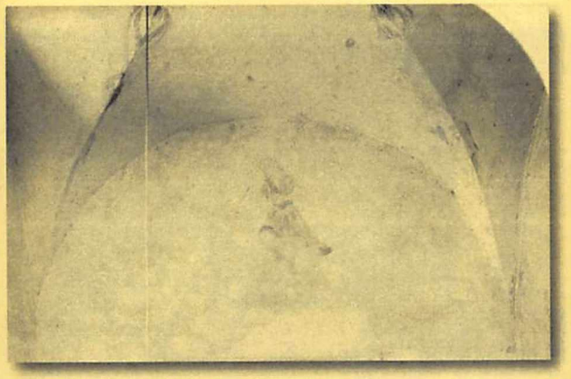
Niche Drinking fountain



San Ignacio de Cabórica, Sonora

Decorative niches are used in mission churches to hold statues of saints.

Groined vault Mission model room



San Xavier del Bac, Arizona

Also known as double or cross vaults, groined vaults can be found in the churches at missions San Ignacio and Tubutama.

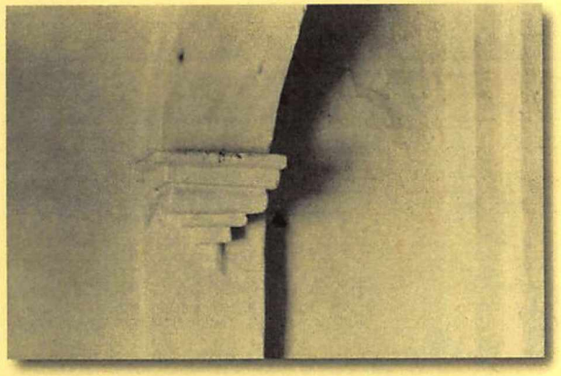
Courtyard garden Adjacent to the visitor center



The Alhambra, Granada, Spain

Most mission architectural details came from Spain, which itself borrowed heavily from Arabic and Moorish tradition. Courtyard gardens were valued for their utility and beauty.

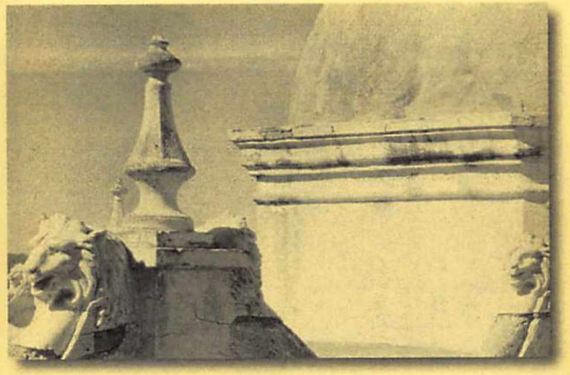
Corbel Mission model room



San Diego de Pitiquito, Sonora

Usually a corbel is structural, jutting from the wall to carry a load. However, they are also used as decorative features to draw attention to something like a statue, a holy water font, or other architectural detail such as an arch.

Finials Roofline corners



San Xavier del Bac, Arizona

Finials are decorative posts that stand at prominent roof corners. While not structurally necessary, they are a common architectural element used to ornament mission structures.

Museum entrance



Tumacácori National Historical Park, Arizona

Because of its unique aesthetic and interpretive value, the Tumacácori Visitor Center and Museum was granted the rare distinction of being designated a National Historic Landmark in 1987.

Tumacácori National Historical Park

Explore Tumacácori

Visitor Center and Museum Architecture

Duration | Distance | Accessibility

200 feet

Tips for a Safe and Responsible Visit

1. Stay on trails
2. Protect historic structures
3. Respect wildlife
4. Dispose of trash properly

History by Design



Pictured from left to right: Robert Rose (naturalist), George Grant (photographer), Leffler Miller (architect), J.H. Tovrea (engineer), Arthur Woodward (archeologist and journalist), Scofield DeLong (architect)

