

Stop 31 – Colorful Frescos

Splashes of brightly colored geometric-shaped murals adorned Mission Concepcion's Church during the 1700s. Picture brilliant ornamental frescos covering both the exterior and interior of the church and the convento...the priest's quarters. As the first permanent mission church, its beauty and extravagance likely drew local natives like a rainbow in the desert. What would you think if you had never before seen such a massive, colorful permanent structure?

Fresco is one permanent technique of decorating, an alternative to tile and mosaics. It was taught as a trade to some of the mission Indians. Pigment is applied to damp lime plaster, which absorbs the color. As the plaster dries it hardens and the colors become permanent. At Concepcion, lime ash and goat's milk were used to bind the color to mission walls. Try and locate the four distinct colors. Yellow and red from ochre found in clay and sandstone, black from carbon and blue from an indigo plant.

While these works of art spoke to the residents of the mission with their color, form, and pattern, they also highlighted architectural features or hid construction flaws. Mainly they were decorative murals to excite, instruct, and reward the mission residents. Frescos were teaching tools, symbols that helped the missionaries teach Catholicism to the Indians.

Look closely at the faded walls and you will see evidence of artists from the past. Mission Concepcion contains the greatest concentration of frescoed wall art of the four missions. Unique and distinct colored drawings are the clearest in Concepcion's library. For decades the only visible fresco on the ceiling was an eye and several rays. It was referred to as "The Eye of God". In 1988, conservationists painstakingly removed 250 years of dirt, smoke, and dust covering the library walls. Their work revealed a second eye, mustache, and goatee. Historians believe the sunburst and face is a Spanish medallion and not a religious symbol. Additional conservation by the Catholic Church has recently exposed frescos within the church itself. However, the true meaning of many frescos, as with much of ancient and modern art, remains a mystery.