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MISSION  
*San Xavier*  
del Bac

T U C S O N



MISSION  
**San Xavier**  
del Bac



REV. CELESTINE CHINN, O.F.M.





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Mission San Xavier del Bac is situated on an elevation in the Santa Cruz Valley nine miles south of the city of Tucson. Framed in the warm browns of the surrounding hills and the violet shadows of more distant mountains, it rises, brilliantly white from the desert floor of dusty green mesquite and sage. The imposing dome and lofty towers, the rounded parapets and graceful spires etched against the vivid blue complete a skyline fraught with the haunting enchantment of seeming unreality.



From early times, the Indian settlement in which the Mission is located was called Bac, "Place where the water appears," because the Santa Cruz river, which ran underground for some distance, reappeared on the surface nearby.

### The Historical Background

The celebrated Jesuit missionary and explorer, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino first visited Bac in 1692. At that time the village, with its fertile fields extending as far as the present site of Tucson, was inhabited by more than eight hundred Sobaipuri Indians. These aborigines of Bac were, in the course of time, supplanted by Papagos from the desert to the west who belonged to the same great Piman nation and spoke a dialect of a common tongue. To the present day, the village is occupied by their descendants.

Eight years later, in 1700, Father Kino laid the foundations of the first church, some two miles north of the present site of the Mission. He named it San Xavier in honor of his chosen patron, St. Francis Xavier, the illustrious Jesuit "Apostle of the Indies."

San Xavier was the northernmost mission of the Pimeria Alta which included all of the territory of the Altar Valley in the state of Sonora, Mexico, and that part of Arizona to the south of the Gila river.

In 1767 the Jesuits, as a result of the intrigues of their enemies, were expelled by royal decree from Spain and her dominions, and their missions were entrusted to the Franciscans.

Fray Francisco Hermenegildo Garces, a man of outstanding personality and prodigious accomplishments, easily ranks first among the great names of Franciscan history in Arizona. This intrepid padre established headquarters at San Xavier in June, 1768, and from there set out on the many far flung missionary explorations that made him famous. It was principally through his efforts that the presidio (military garrison) was moved, in 1776, from Tubac to Tucson. Garces then built the first church in Tucson, the ruins of which may still be seen near the riverbank at the foot of "A" Mountain. A house



for the missionary was also erected and a stout wall for defense. Under the protection afforded by these measures against the frequent raids of Apache Indians, the first Spanish, or European, settlement was established in Tucson, so that Garces may be called one of the founders of the city. In 1779 Father Garces was transferred from Bac to the Yuma Mission where he died a martyr in the Yuma uprising of 1781.

### The Building of the Mission

The present church of San Xavier was built during the administration of the immediate successors of Garces, Fathers Baltazar Carrillo (1780-1794) and Narcisco Gutierrez (1799). Under the expert direction of Ignacio Gaona, architect and builder, and his helper Pedro Bojorquez, the great undertaking required fourteen years of intermittent labor — from 1783 to 1797. Lacking only a few months of work, this remarkable

structure was all but completed when Gaona was fatally injured in a fall from the building. It was probably due to this accident that the east tower remained unfinished, and that the name of his assistant, "Pedro Bojorquez 1797" is carved on the back of the sacristy door. The year presumably marks the date of completion. It is now an established fact that San Xavier, as it stands today, was built entirely by the Franciscans from the very foundations. We are indebted to a modern Franciscan historian, Father Marion Habig, O.F.M., for the final and irrefutable proof ending a long

controversy. (For the complete report of Father Habig, consult the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, October, 1937. For the story of the discovery, by Father Mark Bucher, O.F.M., of Kino's mission site, consult *The Hispanic Historical Review*, February, 1936.)






In 1821 Mexico declared her independence from Spain, and by 1827 the Spanish Franciscans had left San Xavier. The Friars were not to return until 1911. In 1859, the territory of Arizona was annexed to the diocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Shortly thereafter Father Machebeuf, vicar-general of the diocese, visited del Bac and made important and much needed repairs. The most comprehensive restoration was undertaken toward the end of 1906 and extended over a period of three years. The work was done under the personal direction of the Right Rev. Henry Granjon, Bishop of Tucson, who was often to be found wielding trowel and hammer by the side of his workmen. To him is due the credit that San Xavier stands today in its entirety.



