

# Reckoning with meaning: the hidden mural of Mission Dolores

*Eric Brandan Blind  
National Park Service*

Two young men, one an artist, the other an archaeologist, crawled over the ancient redwood beams of San Francisco's Mission Dolores ... opened a trap door, lowered an electric light into a space behind the main altar -- and stared into the 18th century.

There, in a space thick with the dust of centuries and dark as a tomb, is a wall of nearly forgotten religious murals, painted in red, black and yellow by Native Americans in 1791 and hidden from public view for 208 years [Carl Nolte, *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 29, 2004].

Once native peoples made the difficult decision to cross the portals of one of the ... California Missions ... they entered an entirely new world, a world of alien social, economic and ideological practices.... We can only imagine the amazement and shock that the Indians received once they entered these strange, cloistered institutions [Lightfoot 2005:82].

For a discrete period of time during the years after the mission church was completed in 1791 and before the ornately carved wall sculpture or reredos arrived from Mexico some five years later, this 22-x-20-ft. mural was instrumental in creating that new and alien world we can only imagine. Painted on the wall behind the sanctuary altar, it held the most visually prominent position for all who entered and all who attended to worship there. This work of art projected an intentional image of mission culture, but it was also a product of that culture, helped maintain it and continues to reflect it today.

This artwork, similar to almost all art, was designed to communicate meaning. Art is perhaps the easiest form of material culture to understand as

not merely a material object or even a sensory image ... [but] also an idea ... with [these] man creates a new world.... In this world man lives as truly as in the physical world of his senses.... This world of ideas comes to have a continuity and permanence that the external world of his senses can never have [Leslie A. White, in Sahlins 1976].

## Meaning -- what is meaning?

Although there are multiple definitions of meaning, some overlapping, some contradictory, let us concentrate on meaning in relation to ideas. Meaning in this instance is tilted more toward subjective than objective and will be more connotative than denotative.

Denotative definitions or objective assessments of function can often suffice for

utilitarian artifacts with clear uses, such as a fish net or a blade. However, art lends itself easier to connotative definitions related to context or subjective readings based on one's personal biography.

The premises of context and biography are very important springboards from which to dive into aspects of meaning. If we take a contemporary European artist like Goya (1746-1828), it is important to understand the reservoirs of time and place from which his art is drawn; as well as understand the individual, to appreciate his experiences or biography as well as his intentions for the future or his strategy (Hodder and Hutson 2003:165). Therefore, in order to understand the art, it is a foundational step to understand the artist.

### **Contact -- whose artifact is it?**

This brings us to ownership. And by this I do not mean property or possession; I mean creative ownership. So, to stick with this Goya example, his paintings may have been commissioned and even directed by patrons, sold to individual collectors and may now be in the possession of this museum or that. But when the question is posed, "whose painting is that?" the answer inevitably is Goya and not Guggenheim. So who does this Mission Dolores mural belong to? But before biography, how about the context in which it was created?

Although painted some 20 years after the mural was eclipsed by the imported reredos, there is a scene outside the mission doors painted by the artist Louis Choris on an October morning in 1816. This can do for context what would take me well more than 1,000 words. For a moment let us delve into that picture and imagine that the creator of the mural is somewhere in that picture. Who do you think it would be?

Considering that the mural would cover the wall behind the altar that would be the visual focus of every mass and ceremony, perhaps one of the missionaries undertook the project himself. The padres would be projecting their adoration towards the symbols painted there. The body and blood of Christ would be stored and received from a tabernacle along that wall. It would serve to illustrate some of the many religious lessons the padres sought to teach the neophytes.

However, understanding what we know about labor situations at the California missions, with an emphasis on faith through works, it has been reasonably inferred that this mural was the undertaking of one if not several of the natives. If this is the case, our chances of picking the right person out of this picture just dropped considerably. According to the "Libro de Baptismos" meticulously kept by the mission padres and the research therein by Randall Milliken (1995), there were 526 natives baptized by the end of 1790. But, there is a point of agreement between all of these people. Each one of them was baptized and renamed with a Christian name. We can reasonably assume that whoever painted this mural, whether missionary or neophyte, had been baptized and contributed to mission culture. Taking a minute to think about these individuals and their names leads into a question of identities.

### **Connections -- artificial boundaries**

"Culture contact studies of identities generally focus on the colonized/colonizer dichotomy as a fundamental axis of identification" (Voss 2005). But "colonial worlds and indigenous practices are as entangled in contemporary interpretations as they were in past lived experiences" (Silliman 2004:3).

So, “why do we persist in turning dynamic, interconnected phenomena into static disconnected things?” (Wolf 1982:4). This “habit of treating named entities [such as colonized/colonizer or native/neophyte] ... as fixed entities opposed to one another by stable internal architecture and external boundaries interferes with our ability to understand their mutual encounter and confrontation” (Wolf 1982:7).

