

Mission Nuestra Señora de la Concepción, 1755

The watercolor reconstruction below (I-B.1), which was made in the 1930s, only dimly suggests the dazzle that Mission Concepción offered 250 years ago. The building, now stripped to bare stone, was once covered in white plaster and adorned with painted designs in red, blue, yellow, and black. With a dome glistening against the blue southwestern sky, it must have risen impressively from the surrounding plain.

Built in San Antonio in 1755, the Catholic mission had been founded almost forty years earlier in the Texas-Louisiana border region as one of six Spanish missions that served as a barrier against French expansion from the east. Dominican, Jesuit, and Franciscan missionaries looking for spiritual treasure in the form of converts to Christianity had followed the gold-seeking Spanish, who were using large numbers of

native allies to explore and lay claim to an increasing area of the Americas. The goals of the Church and the Spanish Crown overlapped. Because there weren't enough Spaniards to colonize so vast an area, the plan was to turn the lands over to the new converts who would develop the missions into towns, where they would live as Spanish citizens.

Native peoples came to the missions for diverse reasons: some were coerced; others sought safety from their enemies; and still others responded to the missionary message itself. Nomadic tribes may have found the safety of mission life, with its steady supply of food, a less difficult and precarious existence. It was less appealing for sedentary farming communities like the Hopi, who lived in greater security on high mesas. (In 1680, decades after the Spanish conquest of New Mexico, Pueblo tribes, under the leadership of the Tewa medicine man Popé, forced the Spanish out and destroyed many of their missions.)

Mission Concepción was home to a number of distinct nomadic tribes collectively known as Coahuiltecas. Run by the Franciscan order, it was organized like a small village, with storage buildings, a workshop and a church at its core. The friars lived in cubicles in the convent that flanked the church, and the mission Indians lived in housing built along the inside perimeter wall of the complex. Beyond lay orchards, fields of crops, and ranches for grazing livestock.

The church was designed in the ornate seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque style; it was constructed of adobe and rubble, faced inside and out with stone, and then coated with plaster. Catholic traditions determined the floor plan of the building, which, from a bird's-eye view, takes the form of a cross. A long central hall (nave) leads from the southwestern entrance to the altar at the northeast end and is intersected by a second, horizontal hall (transept). The place where they meet, called the crossing, is crowned by a dome with a cupola to let in light.

The church was adorned on the interior and exterior with frescoes (paintings on plaster) and was further ornamented with statues and relief carvings. On the exterior, borders with geometric and floral designs emphasized the building's architectural parts, outlining windows and creating the fictive columns that frame the openings in the bell towers. The flat expanses of wall on the towers were given an overall pattern that resembled Spanish tile work, with each square containing a floral cross inside a circle.

The mission still contains some fragments of the frescoes that once enlivened the interior with color and religious imagery. The most unusual of these is a sun with rays painted on the ceiling of the library. Although the sun is often used as a symbol of God in Christian art, it is a little surprising here to see the mustachioed face (perhaps of a mestizo, a man with mixed Spanish and American Indian ancestry) peering back at us.



I-B.2 Convento and church at dusk. San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. © George H. H. Huey.



I-B.3 Detail. "Eye of God" decoration on ceiling of the library. San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. © George H. H. Huey.



I-B.1 Mission Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de Acuña, San Antonio, Texas, 1755. Ernst F. Schuchard (1893–1972). *Mission Concepción*, fresco details of façade, 1932. Watercolor on paper, 17½ x 17 in. (45 x 44 cm.) in frame. Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library. Ernst F. Schuchard papers, Gift of Mrs. Ernst F. Schuchard and daughters in memory of Ernst F. Schuchard.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | **M** = MIDDLE | **S** = SECONDARY

Allow students to look carefully at these images, briefly pointing out that the detailed views show how the building looked in an earlier state.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M

Have students locate the lanterns and the crosses at the top of the towers and dome. Look for slight variances in the symmetry of this building.

A buttress is on the right corner, the mission wall extends to the right, and windows vary slightly in size on each side of the building.

E | M

Ask students what the original function of the two towers on the front of the church was.

They were bell towers, used to summon the community.

E | M | S

Encourage students to compare Mission Concepción's 1755 façade with the way it looks today.

It was originally plastered white with red, blue, yellow, and black patterns. Now it is exposed rock.

Why is it no longer white with painted designs?

The plaster and designs weathered away.

E | M | S

Ask students why the Spanish built the Texas missions.

They built missions to stop the French from expanding their colonies into Texas and to convert American Indians to Christianity.

INTERPRET

E | M | S

What was the purpose of this building?

It was used as a place of worship.

In addition to religion, what other important functions did the missions serve?

They raised food, trained American Indian workers and artisans, and produced goods such as leather saddles and cloth.

E | M | S

Why did American Indians live at the missions?

Some were forced to, others converted to Christianity and wished to be near the church, and others sought safety from their enemies.

What buildings were often parts of a Spanish mission?

The church, granary, workshops, houses for soldiers, and living quarters for friars and Indians formed part of the missions.

E | M | S

Ask students what the sun detail represents.

It may represent the face of God.

What is unusual about this depiction of God?

This face has a mustache like that of a man of both Spanish and American Indian ancestry.

M | S

Ask students why the Spanish and American Indians constructed European-style churches in America.

The Spanish wanted churches like those in Spain.

Show students examples of seventeenth-century Baroque church façades. (The Obradorio façade of the famous Spanish pilgrimage church of Santiago de Compostela in Spain is an excellent example. Images are available on the Internet.)

Discuss why Mission Concepción is much simpler than many of these ornate churches.

This frontier church was constructed with local building materials and artisans. Although some Spanish artists worked on the mission, most of the builders were American Indians who learned European construction techniques from the Spanish.

M | S

How does this church design symbolize Christian beliefs?

There are many crosses on it symbolizing Christ's suffering and death. Throughout the design there are references to the number three for the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

S

Find design elements that suggest the number three.

The triangle over the door, the three openings above the door, and the façade, which has three major parts—the center flanked by the two bell towers.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: European colonial settlements in North America; Spanish missions; the Pueblo Revolt; Texas history; the Mexican-American War

Historical Figures: Francisco Vásquez de Coronado; Popé; Andrew Jackson; James K. Polk; Zachary Taylor

Arts: Spanish architecture (amalgam of Moorish, Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance influences) modified to meet frontier needs; frescoes, murals