what might have been a desperate bid for relevance, the statue was to also contain chimes to warn mariners in foggy weather. Serra would have been pleased with this statue, as literally all of San Francisco would have lived “beneath the bell.” Rothe’s reach exceeded his grasp, and the colossal Serra was never built, but it was considered a serious enough plan to be front-page news in San Francisco, and it was discussed by the commission planning the Exposition.[[10]](#footnote-10)

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In the early 1920s a whole series of Serra statues and monuments were dedicated throughout California, but 1931 was a watershed year for the commemoration of Serra, for it was then that a larger-than-life statue of Serra created by Ettore Cadorin was unveiled in the U.S. Capitol. Nearly nine feet tall--and situated on a three-and-a-half-foot marble pedestal, the statue of Serra in the nation’s capital is impressive. Serra’s posture and heavenly gaze suggest his confidence, his inner strength, and his higher purpose. On the day that Serra was installed in Statuary Hall, speaker after speaker extolled his piety, 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 Interior, Serra, “imbued with divine spirit, charged with an exalted mission and sustained by an unfaltering faith, faced with supremecourage danger, privation, suffering, [and] disease, to carry the message of salvation over unknown paths along the uncharted shores of the Pacific.”[[11]](#footnote-11)The recipients of this salvation were, in Wilbur’s racist formulation, “the hostile, ignorant, lowly Indian dwellers in that wild empire of the West.” Notably, Serra was also lauded for bringing to California the key components of the Golden State’s agricultural empire: oranges, lemons, olives, figs, grapes, and assorted vegetables, as well as cattle, sheep, goats, and horses.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Serra who stands so tall in the capital is a very impressive physical specimen, but in many ways his statue is most resonant for how it calls attention to the gap that had emerged by 1931 between how Serra lived his own life, how he was commemorated in the 1780sand how California had chosen to commemorate him for posterity in the U.S. Capitol.

(fig. 8)

Gone from Serra’s hand is the crucifix, the object of Franciscan devotion, replaced now by a cross, a generic and rather bland symbol of Christianity and western progress. Pried from Serra’s other hand is his 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 rude huts, but as it appeared a century later, at just about the same time that Jane Stanford was commissioning the first sculpture of Serra. There is no trace in the 1931 sculpture of Serra of Indians or anyone else or of the angst and soul-searching that Serra intended to inspire in those who attended his sermons. This Serra here is not the small and sickly and terrifying Serra of the late eighteenth century but the polar opposite; Serra in the Guerrero painting crouches down, nearing death; but in 1931 he was shown as a big man whose body projects strength, not mortality. Peel off that tunic and we might have a very hard body, probably something reminiscent of Father Deymann, who had been the model for Jane Stanford’s monument in Monterey.

Similar erasures and substitutions characterize the image of Serra portrayed in a medal that was stamped in 1963 on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of his birth. Here, as in Statuary Hall, Serra holds aloft with one hand a large cross and with the other he displays a miniature of Mission San Carlos. As in 1931 Serra comes across as an impressive physical specimen. 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. Serra was never one to bare his skin, unless he was going to mortify himself. This medal would have made him blush. But there is a clear purpose behind the semi-nudity of the left leg: it made suggested the ulcerous leg wound that dogged him for more than thirty-five years as he traveled on foot throughout central Mexico and then 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, bringing civilization into this Virgin Land. 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 bland form of Christianity; and it spoke to an age that did not see the complexities of California’s colonial past or what we now see as the various and contested legacies of the encounters here between Indians and Spaniards in Alta California.

Perhaps it was only as a manly path-finder, as a cross-wielding Lewis and Clark-like figure, as a pioneer of pioneers, and as a generic Christian, that Serra could have made it into Statuary Hall and the curriculum of every fourth grade classroom. But this makeover did not come without cost. To a great extent, people, Catholicism as practiced by Serra, and Indians are absent from the twentieth-century images of Serra that made him a popular icon. What we have here--in the statue and on the coin--is an ahistorical and bland priest disconnected from the larger issues, struggles, and transformations of his own age. What can be controversial about a man who brings everything to a land with nothing? the statue and medallion seem to say.