## The Architecture


Authorities acclaim San Xavier the finest example of mission architecture in the United States. The term, Mission Architecture, can be defined as the Spanish Colonial style of Mexico modified by local exigencies of material and labor, and further adapted to the artistic background, aptitude, and craftsmanship of the artisans in each particular region to which the style was transplanted.

Although the Moorish and Byzantine influences are the first to make themselves felt, the architecture of San Xavier is immediately derived from the late Renaissance of Mexico. The church shows elements of all the stages of development, excepting Gothic, through which ecclesiastical architecture passed in the West, particularly in Spain. With these are mingled various architectural and decorative features from the East, which from an early date permeated every style that arose in Spain. From the standpoint of construction, the use of brick throughout and the pendentives as supports for the dome and vaults are Byzantine in origin, while the high arches and flat vaults are to be traced to the Moorish influence. In the field of ornamentation, the whimsical treatment of vaults and windows as decorative elements and the wealth of arabesques stem from the style of the Moor; whereas, the simulated patterned marble effects, the glitter of gold, and the frescoes savor of the lavish display and royal splendor of Byzantium. All these diverse elements are fused into a design so closely unified and delightfully harmonious, that it is almost impossible to point out where one style begins and another ends.



### General View of the Mission

The visitor will be amply repaid by viewing the picturesque ensemble of buildings at some distance from the front of the church. The facade, or ornamental structure above the front entrance, is flanked by terraced towers. Between them rises the majestic dome that is without a serious rival in all the Missions.





The towers are particularly pleasing for a sense of lightness and slender proportions due, in great part, to a subtle arrangement of spaces. This impression is further emphasized by the attenuation of the pierced openings on the upper tiers. The towers are considerably enhanced by the flying buttresses whose scroll-like curves form a happy transition from the ornate facade to the straight lines and plain surfaces above. The tower to the right, originally abandoned without plaster or dome, owes its present appearance to the extensive restoration of 1906.

Close by, to the left of the church, the mortuary chapel lifts its dome and belfry above the enclosure of the old cemetery. To the right of the church, and adjoining the unfinished tower, are the original living quarters and workrooms, to which were added, at a much later date, a monastery section and classrooms.



#### The Facade

On approaching the entrance we find the church separated from the plaza and roadway by an enclosed quadrangle known as the atrium.

From this point it would be well to make a closer study of the facade which lends such prominence to the portals. It

alone was left untouched by restoration, so that its warm reddish hue stands out in marked contrast to the rest of the structure. Here and there traces still remain of the original brightly painted ornamentation. This exquisite three part composition, i. e., two stories and a gable, at once marks out the width of the church, while its two horizontal panels, defined by the cornices (projecting bands), indicate the interior division of two stories. The horizontal sections are visibly supported by narrow pilasters. Originally an ornate column of the Churrigueresque style stood in front of each of the ten pilasters. Regrettably, the loss of these columns has destroyed the sharply drawn, torturous design of light-and-shade, leaving the facade comparatively flat and restful. Large surfaces are adorned with rich arabesques, figures in niches, volutes, and looped swag draperies of brick and mortar.

The whole composition is crowned by a rounded gable formed by two free swinging S-curves which meet in the center with a sharp curve in reverse. The cone shaped object appearing above the gable is all that remains of the statue of St. Francis of Assisi. Below it, the Franciscan coat-of-arms in bold relief holds a position of prominence. The device is an escutcheon that displays a knotted cord (part of the Franciscan habit) surmounting a cross on which is nailed the bare right arm of Christ and the clothed left arm of St. Francis. The escutcheon is surrounded by intricate arabesques representing a grapevine with evident reference to the words "I am the vine, you are the branches." John 15:5. On either side of the coat-of-arms the monograms of Jesus and Mary are appropriately incorporated into the conventionalized pattern of the vine. The lions rampant in the far corners, symbols of the Spanish tenure, are reminiscent of those emblazoned on the scarlet and gold field of the standard that fluttered gaily above the stalwart Conquistadores.

The four figures placed in niches between the pilasters bear no inscriptions. The higher figure, above and to the left, wearing a crown probably represents St. Barbara, the patroness of soldiers and artillerymen. The image below can





no longer be identified. The upper figure to the right carrying the tambourine is St. Cecilia, the patroness of music. The last figure, blackened by smoke and covered with candle grease, is judged to be that of St. Lucy, since by long standing custom the Indians invoke her aid against sore eyes, and to honor her, burn candles in thanksgiving.

