

Panama-California Sculpture Court — Original Sculpture in Mute Display at Casa del Prado

By Ross Porter

Tucked away in a quiet section of Balboa Park's Casa del Prado courtyard is a cluster of original, three-dimensional sculptures and decorative motifs. Now they rest, mysterious and unexplained, awaiting the touch of the restorer's hand and the curator's spotlight.

The "staff" material used to create ornamentation for the "temporary" buildings at Balboa Park's 1915 Panama-California Exposition was invented in France about 1876. Staff is made from gypsum plaster mixed with hide glue. For strength coconut fibers called "coir" or hemp or jute were added.

Most of the elements now on display in the Casa del Prado courtyard were designed by architect Carleton Monroe Winslow for the "temporary" 1915 building known widely as the Food and Beverage Building. Its reconstruction as the Casa del Prado in 1971 was the first success for The Committee of One Hundred. Fourteen staff pieces and two concrete reproductions were joined by three original models for Spanish artists Velázquez, Murillo, and Zurbarán, designed for the façade of William Templeton Johnson's Fine Arts Gallery (now the San Diego Museum of Art) and executed in New York by sculptor Furio Piccirilli (1868-1949).



Furio Piccirilli created these full-size plaster models of three Spanish painters for the entrance to what is now the San Diego Museum of Art.

Among the garlands, columns, and cherubs are references to California history, including Franciscan missionary Junípero Serra. A man with a plumed hat, Native Americans, a Madonna, and a European queen (Isabella?) were chosen to depict some of the cultural threads that came together to form twentieth century California—all can be seen on an elaborate altar-like "retablo" that was recreated on the Casa del Prado's eastern façade. The visitor to the Panama-California Sculpture Court has the opportunity to appreciate this architectural ornamentation up-close as nowhere else in Balboa Park.



Beribboned shoes on the plaster figure of Velázquez

In designing the Food and Beverage Building, Winslow was following the creative lead established by Bertram Goodhue in the ornamentation of the California Building, then envisioned as one of the handful of permanent structures of the Panama-California Exposition. C. Matlack Price wrote in 1915 that the San Diego Exposition was:

...intended to express and typify the history, resources, prosperity, industries and products, as well as the golden-lined future promise of the Southwest. "It is an attempt to embody the romance of old Spanish civilization, with its mixture of the spirit of adventure and the spirit of devotion, to build such a city as would have fulfilled the visions of Fray Junipero Serra..."



Memorial to Fray Junípero Serra (1713-1794) on display in the Sculpture Court

Thus did romantic vision give birth to an entire revival of stucco-clad homes throughout Southern California. In Balboa Park the ornamentation offered a focal point to visitors seeking the quiet of sun-dappled patios. This "Dream City" became for San Diegans not a temporary display but a permanent monument to civic vision and architectural beauty.

The Committee of One Hundred is developing a plan for professional cleaning, modest restoration, enhanced display, and the creation of new interpretive graphics that will help de-mystify these nineteen sculptures, while safeguarding their historic and artistic value for the appreciation of future generations. A renewed Panama-California Sculpture Court will help visitors learn about Balboa Park's historic buildings and the importance of preserving them.

Sculpture photographs by Ross Porter

Amero, Richard. "The Making of the Panama-California Exposition 1909-1915. *The Journal of San Diego History*" Vol.; XXXVI (Winter 1990). www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/90winter/expo.htm

The following can be read in full on our website: www.C100.org/resources.htm

Baxter, Sylvester, with Bertram Goodhue and Henry Peabody. "The Spanish Colonial Architecture of Mexico" (1902)

Goodhue, Bertram Grosvenor, and Winslow, Carleton Monroe. "The Architecture and the Gardens of the San Diego Exposition" Paul Elder & Co., San Francisco (1916)

Johnson, William Templeton. "From Aztec Cave to Conqueror's Castle" *The California Outlook* (Dec 26, 1914)

Price, C. Matlack. "The Panama-California Exposition, San Diego. Bertram Goodhue and the Renaissance of Spanish-Colonial Architecture" *The Architectural Record* (1915)



Sculpture Court pieces in this "retablo" group were reconstructed on the east side of Casa del Prado