

The Immaculate Conception

San Diego's Forgotten Patroness



Save Our Heritage Organisation



San Diego's Forgotten Patroness The Immaculate Conception

Commemorating San Diego's 250th Anniversary
July 16–December 29, 2019





Introduction

The Immaculate Conception was the principle icon of the presidio chapel and the patroness of the town of San Diego, the port, and the presidio fort. Her story was nearly lost to history—until now.

For the first time in 75 years, the 18th-century wood and gesso statue of the Immaculate Conception is seen in her former historic setting.

In 1770, the Immaculata was placed on the altar of San Diego's presidio chapel, according to historian and author James L. Nolan. Later, parishioners moved her and other religious artifacts from the presidio to the Casa de Estudillo in Old Town, and then, in 1858, to the Adobe Chapel. The Immaculata remained the centerpiece of that altar for 55 years. It was transported yet again in 1919 to the nearby Church of the Immaculate Conception. After 1945, her whereabouts were generally unknown.

In his 1978 book *Discovery of the Lost Art Treasures of California's First Mission*, Nolan traced the history and movements of the statue and other presidio chapel artifacts to the Mission San Luis Rey Museum, where today they form one of the Southwest's finest collections of Spanish Colonial art.

The altar also holds the original tabernacle from the presidio chapel. Historic photographs guided SOHO in recreating the altar's appearance during the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Tin sconces have been reproduced and 19th-century Stations of the Cross hung in their historic positions. The authentic result enables visitors to view the Immaculate Conception sculpture almost as it appeared in the late 1800s.

The Immaculata represents a real and tangible connection to the city's early residents and their cultural and spiritual lives. It is especially fitting that, after an absence of over 100 years, this highly venerated statue returns to the Adobe Chapel in commemoration of San Diego's 250th year.



An early 1870s exterior view from the southwest shows deterioration of the chapel's adobe walls. The bells from the San Diego mission can be seen hanging from a post and lintel wood structure.

History of the Adobe Chapel

Until the mid-19th century, Old Town San Diego, a small, dusty pueblo of a few hundred inhabitants, had no parish church. The presidio chapel and Mission San Diego de Alcalá from 1769 were in ruins. In 1858, the Spanish-born Don José Antonio Aguirre, who became wealthy and settled in Old Town in 1840, filled this spiritual void. In 1858, he purchased an adobe house built in 1850 for \$350, and transformed it into the Adobe Chapel. Irreplaceable 18th-century religious items rescued from the first churches, such as statues, vestments, chests, and bells, soon followed.