## The Interior of the Church

Weathered doors of mesquite open in upon a low groin-vaulted area which corresponds to a vestibule, though in this instance, it is not separated from the nave. Directly above is the choir loft and at the opposite end, the main altar. The church, which is of burned brick covered with lime plaster, measures 98 feet 6 inches by 21 feet 7 inches inside the walls. These walls have an average thickness of three feet except at the base of the towers where, in order to carry the great weight above, they approach a width of six feet.

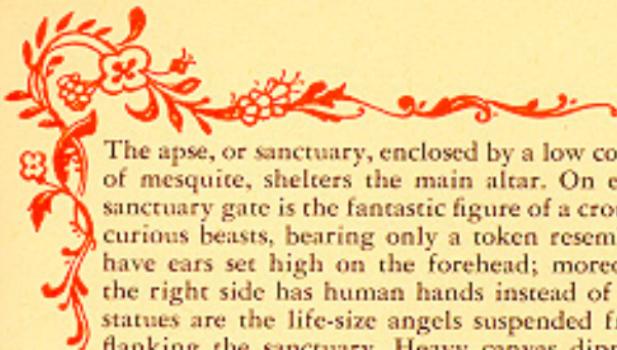
The plan is that of the Latin cross. The single nave (main aisle) is separated from the apse (sanctuary) by the transept, or cross aisle, the ends of which terminate in side chapels. Above the crossing of transept and nave, the dome, supported by arches and pendentives, rises on an octagonal drum to a height of 52 feet.

## The Baptistry

To the left as you enter the church, a low doorway leads to the Baptistry. In the center of this groin-vaulted chamber, a pedestal of brick covered with plaster decoration supports a copper basin which, we are told, was used in the original chapel of 1700. A room similar to the Baptistry is to be found on the ground floor of the opposite tower. Its purpose can no longer be determined.

Proceeding toward the sanctuary, we come upon another door to the left which leads outside toward the mortuary chapel. To the right, a matching doorway is painted on the wall; this amusing device to secure formal balance was employed three times in the building.




The Main Altar

The apse, or sanctuary, enclosed by a low communion railing of mesquite, shelters the main altar. On either side of the sanctuary gate is the fantastic figure of a crouched lion. These curious beasts, bearing only a token resemblance to nature, have ears set high on the forehead; moreover, the lion on the right side has human hands instead of paws. Unique as statues are the life-size angels suspended from the pilasters flanking the sanctuary. Heavy canvas dipped in paint was used to form their flowing draperies, and legend tells us that the twin daughters of the artist served as his models.

