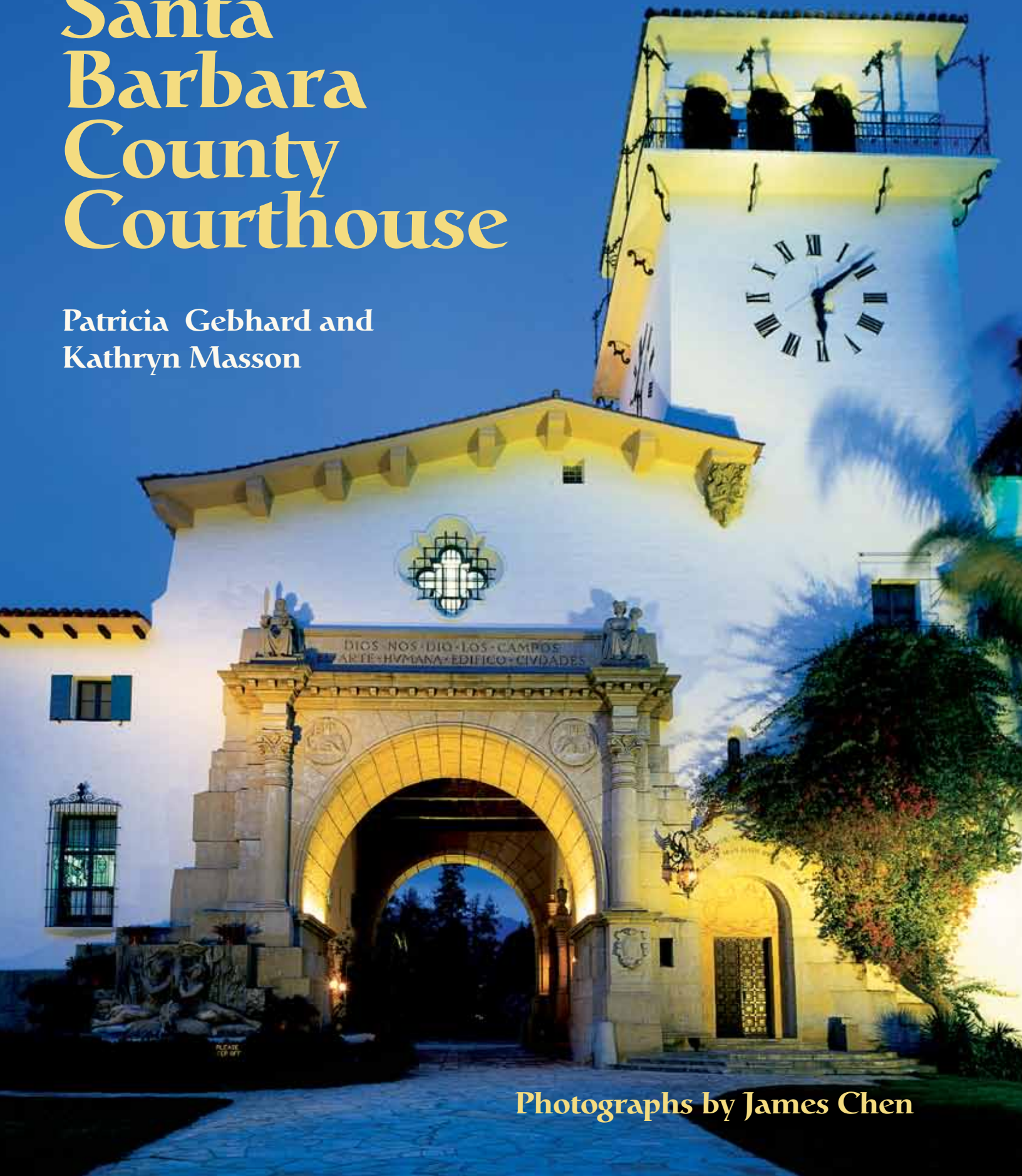


The Santa Barbara County Courthouse

Patricia Gebhard and
Kathryn Masson



Photographs by James Chen



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and Kathryn Masson**

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Acknowledgments

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**The
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Introduction

THE CURRENT SANTA BARBARA COUNTY COURTHOUSE, set near the center of town amid low, pedestrian-level buildings and surrounded by hillsides cascading with white-washed, red-tile-roofed buildings, presents itself as a grand palace rather than a utilitarian public building. Yet it captures all of the charm inherent in the vernacular architecture of Andalusian Spain in its seemingly haphazard combination of parts.