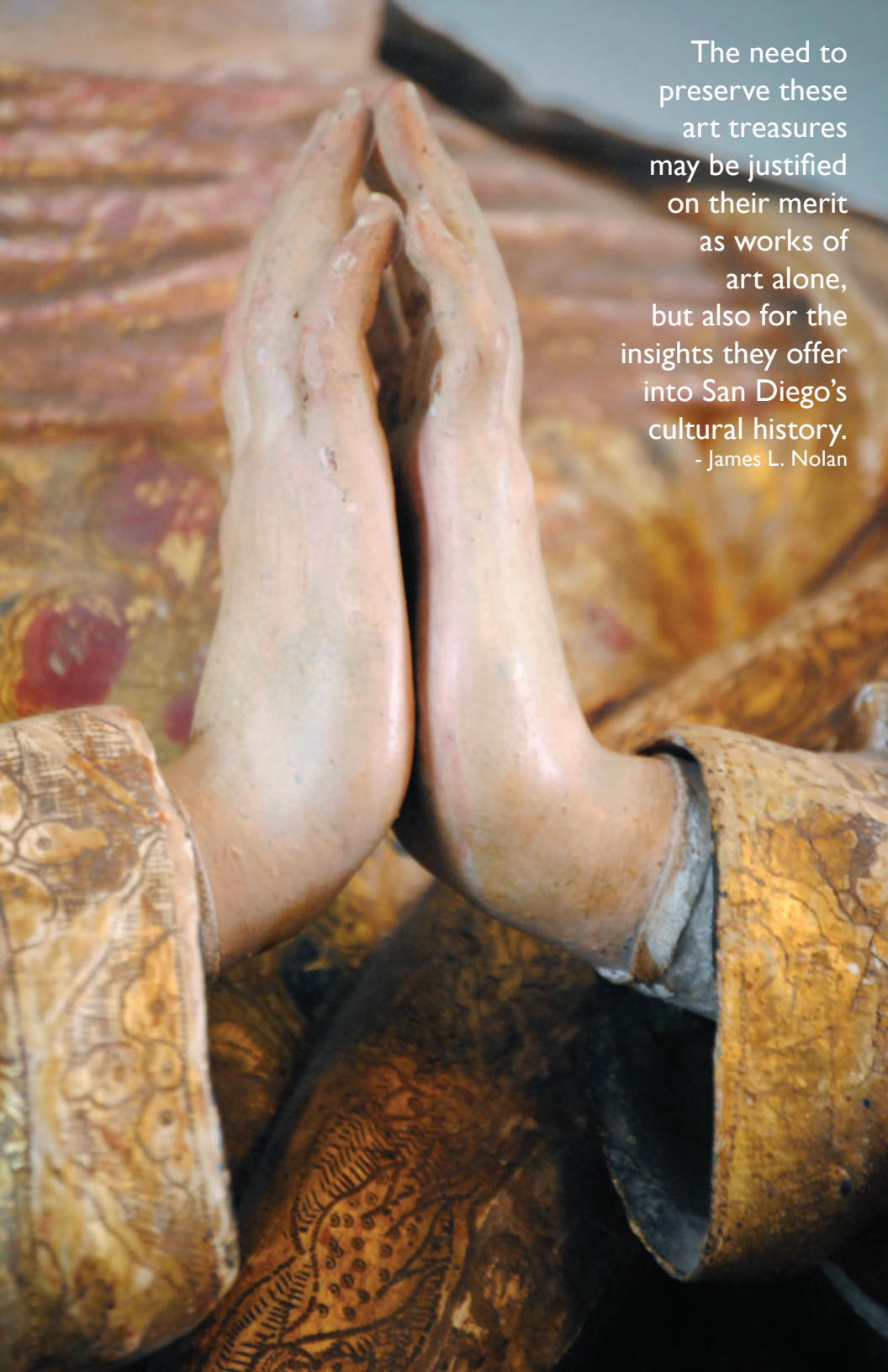
In November 1858, Franciscan Father John Molinier dedicated the Adobe Chapel before people of mixed faiths to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the patroness of the city, presidio, and port of San Diego.

In the 1870s, the chapel was covered with wood siding to protect its adobe walls. It was in use until 1919, but abandoned and boarded up by 1922.

Still, the building's historic significance shone through, and in 1932 the chapel became California Historic Landmark No. 49. The City of San Diego assumed ownership from the Roman Catholic Church in 1936. The city soon bulldozed the chapel for street alignment, but salvaged architectural elements for reuse in a replica.

Reconstructed by the Works Progress Administration in 1937, today's chapel includes original doors and windows, pews and woodwork, the altar and tabernacle, and parts of the confessional. Workers also moved benefactor Don Antonio's tombstone and re-embedded it in the new chapel's wood floor.

In November 2004, Save Our Heritage Organisation became the Adobe Chapel's manager for the city. SOHO has restored portions of the building, replicated the original tin sconces, rehung historic Stations of the Cross, and reopened it to the public as a museum, and community performance and meeting venue.



The need to
preserve these
art treasures
may be justified
on their merit
as works of
art alone,
but also for the
insights they offer
into San Diego's
cultural history.
- James L. Nolan



