

Few but varied images of Blessed Serra spark inspiration, controversy

By Nancy Wiechec

Catholic News Service

PHOENIX – When Jen Norton decided to paint Blessed Junipero Serra, she turned to the Internet to see what images of him exist.

“Turns out there are not a lot,” said the Catholic folk artist from San Jose, California. “I looked for resources online and the same images kept popping up.”

The ones she saw were stern and serious. “I get the sense that he was not that happy,” she told Catholic News Service.

Norton said she discovered from reading some of his documents that Father Serra cared for the native people he evangelized despite his apparent serious demeanor.

She said he “lived in service” to people and she wanted to show the Franciscan in a positive light, honoring his work and perseverance.

“I wanted to tell the story of the work that he did. ... That he walked and worked to build what is now essentially the California we know,” she said in a telephone interview.

In Norton’s painting, Blessed Serra holds a cross and walking stick and is surrounded by representations of nine missions he established. Along his robe, the California coast is demarcated with a splash of blue. A rooster at his feet is a nod to his early rise and the long hours he labored. The painting is awash in the colors of California’s ocean-side landscape — blues, golds and greens.

In her own blog about the painting, Norton wrote of Father Serra, “He is the story of persevering in what we believe in.”

Norton’s colorful painting stands in stark contrast to a portrait the turns up every time his name is Googled. That image shows the tonsured friar against a dark background looking left in a wide-eyed stare. He wears a gray cowled robe, the Franciscan garb of his time. A crucifix hangs from his neck.

“It has become the iconic image of Serra,” said Monica Orozco, director of the Santa Barbara Mission Archive-Library in California. One that has inspired other interpretations of the missionary.

The painting hangs in a small reception room just off Orozco’s office at the library and archive. The oil-on-canvas is a copy made from an original likely painted in the 18th century but lost sometime during the Mexican Revolution.

“Two copies were painted by a priest by the name of Jose Mosqueda. And we have

one of those,” Orozco explained in an interview in her office in Santa Barbara. “We treat it as an original.”

The other Mosqueda copy resides in Mexico.

Orozco said the painting is typical of how people sat for portraits at the time.

“I suppose (he) looks a little dour, a little apart, not much in terms of emotion,” she said, adding that there is a certain “majesty” and “gravitas” to his image.

The Mosqueda portrait is among the few 18th-century depictions of the missionary. Another is a woodcut published in 1787 with the first biography of Father Serra by Franciscan Father Francisco Palou, his student and friend.

This image shows the missionary preaching in Mexico. In his right hand he grasps a rock, in his left, a crucifix. Around him are Indians, Spaniards or Creoles. He stands “ready to punish his own body to atone for the sins of others,” wrote University of California historian and Serra biographer Steven Hackel about the depiction.

“This one is by far the grittiest, the most complicated, and likely to be the most accurate image that exists of Serra,” Hackel said in a 2013 article in *Huntington Frontiers* magazine, a publication of the Huntington Library.

Like the man himself, his images have become both a source of inspiration and of controversy.

Those who say the Spanish missionary does not deserve honor assert that he was a part of the imperial conquest under which California Indians nearly became extinct. Critics have defaced his image during protests and on social media. Some have portrayed him as the devil.

Earlier this year, an effort was made to have a statue of Blessed Serra removed from the U.S. Capitol exhibit that honors prominent Americans. The sculpture by Italian-American Ettore Cadorin is one of two statues given by California to represent the state in National Statuary Hall.

Recently, California Gov. Jerry Brown commented on the row. He promised that the statue would stay in the Capitol “until the end of time.”

Promoters of Blessed Serra, like the late California developer and Catholic philanthropist William H. Hannon, have promoted the missionary by making his image more accessible.

Nearly 100 identical statues of Blessed Serra gifted by the William H. Hannon Foundation are set at various locations across the state, including at the missions and at Catholic schools. Hannon was said to have encouraged children to rub the statues’ sandal-clad feet for good luck.

The Knights of Columbus featured the Mosqueda portrait of Blessed Serra on the cover of the organization’s April issue of *Columbia* magazine. More than 1.7 million copies were distributed to members and supporters. An accompanying prayer card also was produced using the image.

As his canonization nears, Norton said more and more people have been calling for prints of her Serra painting.

Pope Francis will make him a saint during an outdoor Mass Sept. 23 in Washington on the grounds of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

The shrine honors Blessed Serra with two images, one a mosaic gracing an upper area of a portico and a stained-glass window in the sacristy.

Other notable 20th-century representations of Blessed Junipero Serra include:

- A stone statue titled “Padre” by blind artist Arthur Putnam installed in 1918 in the cemetery and garden of Mission Dolores in San Francisco. A bronze of the Putnam sculpture also sits on Presidio Hill in San Diego.

- A bronze sculpture by Douglas Tilden, dedicated in 1907, resides in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

- The official 1988 beatification painting by Lorenzo Ghiglieri housed at the Vatican.

- A contemporary mural by Frank A. Martinez greets those entering the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. The rendering depicts figures from early California, including Father Junipero Serra, other missionaries and native people building the missions.

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