As the epitome of the Spanish colonial revival idiom, this courthouse, completed in 1929, represents a unique contribution to public architecture in the United States. Praising it beyond its stylistic limits, Charles Moore, an influential architect of the twentieth century, considered it one of the major buildings “on the planet.” The design expresses on a magnificent scale the desire of Santa Barbara citizens to recreate Santa Barbara as a romantic Spanish city. Even its architect, William Mooser, claimed the courthouse was more Spanish than any hotel-de-ville in Spain.



An elite group of civic-minded Santa Barbara citizens not only chose the Spanish image as an appropriate style for a city with a Spanish past, but mandated its use in the courthouse. Even today, like-minded citizens have continued to insist on what might be called “the Santa Barbara style” in the downtown area through legislation and the establishment of a watchdog review committee.

By the 1920s, interest in and enthusiasm for the romantic, exotic, and picturesque elements of Spain, developed over the past decades, was at its height. Although travelers had written about their visits to Spain

since the early nineteenth century, the book that popularized Moorish Spain was Washington Irving's *The Alhambra*, first published in 1832, republished in 1857, and again in 1896, with evocative illustrations by Joseph Pennell. The Alhambra and adjacent Generalife, Granada's magnificent fortress-palaces, exemplified the exotic sophistication of Moorish architecture as a culmination of a developed aesthetic more than any other buildings in Spain. Built and refurbished over time, the multiple buildings and gardens blend in perfect harmony on a hilltop in a vast landscape. The relationship of the interior and exterior spaces and the rich decoration in intricate plaster and tile provided an inspiration and impetus for Moorish designs in America.

However, accounts of Spanish art and architecture would not have been persuasive enough for California architects to espouse a Spanish-Mediterranean style if the United States as a whole had not been searching for a national style. The American colonial revival was born after the Philadelphia centennial of 1876, and American architects on the eastern seaboard sought to popularize colonial styles for domestic architecture nationwide. They were reasonably successful in their promotion. Colonial architecture flourished in the eastern states, and in the 1930s became the predominant domestic style throughout much of the United States.

At the end of the nineteenth century, architects in California found a basis for a regional style, the mission revival, in the provincial Spanish missions still in existence there. As part of this emulation of mission architecture, Californians began to work for the preservation of the extant

missions and adobe buildings throughout the state. The mission revival style then evolved into the Spanish colonial revival, more accurately called Mediterranean revival, in the mid-teens and twenties, when the simplicity and austerity of the California missions were combined with more formal and ornate renaissance and baroque design elements from churches built in the American Southwest, Mexico, and Spain. In many of these churches elaborate churrigueresque plasterwork contrasted with planar façades of white stucco.

With major buildings designed by Bertram G. Goodhue using churrigueresque elements, the Panama–California Exposition of 1915 in San Diego put the stamp of approval on the use of these Spanish forms. However, a simpler Spanish expression based on the provincial buildings of Spain and Italy also emerged at that time. In Santa Barbara, architect George Washington Smith developed a less pretentious and more informal architectural style. Incorporating these two styles, the high art and the vernacular, the Spanish colonial or Mediterranean revival became the “California style” and locally came to be labeled the “Santa Barbara style.”