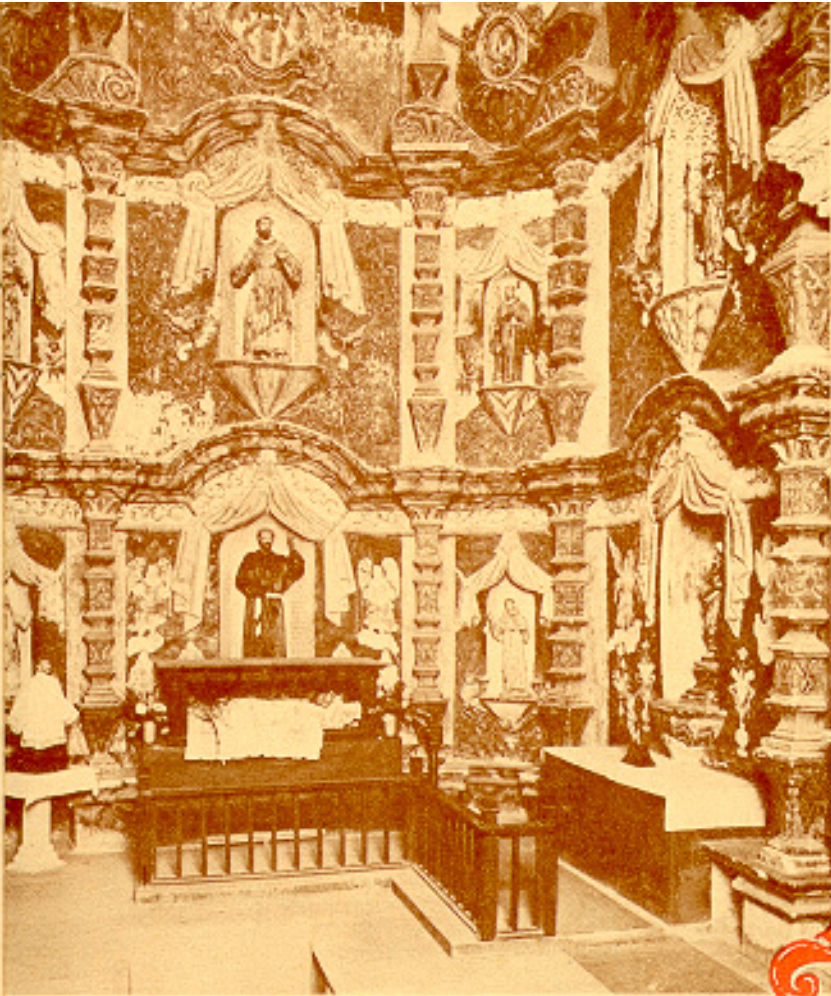
The retable, or highly ornamental backing set up behind the altar, is built entirely of burned brick covered with a profusion of gilded and painted embellishments in plaster. The whole composition is divided into two tiers supported by eight fanciful columns Churrigueresque in style. Surmounting the retable is the bust of God the Father. Smaller busts set in medallions represent Adam and Eve. Below these in the central niche is the figure of the Immaculate Conception, with the statue of St. Peter on her right and that of St. Paul on her left. Continuing around the sides of the church, the statues of the other apostles are placed in niches cut into the pilasters. To their number was added St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. The vacant niche behind the pulpit was left for Judas, the traitor.

Sumptuously clothed in rich robes of satin and velvet, the statue of St. Francis Xavier occupies the place of honor directly above the altar table.

Time has long since subdued the dazzling colors of the retable and muted the gilt to a mellow greenish sienna. Still, this symphony of riotous arabesques and color superbly dominates all else and establishes a focal point of fortissimo intensity. Its very position contributes to the breath-taking effect, veiled as it is in the shadow of mystery behind a curtain of golden light that falls from the star windows set high above in the drum of the dome. This retable is the best of its style and type of construction north of the Mexican border.







Chapel of the Suffering Savior

In the chapel to your left, as you face the sanctuary, there are two altars. The one facing the crossing, though similar in style to the main altar, shows a greater amount of frescoed rather than embossed decoration. It is dedicated to the Suf-

fering Savior, easily recognized by the resplendent crimson of His robe. The statute in the niche above is that of St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan Order. This image best exemplifies the characteristics of the larger statues, imported from Spain or Mexico, which were carved of hard wood, covered with gesso worked to the smoothness of enamel, and finally, gold-leafed and polychromed for a preciousness and brilliance of effect.

Hovering about the niches, several little Indian cherubs of deep copper hue were placed higher than the white cherubs perched in the corners below. Was this touch suggested by the padre for the consolation of the Indians so often provoked by the soldiers and colonists? In any event, it preaches a visual sermon on the equality of merit in the Kingdom to come.

Below, in a sepulcher is a reclining figure clad in priestly vestments representing the incorrupt body of St. Francis Xavier as it reposes today in the church of the Bom Jesus, at Goa in the Indies. The image, an original from Tumacacori Mission, has converted this chapel into a shrine of pilgrimage. The number of pilgrims increased considerably during the recent religious persecutions below the Border, as it became difficult to visit the church in Magdalena, Sonora, where a similar image has long attracted wide veneration. The silver and gold votive offerings fastened to the vestments are tokens of gratitude for cures obtained by a fervent legion of suppliants. The few remaining Sobaipuris living near the Mission some twenty years ago maintained that the original reclining statue at Magdalena was carved at the request of Father Kino and was intended for San Xavier del Bac. The altar to the right is dedicated to St. Joseph. Above, the figure of St. Dominic was placed close to that of St. Francis, an acknowledgement of the friendship between the two Saints and the Orders which they founded.

Our Lady of the Pillar, an apparition of the Blessed Mother at Saragossa, Spain, is frescoed on the opposite wall above the confessional screen.