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When the Catholic Church moved forward in 1987 with Serra’s beatification, the beatified Serra had to have a visual representation, and what emerged twenty-five years ago was arather bland, ahistorical image, of uncertain inspiration. the official Vatican beatification portrait of Serra painted by Lorenzo E. Ghiglieri. 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. More likely though, the portrait was inspired by the 1924 sculpture by Sally James Farnham. But there is one important difference. Farnham’s sculpture is about Serra protecting Indians.

(fig.9)

In Ghiglieri painting there are no Indians. In Ghiglieri’s rendering, Serra looks more like a member of the Sierra Club than a man intent on telling anyone who would listen about the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell. Here is the man who would never turn back, the man who by some estimates walked more than 7000 miles during his years as a missionary. No crucifix is shown here, but hanging around Serra’s neck is an enlarged version of the cross that Serra hung from his neck throughout his life and which was probably buried with him in 1784. The mission model of the 1931 statue is gone, and the Pacific coast of the 1963 medal has been replaced by mountains. There is no trace of Indians or anyone else in the portrait. The beatified padre walks alone, seemingly climbing to heaven.

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With the Pope’s announcement in 2015 that he would canonize Serra came another opportunity for the church to update its visual portrayal of Serra. Soon after the Papal announcement, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, under the direction of Archbishop José H. Gomez, commissioned Lalo Garcia, a Mexican-born artist, to create the “official” portrait of Serra. The oil painting is dominated by the representation Serra, who now has the halo of a saint.  His face bears a strong resemblance to that found in the 1787 engraving from Palou's hagiography.  What is new here, however, are Serra’s hands clasped in prayer—a modern-day representation of prayerfulness--and his apparent focus on the Virgin of Guadalupe, which came at the suggestion of Archbishop Gomez, a tireless advocate for the rights of Mexican immigrants in the United States.  While Gomez’s political positions are laudable, Lalo Garcia’s rendering of Serra links Serra to the Virgin of Guadalupe and to Mexico in ways that never existed. While Serra did visit her shrine at the conclusion of his walk from Veracruz to Mexico City on the last day of December 1749 or January 1, 1750, other than that he seems to never have manifested any outward devotion to this representation of the Virgin. As a Mallorcan Franciscan through and through, he was fiercely devoted to the notion of the Immaculate Conception, but he had other Catholic figures that resonated more intensely with him.  Serra had a particular devotion to Saint Francis of Solano--it is to him that he prayed when he was in need of direction.   Also, he was particularly moved by the spiritual life of Maria de Jesus of Ágreda, the seventeenth-century Spanish nun who claimed to have bilocated to the New World and preached to Indians in their own language.

(fig.10)

The painting has other historical oddities and inaccuracies. To Serra's right shoulder on the canvas is the Pacific Coast, with nine missions (the number founded in California under Serra) and next to them is the modern symbol of the El Camino Real, the shepherd’s staff with the bell attached.  This symbol was created in the twentieth century by the Southern California Automobile Association to promote automobile tourism.  In the bottom of the painting are three California missions. On the left is Mission San Buenaventura, his last California missions, established by him on Easter Sunday, 1782.  In the middle is Mission San Gabriel, founded in 1771 by other Franciscans while Serra was in Carmel.  This mission was not central to Serra’s life but it is the most prominent mission in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. On the right is Mission San Carlos Borromeo, established by Serra in June 1770 and the mission where he spent most of his time and is now buried.  The images of each of these missions are standard, typical, and therefore not in any way a representation of these missions as Serra knew them.  In his day they were still rather primitive structures.  These buildings--the ones shown here--were for the most part raised long after his death.

The color scheme of the painting is dramatic.  It is almost as if the missions are on fire, a reflection of the artist’s sense of Serra’s intense religious desire.  Serra himself almost looks aflame.  He seems to erupt out of Mission San Gabriel.  Most important, the painting contains not a single reference to Indians, the object of Serra’s efforts. Also missing is any reference to his years in Mallorca or Mexico. Finally, a very notable omission is the crucifix.  The 1787 image has him holding the crucifix aloft.  In the 1931 statue the crucifix becomes a cross.  That was to make him less of a Catholic and more of a symbol of Christianity and Western Progress.  Here, one could argue, the progression, or makeover continues.  Serra is simply a Mexican man of prayer, devotedly praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe, who watches over Serra and the missions of California. This is a Serra for the Southern California masses, not one that situates him necessarily in the past, or outside of California.