By the 1920s, very little remained of the “real” past of Santa Barbara and its Spanish heritage. Only two significant structures survived: the mission, established in 1786 and completely reconstructed in 1812–1820, and the guardhouse, El Cuartel, of the original Spanish fort, El Presidio Royal. However, of the more than one hundred small adobe houses dating from the early nineteenth century clustered around the presidio in the original center of town, most had been

demolished by the 1940s to make room for “progress.” Today fewer than twenty remain. Yet these remnants of Santa Barbara’s Spanish past provided the rationale upon which the city was remodeled in an authentic Spanish style.

By the late teens, the citizens of Santa Barbara had determined they wanted a Spanish-style courthouse, but favored the Spanish renaissance architecture of the exposition in San Diego. With the impetus of a group of displaced easterners recently enamored of Santa Barbara, the citizens devoted themselves to the cause of planning for the city’s continued beauty and its re-creation in a uniform Spanish style. The earthquake of 1925 provided the opportunity not only to refashion the city as they desired, but also to erect a new courthouse.

In Santa Barbara, architects George Washington Smith, Winsor Soule, Carleton Winslow, Sr., James Osborne Craig, and Reginald D. Johnson were pioneers in embracing the Mediterranean style. Their widely published, appreciated, and imitated building designs provided models throughout California and the United States. Their work excelled due to their acquaintance-ship with and sophisticated appreciation of Spanish and Mexican architecture, acquired through extensive travel and familiarity with historic and current literature.

Whether or not it is the country castle that architectural historian David Gebhard has labeled it, there is no question that the Santa Barbara County Courthouse is one of the finest public examples of the Spanish-Mediterranean style. Yet it is so idiosyncratic in its design that it can be admired and appreciated without reference to its Spanish

colonial revival stylistic designation. It is a delightfully bewildering medley of thick white walls and red-tiled roofs, unexpected stairwells and towers, graceful arches and balconies, charming windows and gates with iron grilles. The simple lines with long reaches of restful walls inside and out complement the lavish use of ornament. The white walls of the building provide a man-made contrast to the lush planting, which creates constantly shifting shadow patterns on the walls. It is the total ambiance of the buildings set in the now-mature, park-like landscape envisioned over seventy years ago that makes the courthouse so exceptional.

Much of the courthouse may still be enjoyed as it was originally conceived. The majority of the exterior, the lobbies, the interior galleries, the law library, and the Mural Room have remained unaltered since 1929, although some interior rooms have been remodeled over time. Accessible to the public, the Mural Room, no longer used for the county supervisors’ meetings, remains the crowning glory of the building’s interior, with its intricately painted walls and ceiling and its patterned tile floors.

Lauded in its own time as the city’s greatest asset, the courthouse has received official recognition by its designation as a Santa Barbara city landmark and its placement on the National Register of Historic Places. It enhances the lives of all who have the good fortune to experience it and continues to impress inhabitants and visitors to Santa Barbara as one of the world’s great architectural successes.



1872, a bill was passed in the California Senate and Assembly authorizing a new courthouse for Santa Barbara. The county considered a number of locations for the courthouse, finally settling on the Kays adobe site. The Board of Supervisors requested designs for the new building and selected Peter J. Barber as the architect. Barber was well known in Santa Barbara for his Arlington Hotel as well as numerous churches, schools, and commercial and residential buildings. The cornerstone of the new courthouse was laid October 7, 1872, and offices were occupied by early 1875. Bonds in the sum of \$50,000 payable in 30 years at 7 percent were issued for the construction of the new courthouse. The building would contain the courtrooms and

judges' chambers as well as various county offices.

The new courthouse was built in a classical revival style, similar to that of many courthouses built at that time across the country, and represented a rejection of Santa Barbara County's Hispanic adobe tradition. The new building's floor plan was in the form of a Greek cross, and the entrance façade featured columns and a pediment. A small cupola with a dome covered the central space. Over the years the grounds were landscaped, so that by 1925 many trees and flowers embellished them.