If we look closer at the more populous half of this dichotomy, we find “the mission neophyte communities were heterogeneous in composition and highly complicated in social organization and politics” (Lightfoot 2005:111). After all, the aggregate population of the mission was drawn from a wide geographic range, and by the time the mural was obscured 20 distinct tribal groups had members of their population baptized by the mission. These groups had their own experiences, relationships and strategies for the future prior to the colonial incursion. From this well, they drew their identities. After contact, their identities would predominantly be defined in contrast to the identities of the colonizers.

This question of identity is crucial to the discussion of meaning, because, “meaning is not inherent in any situation. Meaning is relational. It is therefore always for someone” (Hodder and Hutson 2003:157). This conveys the idea that meaning is intrinsically subjective, especially in relation to art and symbols. For that matter, even the hard physical sciences are finding that the very act of observation changes that which is being observed (see Buks et al. 1998).

I have been told by people well versed in Catholic iconography that at least two of these symbols have very clear and discrete meaning. These are the two hearts, taken to be the Sacred Heart of Mary symbolizing the prophesy of Saint Simon who foretold that for Mary losing her son Jesus would feel like a sword through her heart, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, differing from the more modern-day version of a heart with a crown of thorns but with three stakes piercing the heart, symbolizing the nails of the cross and Jesus’s ultimate sacrifice.

But what if we go beyond the mural’s intended meaning? We must also ask ourselves about those people who interacted through observation with this prominently placed artwork after its creation. What did it mean for them? Was the meaning clear and discrete? What did it mean to the 185 neophyte couples who were married in front of the mural? Were they well versed in Catholic iconography? And finally, what about those unique cases that escape generalization, such as 12-year-old Salvador, a boy from Bombay, India who somehow found himself aboard a trans-Pacific ship and was baptized in 1793 before this mural? Little else is known of his experience, but I am guessing it was different than most folks baptized during this time and that experience affected Salvador’s interpretation of the mural’s meaning.

## **Was and is -- meanings of the past**

This idea that one’s past experience will affect interpretations of meaning is surely not relegated to history, but continues into the present. These interpretations are necessarily contextual and subjective because “we only interpret things that we do not understand. Interpretation therefore occurs only when something is confusing, incomplete or cloudy” (Hodder and Hutson 2003:161). An analogy would be with blind-spots in our visual field. Everyone has them but no one sees them, because our brain fills in the incompleteness from context. The confusing or cloudy aspects of meaning are similarly filled in through interpolation or extrapolation from our own experiences.

This became evident through this project from both the media coverage and specifically through the public reaction to what was being called a “discovery.” One moment sticks out from

the rest. Shortly after the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran the story as its headline, I was receiving phone calls and visits from people who wanted to share their thoughts on the mural and its meaning. At this point, Ben Wood and I had not yet stitched together the composite image from the 300 individual section photos, but Ben had finished some portions, and he projected them on the basilica dome all day, every day for a month. From this image alone, people were interpreting meaning. One day a man stopped by my office to share with me that he had seen in the image the 12 Stations of the Cross depicting Jesus on his way to the crucifixion. Our conversation was cut short by a phone call from a woman who wanted to share with me the significance of the Aztec iconography in the mural. It was after this episode that I personally nicknamed -- much to Ben's chagrin -- our work at the mission "the cloud project," because, much like cloud formations, I thought people could see in the mural whatever they brought to the interpretation.

An archaeologist is not always but often the first someone to attribute meaning to artifacts of the past because they often have the first opportunity to relate to a newly discovered object. However, finding an artifact does not imply that your relationship will be an exclusive one. Although you may have offered the first interpretation -- or more aptly, the first in a long time -- an intriguing artifact will attract more suitors, each of whom will have their own relationship with the past, their own intentions for the future and potentially distinct interpretations of an artifact's meaning.

Our knowledge of the past is [necessarily] created in the present... Because each of us has ... a different set of experiences to draw upon, we will each construct the past in different ways. [So] our understanding of any past world is contingent and incomplete, but so was that of anyone who occupied those worlds [Thomas 2000:4].

## References cited

- Buks, E., R. Schuster, M. Heiblum, D. Mahalu and Umansky, V.  
1998 "Dephasing in electron interference by a 'which-path' detector", *Nature* 391:871-874.
- Hodder, Ian and Scott Hutson  
2003 *Reading the past*, Cambridge University Press.
- Lightfoot, Kent G.  
2005 *Indians, missionaries, and merchants*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Milliken, Randall  
1995 *A time of little choice*, Ballena Press, Menlo Park, California.
- Sahlins, Marshall  
1976 *Culture and practical reason*, University of Chicago Press.
- Silliman, Stephen W.  
2004 *Lost laborers in colonial California*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Thomas, Julian  
2000 *Interpretive archaeology*, Leicester University Press, London.
- Voss, Barbara L.  
2005 "From *casta* to Californio: social identity and the archaeology of culture contact", *American Anthropologist* 107(3):461-474.
- Wolf, Eric  
1982 *Europe and the people without history*, University of California Press, Berkeley.