What all of these twentieth-century images of Serra have in common is their highly selective portrayal of the man so that he might appeal to new and different constituencies. But when we see Serra only as simply the embodiment of a generic Christian ideal, or as a rugged outdoorsman, or as a Mexican priest, or a man surrounded by missions but not by Indians--we lose sense of who Serra 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.

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Today, in the wake of Serra’s canonization, we are now in an extended moment that is focused less on Serra’s canonization than on the public memorials to him that exist across the California. This era began during the run-up to Serra's canonization. In 2013 some California lawmakers--motivated by the belief that Serra had been cruel to Indians--attempted to remove his statue from the National Statuary Hall.Theattempt failed utterly and the matter was put to rest when the governor declared that he would not endorse any such effort and that Serra would remain in the U.S. Capitol “until the end of time.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Of course, not everyone shares the governor’s views. And those who wish to contest Serra’s legacy, and argue that he should be removed from public places, have directed some of their ire at his statues. In September 2015, in the immediate wake of Serra's canonization, vandals attacked Serra statues at Mission San Carlos and decapitated the one that had been placed on the coast of Monterey by Jane Stanford in 1891.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The reconsideration of the appropriateness of Serra’s public prominence has accelerated as part of a larger national debate over the appropriateness of commemorative sculptures of controversial historical figures in public places. In 2017, vandals attacked Serra statues at Missions Santa Barbara, San Fernando, and San Gabriel. Further, as part of a new trend, Stanford University convened a faculty committee to consider whether Serra's name should be removed from campus buildings and streets.[[15]](#footnote-15) The committee became deadlocked and collapsed and from its ashes rose two committees, one to determine the standards the university should use in renaming buildings, and another to apply those standards to Serra in particular. While it seems like a foregone conclusion that Stanford University will do something to erase the presence of Serra on the campus, a recent opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times*denounced that effort.[[16]](#footnote-16) The University of San Diego has also begun a very public discussion about whether or not it should rename its “Serra Hall.”

It seems highly unlikely that anytime soon Californians and others will stop debating Serra's legacies. And, in an indication of the staying power of Serra, it is worth returning, if only briefly, to the statue placed by Jane Stanford in Monterey in 1890. It was mocked as bad art when it was unveiled in 1890, and then it was pretty much ignored until it was decapitated in 2015. Miraculously, though, the severed head washed ashore six months later and was discovered at low tide not far from where the headless statue then stood. In February of 2017 the head was re-attached, and the statue, now reinforced with an internal structure of rebar, stands firm in Monterey’s Lower Presidio Park.[[17]](#footnote-17) If there is a lesson here it might be that some figures when attacked come back in a stronger form. Simply put, Serra—a man widely cast in stone and depicted on canvas, who is now a saint and can be read in many ways—will prove hard to erase as successive generations continue to find relevance in this figure, even as the modern world moves further from the values and goals that animated his own life.

1. AGI Contratación, 5546, fols. 13a-b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On Serra’s life, see Steven W. Hackel. Junípero Serra: California’s Founding Father. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013; Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz. Junípero Serra: California, Indians, and the Transformation of a Missionary. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2015; Francisco Palou. Relación histórica de la vida y apostólicas tareas del venerable padre fray Junípero Serra. Mexico, 1787; and Maynard Geiger. The Life and Times of Fray Junípero Serra, O.F.M; or, The Man Who Never Turned Back (1713-1784. Washington, D.C.: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1959). See also Hackel ed., The Worlds of Junípero Serra: Historical Contexts and Cultural Representations. Oakland, Cal.: University of California Press, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sancho quoted in Maynard Geiger, O.F.M.. Representations of Father Junípero Serra in Painting and Woodcut: Their History and Evaluation. Old Mission Santa Barbara, California: The Franciscan Fathers, 1958, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Francisco Palou. Relación histórica de la vida y apostólicas tareas del venerable padre fray Junípero Serra. Mexico City, 1787. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the image in Isidro Félix de Espinosa. El peregrine septentrional atlante: delineado en el exemplarissima vida del venerable padre Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús. Mexico City, 1737. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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10. San Francisco Call, Volume 110, Number 85, 24 August 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Address by Secretary Wilbur in Acceptance and Unveiling of the Statues of Junipero Serra and Thomas Starr King. United States Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1932, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Address by Mr. Dockweiler in Acceptance and Unveiling of the Statues of Junipero Serra and Thomas Starr King. United States Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1932, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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