Although this building remained in use as the courthouse until 1925, two substantial additions were required in order to accommodate growing needs. The first was

an adjacent public records building. From among plans submitted, within a cost limit of \$22,000, the supervisors chose that of architect Thomas Nixon, owner and operator of the Union Mill and Lumber Company. Nixon was a master carpenter and cabinetmaker who, in addition to designing the building, crafted the woodwork of the interior. The new public records building, shown opposite, was designed in the Queen Anne style, reflecting the town's enthusiasm for this late phase of Victorian architecture. It was fifty-two by sixty feet, had a forty-foot-high tower, and was considered to be a very fine building for its time (1889). However, it was built without thought for context, lacking harmony with the existing classical revival courthouse in its form and style.

Continued need for more space was answered in 1904–05 with expansion of the 1870s courthouse itself to provide larger courtrooms and offices. Designed by the Los Angeles firm of Train and Williams, this expansion basically filled in corners of the building, adding bays to each side delineated by classical pilasters.

The Competition for a New Courthouse

After World War I, both the 1875 courthouse and the public records building were considered inadequate, so that in early 1919 the county set in motion a competition for the design of a new courthouse. The structure was to be a war memorial and was to include an auditorium and offices for both the county and city governments.

The jury for the Santa Barbara County Courthouse and Memorial competition reviewed twelve entries and selected first through fourth place finalists on August 4, 1919. The first prize went to Edgar A. Mathews of San Francisco, whose entry (below) endeavored to create a Spanish theme in keeping with the history, culture, climate, and environment of Santa Barbara. William Mooser and Horace G. Simpson of San Francisco won second prize for a design (next page) that also reflected the Spanish antecedents of Santa Barbara.

Although this competition reflected a desire to build in the Spanish idiom and was an important prelude to the current courthouse, it did not result in the construction of a new building. The Spanish stylistic





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The Exterior

The Victorian art and architecture critic John Ruskin, discussing the “possible virtues of architecture” in volume I of *The Stones of Venice*, explains that, “In the main, we require from buildings...two kinds of goodness: first, the doing their practical duty well; then that they be graceful and pleasing in doing it.”

“Strength and beauty,” he continues, are the sources of virtue for both a building’s “action” and its “aspect.” The courthouse has stood well in doing its “practical duty” as a center for the governmental and judicial systems of the county and has unarguably been pleasing while doing it.

In the words of its architect, William Mooser, “The secret of the picturesqueness and beauty of the Santa Barbara courthouse is to be found in developing the structure and the various architectural effects to scale. In building the Santa Barbara courthouse we tried to get back to the massive scale of building as carried out by the Spaniards. In many instances a building excellently conceived is ruined because the design has been carried out in a smaller scale than was warranted.” The monumental scale of the



building masses of the courthouse in relation to the site, to each other, and to the cityscape as well as to the scale of individually designed decorative elements show how effectively Mooser achieved this goal.

The Santa Barbara County Courthouse is a potpourri of Spanish architectural elements held together by the overall concept of its design. The vast blank wall spaces surrounding particular and often ornate ornamental applications create a simple, bold statement. The courthouse is a complex arrangement of thick, white walls, widely varying windows, loggias, galleries, and ornamental and architectural details. Because of its combination of disparate elements that make a coherent whole, renowned architect Charles W. Moore described it as “one of the century’s great monuments to the architecture of inclusion.”

This concept of making a whole out of

are, however, only windows, since a miscalculation in the first floor ceiling height put the floor of the second story Mural Room lower than the bottom of the presumed doors. Inside, the resultant windows sit above a sill almost three feet high. To the right of this loggia, a staircase leading to a door with adjacent windows creates the effect of a handsome townhouse. The door no longer gives access to the building.

The little bell “tower” on the corner of the Figueroa and Anacapa street façades is a gem, in spite of its denial as a tower by the façade below it. This small and simple element, the only purely mission revival feature on the courthouse, contains the city’s old fire bell. The bell was supposedly the

sole survivor of a set of chimes from the clock tower of the 1896 Park Building that was destroyed in the 1925 earthquake. After the earthquake, it initially served as the fire bell for the city’s former volunteer fire



department. The bell had hung on a wooden framework between the two palm trees in De la Guerra Plaza, with the fire hose beside it. When it was no longer needed by the fire department, it was decided that the fire bell would be safer in the courthouse tower.