Chapel of the Sorrowful Mother

The altar at the opposite end of the transept, facing that of the Suffering Savior, is dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows.



For many years the statue of Our Lady wore a wedding gown which had been donated by a grief-stricken Papago maiden whose fiance had been killed shortly before the date set for her wedding.

Dominating the wall above, there appears a cruciform frame of unusually fine workmanship. The beveled sides of the frame radiate ribbed undulations suggestive of the scallop shell so much in evidence throughout the church. This incised fluting merges into an intricate arabesque border of flowers. Deeply embedded in this frame, as in a refulgent burst of rays, is a wooden cross on which only the left arm remains of the image of the crucified Christ.

With but a few exceptions, saints of the Franciscan Order are enshrined in the many niches and medallions of this and the opposite chapel.

The altar to the left is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. On the opposite wall the fresco portrays the Blessed Mother under her title, Queen of the Holy Rosary.

In front of the double pilasters at the corner of this chapel stands the original hand-carved pulpit in natural wood, similar in style, though vastly simpler in design and embellishment, to many that are to be found in the baroque churches of Europe.

#### The Decorations

The frescoes (none of which were done on wet plaster) suffered most in the thirty odd years during which the church was virtually abandoned. The majority are badly faded, and many have become mottled and flaked to such a degree as to be almost beyond recognition. Yet even in their present condition, they



remain among the best preserved frescoes of their kind in all the Missions. As a group, they are characterized by an uneven quality which would indicate that some are the work of a tutored hand while others are obviously the faltering essays of apprentices. Generally speaking, the greater number of frescoes in the body of the church depict scenes from the life of Our Lord and His Blessed Mother. These, in particular, show a sureness of composition, modelling, and a sense of color often lacking in the others.

The dadoes, or frescoed borders occupying the lower part of the walls, have almost disappeared. Interestingly enough, the three dimensional block design is to be found on one of the buildings in Pompeii, the Roman city destroyed in 79 A.D. by an eruption of Vesuvius. This detail might indicate that the designer was conversant with the celebrated treatise (discovered in the fifteenth century) of Vitruvius, Roman architect and engineer during the reign of Augustus.

The all-over pattern in blue to be seen on the pilasters lends a rare touch of primitive charm in no way at odds with the more sophisticated decoration all around. The supposed method of applying the pattern was simplicity itself — the Indians dipped their thumbs in the vegetable dye and pressed them on the plaster. A further detail, unquestionably of Indian inspiration and design, is the diamond-back rattle-snake motif that writhes around the niches adding a decided dash of regional color.

Starting immediately above the arch supporting the choir loft, the Franciscan frieze, the dominant feature of moulded decoration, can be traced along the walls throughout the building. The motif consists of the knotted Franciscan cord shown in yellow; below this, the hem of the garment falls in patterned folds of burnt orange. Suspended from the hem is a tiny bell and pomegranate in alternate succession. The ends of the cord fall on either side of the statue of St. Francis Xavier on the main altar.

The delicately wrought shell windows of San Xavier are particularly captivating. They are in the only unadorned

surface high in the walls of the nave. With fine artistic and architectural intuition the master builder undoubtedly realized that the ever shifting design of light-and-shade, caught up in their furrowed hollows, was beauty that should stand without added enrichment.

