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Mission San Xavier Del Bac A Model for Conservation

Located nine miles south of downtown Tucson, Arizona, stands the church of Mission San Xavier del Bac, arguably the finest example of Mexican Ultra Baroque architecture and decoration in the United States. A National Historic Landmark since 1966, in 1940 it was the object of an intensive project by the Historic American Buildings Survey, one that resulted in some 200 black-and-white photographs and 41 sheets of detailed plans, elevations, and drawings of individual elements of the church and immediately adjoining structures of the mission complex.

The church at San Xavier del Bac was built between 1783 and 1797 when today's southern Arizona was a part of New Spain's Province of Sonora. It was the inspiration of Franciscan missionaries who raised the money for its construction and who supervised the overall effort. Its architect was a master mason, Ignacio Gaona, who, like the so far anonymous painter(s) and sculptor(s), undoubtedly came from Mexico, possibly from the city of Querétaro where these particular Franciscans then had their headquarters.

The O'odham (Piman Indians) in whose village of Wa:ak (Bac) the church was built were the paid laborers who dug the clay for the bricks,



shaped them, fired them, and laid them in lime mortar to form the walls and multi-domed ceiling. They excavated, burned, and slaked the lime. They hauled rocks to the site for use in foundations and in the cores of walls. And when the job was finished in 1797, they worshiped in the building even as their descendants do to the present.

In the aftermath of its successful War of Independence in 1821, Mexico's government began secularizing as many of its missions as possible (i.e., turning churches over to secular priests). Franciscans, however, managed to remain at San Xavier until 1837, when the last missionary departed leaving the church abandoned except for an occasional visit by a secular priest and whatever caretaking it might receive from the O'odham villagers. After June 1854, when the Gadsden Purchase was ratified, San Xavier became part of the United States. In 1859, it also became the responsibility of the Santa Fe Diocese in New Mexico, and that year a diocesan priest made a few emergency repairs on the deteriorating structure. It was not, however, until 1873 when Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet moved into San Xavier to open a school for the Indians that anyone was again in permanent residence. In 1912, the church was turned back to Franciscan administration and the mission has had resident occupants ever since.

Henry Granjon, the Bishop of Tucson, made extensive repairs and renovations at Mission San Xavier—which had suffered damage from an earthquake in 1887—between 1905 and 1908. The Franciscans carried out another campaign of repair and conservation in the 1950s. By the late 1980s, however, moisture was making its way into the walls of the building and the 200-year-old painted and sculptured interior was in danger of being badly damaged if not altogether destroyed. Studies of the problem indicated that more than a million dollars would be needed to effect necessary repairs and provide for long-term conservation.

*San Xavier del Bac.
Photos courtesy
NPS.*



Mission San Xavier del Bac is owned by the Roman Catholic diocese of Tucson and is administered as the parish church of the San Xavier Indian Reservation by Franciscans of the Saint Barbara Province of the Order of Friars Minor whose headquarters are in Oakland, California. With both groups confronted by more pressing social needs, the projected cost of repairs on the 200-year-old church was far beyond the capacity of Franciscan or diocesan clergy to handle. The potential solution lay in a not-for-profit organization of volunteers, the Patronato San Xavier, that had been incorporated in 1978—somewhat in anticipation of events that lay ahead—“to be used solely and exclusively for historical, research, and scientific and educational purposes concerned with the restoration, maintenance and preservation of Mission San Xavier del Bac near Tucson, Arizona”

The Patronato's board members, then as now, are volunteers drawn from a wide social and economic spectrum of the greater Tucson and southern Arizona community. The Patronato is nonsectarian, and its members include representatives of the San Xavier parish as well as persons off-reservation who are anxious to maintain a church that for all practical purposes has become the symbol of Tucson and southern Arizona community identity. The image of the church has become the region's logo regardless of one's race, religion, gender, ethnic background, or economic standing. It is a symbol all residents share and that outsiders have come to recognize.

The Bishop of Tucson, who controls title to the mission, and the Franciscan Father Guardian who is in charge of its daily administration are ex-officio members of the Patronato's board as is the chairperson of the San Xavier District of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Although none has a vote in Patronato affairs, each—especially the Bishop and Father Guardian—has veto power over any decision the Patronato might reach. It is only through consensus among the Patronato, religious officials, and community governmental authorities that efforts toward conservation of the mission can go forward. The Patronato has only the power of persuasion and an ability to raise and allocate money.

It has been the Patronato's role to raise funds for repair and conservation from private sources: individuals, corporations, and foundations. The Patronato also makes decisions concerning what work needs to be done at what times and by whom. It has chosen a Tucson architect, a specialist in historic structures, to oversee ongoing work by a local construction company on repairs and rehabilitation of the physical structure of the church. Since 1992, it has brought to the mission

for three months each year a team of international restorers, principally Italians, who are among the world's best conservators of painting and sculpture on plaster surfaces. These conservators have been training four Tohono O'odham (Papago Indian) residents of the San Xavier community in conservation techniques so that when efforts on the church's interior painting and sculpture are concluded in 1997, there will be people who live in the parish who will be qualified professional caretakers. The Patronato is engaged in raising an endowment whose interest can be used in perpetuity for upkeep—something the mission has lacked in the past.

This undertaking has been enormously successful in part because there has been honest and unrestricted communication among all participants each step of the way. The Patronato has posed no threat to either the Bishop of Tucson or to the mission's Franciscan administrators, always acknowledging their ultimate authority and keeping them informed in advance what plans or steps are being proposed. Hidden agendas are taboo and surprises are ruled out. Without the cooperation of all parties, the expert conservation of Mission San Xavier would have been most unlikely.

Success of San Xavier's conservation must also be attributed to the affection residents of southern Arizona—Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo—have for this unique place. It has helped that there has been one organization, the Patronato San Xavier, to whom their tax-deductible donations can be made for its preservation. And so has it been helpful, if not essential, that the energies of the board members of the Patronato San Xavier are focused entirely on one building rather than on a number of buildings that may need similar attention. This kind of one-on-one relationship between a knowledgeable and devoted group of enthusiasts and a particular structure provides the ideal circumstance for eventual success.

References

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