On the sunken garden façade of the Anacapa wing, the massive main arch and tower are the major elements of the composition, as they are on the street façade, although on the garden façade the asymmetrical



placement of ornamentation makes the arch less formal and less reliant on architectural precedence. Incorporating different textures, the rough-hewn Refugio sandstone of the arch surface is edged with precisely cut square dentils. Various bas-relief sculptures, all of cast stone except for the keystone figure of Hercules, decorate the arch more or less at random. To the left of the arch, beyond a handsome grilled window, the new handicapped entrance uses a former window to give access directly into the entry hall. This new addition succeeds in its purpose without damaging the integrity of the building's original design.

Cast-Stone Decoration

The cast-stone elements on the courthouse, especially the medallions on the arch facing the sunken garden, are of uncertain origin, though two firms, Wagner & Fell and Roy Richardson, did at least some of the work. Cast stone is made from fine cement poured into a mold that is made from a sculpture. The exquisite decorative cement work on the turret of the jail tower is cast stone, as are other design elements such as corbels, water drains, cartouches, finials, window frames, grilles, and sills.



Garden Façade and Circular Stair Tower

To the upper left of the arch on the sunken garden façade of the courtrooms building is a large, cast-stone rose window, which lights the second-floor lobby. Beyond, to the left of the rose window, is a loggia echoing the loggia on the Anacapa Street façade. Both loggias are impressive in size and each loggia has segmented arches, but the thin columns of the front façade, in contrast to the low heavy posts on the garden side, make it appear higher, lighter, and airier.

The circular stair tower rising above the roofs at the interior corner of the Figueroa and Anacapa wings marks the transition between them. The tower is thought to be derived from a design by Leonardo da Vinci, who was commissioned to design such an

“indoor-outdoor” tower stairwell for a chateau in the Loire Valley of France. Leonardo’s design, invented as a strategic device to confuse the enemy, included two separate staircases, one located inside the other so that it was hidden from view, allowing one army to flee the building via a staircase in one direction while the opposing army climbed a staircase in another. Early twentieth-century traditionalist architect Addison Mizner often used this design feature in the Gothic-medieval-inspired Mediterranean-style houses he built in Palm Beach, Florida. Design features of the courthouse circular tower also include a circular window and a continuous series of small, beveled, round-headed windows just under the roof. On the outside of the tower a wrought-iron railing on the staircase continues with final steps

to the ground. On the wall adjacent to this short flight is a grilled window, its ironwork similar to examples in *Spanish Details* by William L. Bottomly and seen in numerous houses and commercial buildings in Santa Barbara and elsewhere.

Ironwork and Other Metalwork

Metalwork found throughout the exterior of the courthouse uses traditional Spanish designs that authenticate the building's historical sources and add delightful vignettes to mitigate the plainness of the white walls. Hand-wrought iron window grilles, ornate gates, balconies, balustrades, handrails, decorative finials, door hardware, decorative studs, and shutter holders embellish the courthouse.

The most striking use of metalwork is for lighting fixtures, whether they are small sconces affixed directly onto walls, or huge elaborate lanterns hung from pendant chains or brackets. Their sturdiness and weight complement the massive buildings, and their designs and fine workmanship add dimension and idiosyncratic elements to corners, recesses, and protrusions throughout.

All metal items were specifically designed by the architects or chosen by them from catalogs to either order or copy. Fabricated in Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, the designs include heavy iron or steel balcony balustrades, handrails, and all door hardware.

Copper was also used, for example, in the large exterior lanterns where it was finished to resemble wrought iron. Thin, pliable copper was intricately cut for the decorative surrounds of small wall sconces.