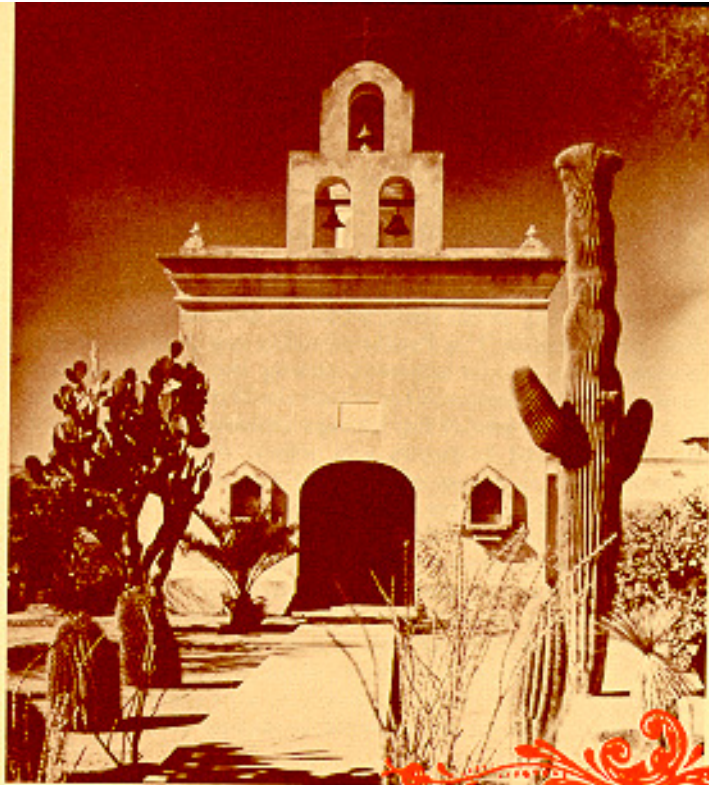
The scallop shell motif, more frequently used than any other single detail in the decorative scheme, is the emblem of St. James the Greater, national patron of Spain. Because of the ancient tradition that the body of the Apostle was miraculously transported to Compostela, it became one of the most celebrated shrines of pilgrimage in the world during the Middle Ages. Pilgrims returning from Compostela often carried back scallop shells as proof that they had fulfilled their vow. As a result, the scallop shell became the special emblem of the pilgrimage in honor of St. James and, gradually, the symbol of pilgrimage in general.

Not to be overlooked is the charming and imaginative treatment of the three oval vaults spanning the nave; each simulates a canopy. Radiating from the center, severely pleated folds are confined by an encircling rope a foot or more above the edge of the ruffled valance.

#### The Old Cemetery

The old cemetery occupies the enclosed area to the west of the church. The only monument for the many unmarked graves is the mortuary chapel where the deceased reposed until the requiem service. The chapel is vaulted with a dome and is further enhanced by a lantern and a small storied gable pierced for three bells. The marble slab set in the floor in front of the altar marks the place where the two padres, incumbents at San Xavier during the years of construction, fittingly rest in the shadow of the beauty that blossomed





under their hands. The Latin inscription reads:  
"Here rest from their labors two renowned missionaries  
who departed this life in the midst of an arduous  
and very successful career in this region  
Reverend Father Baltazar Carrillo, O.F.M.  
October 9, 1795  
Reverend Father Narciso Gutierrez, O.F.M.  
December 21, 1821  
Their bodies, transferred from the old  
Franciscan Mission at Tumacacori, Arizona,  
were interred in this Mission of  
San Francisco Xavier  
February 21, 1935."

## A Link with the Past

Mission San Xavier del Bac is no mere symbol of a great ideal long since ushered out by the passing years and the fevered onrush of all we call modern. Upon their return nearly forty years ago, the Franciscan Fathers made the Mission the starting point from which to continue the work of their predecessors. The Padres of today can point with satisfaction to the results achieved among the Papago Indians, kinsfolk of the Sobaipuris for whom the Mission was founded. In addition to a school for Papago children associated with the Mission, and a church and school for the Indians in Tucson, there is a vast territory of the desert to the west, almost a hundred square miles in area, where a staff of nine Franciscan Fathers and fifteen Franciscan Sisters ministers to the needs of more than five thousand Papagos. There are fifty six churches and chapels in thirteen districts (pueblos), and six day-schools attended by nearly five hundred pupils. Each school and every church is a milestone along the road of conquest envisioned by Kino, Garces, and all the rest of that heroic band — the mighty conquest of the pagan spirit, but one to be effected, then as now, by means wholly peaceful.



The proceeds of this booklet will be used exclusively to supplement the funds of the San Xavier Mission Restoration program. The proposed work of restoration and preservation is extensive and, with the exception of this guidebook as a source of income, is solely dependent on the generosity of individual donors.





The builder of San Xavier added a grace note of humor to the superb design of the facade. Clinging to the inner curves of the lower volutes are a cat and mouse. Across the breadth of the gable they glare at one another with relentless suspicion. May they long continue to do so, for the Indians of San Xavier say, "When cat catches mouse, end of world will come"





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The original decorative designs  
and motifs used throughout this  
brochure are based upon the  
Spanish colonial baroque archi-  
tectural forms to be found in the  
Mission San Xavier del Bac.