The Immaculata, c. 1770

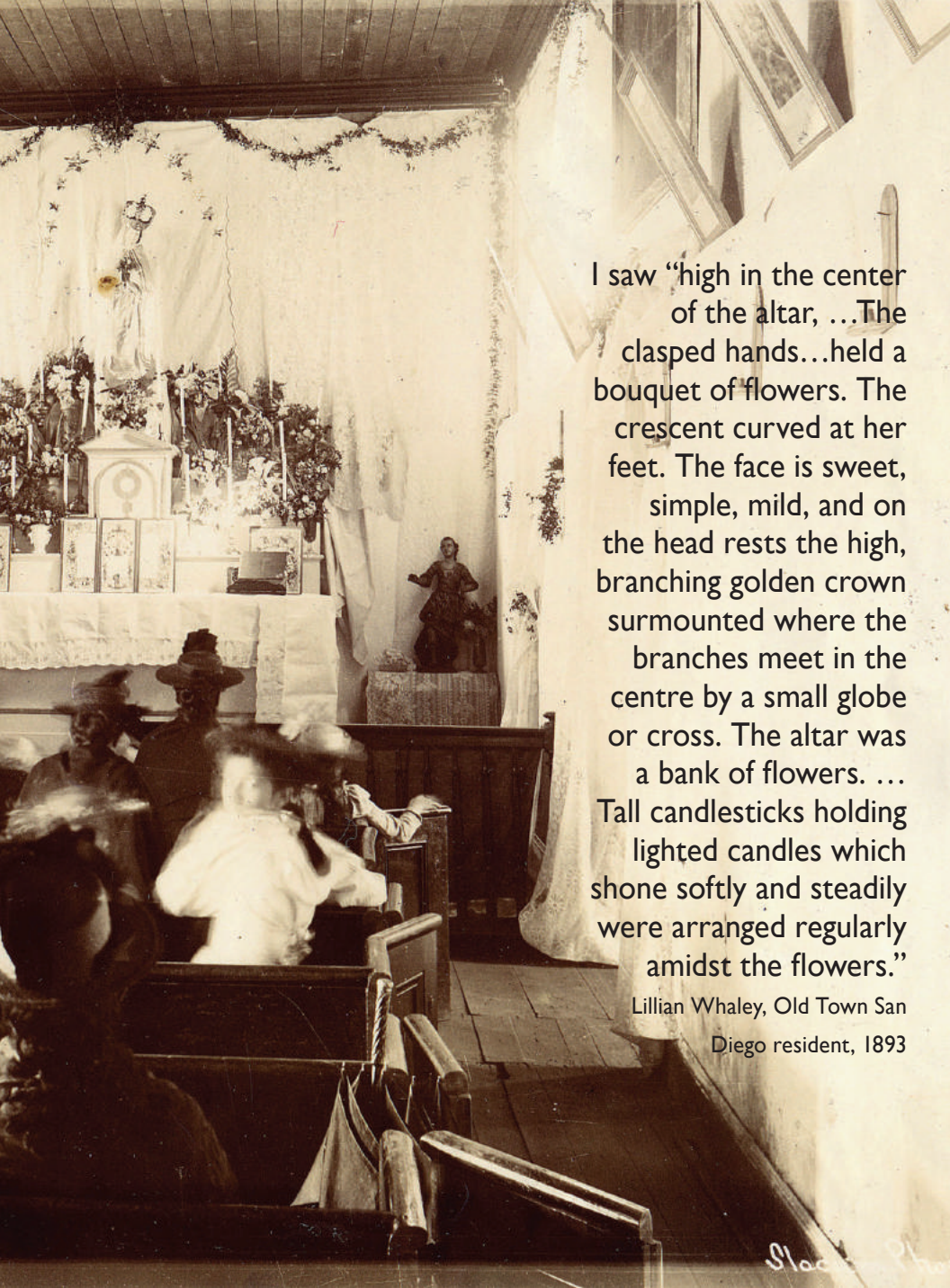
Wood, gessoed and polychromed • 56.5" x 12"

On loan, Mission San Luis Rey, Spanish Colonial Arts Collection



1118. Interior of Chapel at Old Town.

Interior of the Adobe Chapel, c. 1890 with the Immaculate Conception statue in place.



I saw “high in the center of the altar, ... The clasped hands...held a bouquet of flowers. The crescent curved at her feet. The face is sweet, simple, mild, and on the head rests the high, branching golden crown surmounted where the branches meet in the centre by a small globe or cross. The altar was a bank of flowers. ... Tall candlesticks holding lighted candles which shone softly and steadily were arranged regularly amidst the flowers.”

Lillian Whaley, Old Town San Diego resident, 1893



Adobe Chapel Tabernacle, c. 1769

Wood • Original faux painted marble still discernible under a later paint over
31.25" x 25.25" x 18"

City of San Diego



The altar was originally painted in all white faux marble; later additional dark marbling was added to its columns. It is shown here (facing page) without any traditional dressings or coverings.



Adobe Chapel Altar, c. 1858
Wood • Original marbelized painted finish • 69.25" x 97.75" x 54"
City of San Diego

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