Traditional Spanish motifs found in architectural books that were in print at the time of construction often served as references for the metalworkers. As with the huge lanterns, prototypes for other products were found



in catalogs from Spain. During that era, independent ironworkers, as well as larger metalwork firms in Los Angeles, cherished their heritage of fine workmanship and design, honoring the ideals of medieval guilds. Fortunately, the economics of the time allowed the expense of this labor-intensive industry.

Specific information as to which companies were involved in the fabrication of the

courthouse's ironwork is fragmentary. Los Manos Ironworks of Santa Barbara was credited in the August 1929 *Morning Press* special edition with some of the ironwork. Also, the Earle Hardware Manufacturing Company of Los Angeles (which went out of business in 1929) has all of the courthouse's door hardware in its Catalog No.A-3 of



builders' hardware. One escutcheon, however, that may have been specifically designed for the courthouse is the large, ornate, double lion head surrounding the door locks of the double doors facing the law library. Gustave Schmitter of Santa Barbara made the large exterior lantern with the snake design and the pendant lamp at the entrance





to the jail. H. Dombrink Company in Oakland, California, with whose work the Mooser firm was surely familiar, fabricated and furnished the glass for many of the other lanterns. Santa Barbara resident Walter Cordero worked on the balustrades surrounding the clock tower. Other heavy-gauge ironwork, such as gates, balustrades, and handrails, was also made by local ironworkers. These companies used a particular catalog from Spain (in which many of the courthouse's lighting fixtures are pictured) and the architects' specifications for their metalwork designs. Both sources are found in the county records.

Courtrooms Building— Figueria Wing, Garden Façade

Viewed from the sunken garden, the courtrooms section of the Figueria wing to the left of the circular staircase is clearly delineated by its higher roof and balanced façade. The expanse of white wall with a minimum of openings captures the Andalusian ideal of simplicity, especially on this rather plain façade, where the visual contrast of the landscape's palm trees and the shadows they cast are particularly effective. The entrance to this section is more impressive than the corresponding entrance on Figueria Street (which is obscured by a loggia) because of its large size and because it is emphasized by a second doorway located on a balcony above the first. Appearing as a dark tunnel from a distance, this garden façade entrance contains, on its lower level, a central arched



Monte Hotel, the courthouse in Portland, Oregon, the library in Ottawa, and the King Edward Hotel in Toronto. His reputation from this painting for Batchelder enabled Groesbeck to obtain the \$9,000 commission to decorate the walls of the supervisor's meeting room. "The Landing of Cabrillo" now hangs opposite the entrance to the Mural Room.

Description of the Murals

The scenes covering the walls of the Mural Room reflect the interaction of influences of Groesbeck's life. His expertise in the genres of maritime seascapes and figure painting made it possible for him to depict historical events with action and immediacy through a masterful use of color, scale, and perspective. Although he took artistic license while

painting and failed to do careful research, which produced some historical errors and misspellings, he more than compensated for any lack of precision by his compelling renderings.

The first wall in sequence, the rear wall (the one containing the main entry doors), contains a banner stating, "1786 Fr. Presidente Fermin de Lasuen builds the Xth Mission at Santa Barbara after the death of Fr. Junipero Serra at Carmel." The scene depicts the construction of the mission with scaffolding against an imposing mission tower with Native Americans laboring under the supervision of Father Lasuen. Although the costuming is incorrect, the scale of the tower, the beams and ladders set at irregular angles, and the motion of the laborers create a dramatic composition. Groesbeck's forged signature is found on this wall. On the day the paintings were completed, Groesbeck left for England. When he was wired to return to Santa Barbara to sign his work, he responded that someone should simply copy his signature.



The second wall, on the left side of the entry doors (opposite the windows), displays the largest of the paintings and has three inscriptions: "The Canolino Tribe bordering the Santa Barbara Channel were the most enlightened of the California Indians," "1542 Fifty years after Columbus, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo lands at Las Canoas with the Flag of Spain," and "1602 Vth Count of Monterey sent Viscaino North, who named the Channel at Santa Barbara." The painting depicts



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