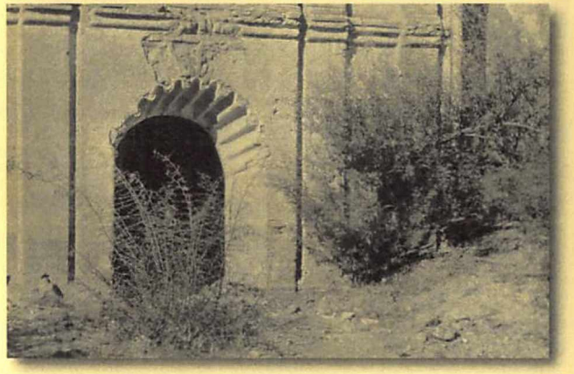
Tumacácori's visitor center building was designed to reflect historic mission architecture. It was purposefully planned to give visitors the feeling of stepping into the past, and of walking through mission structures, without actually reconstructing the historic mission complex.

In 1935, as planning for the new building began, a group of National Park Service specialists visited two Spanish colonial mission sites in Arizona and thirteen in Sonora, at a time of political and social unrest in Mexico. Architectural elements from mission structures were incorporated into in the design of the new visitor center. As a final touch, the building was oriented to provide an initial "knock-out" view of the church upon entry to the mission grounds.

The visitor center was built of adobe and plaster by local workers, using "New Deal" project funds, and dedicated in 1937.

Find these features
in the visitor center!

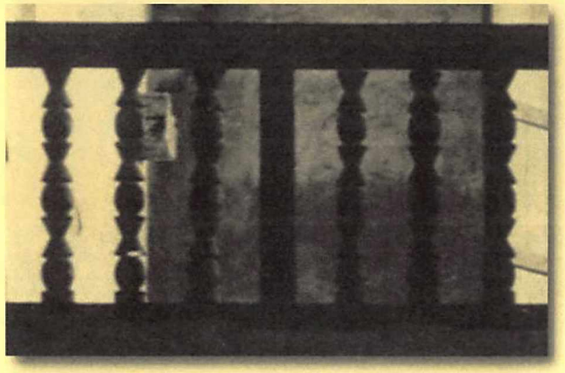
Scallop shell motif — Visitor center entrance



Nuestra Señora del Pilar y Santiago de Cocóspera, Sonora

The shell motif symbolizes the patron saint of Spain, Santiago de Compostela. One can find excellent examples in the niches of Tumacácori's bell tower and the front doors of the Cocóspera and Tubutama mission churches.

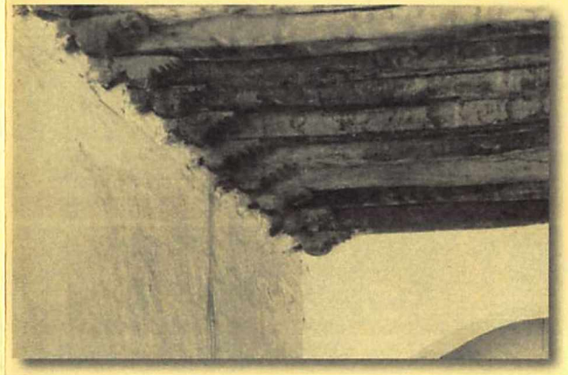
Spindles — Window next to visitor center entrance



San Pedro y San Pablo de Tubutama, Sonora

Tubutama's choir loft railings were the inspiration for a visitor center window feature. The last remains of the Tumacácori church choir loft collapsed in the late 1800s; the design of its railings is unknown.

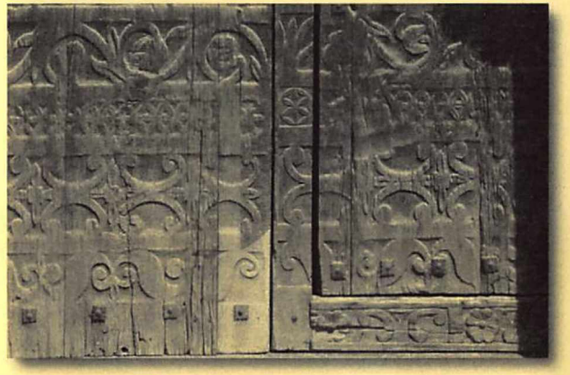
Vigas* and *latillas — Park store interior



San Antonio de Paduano de Oquitoa, Sonora

The heavy wooden beams supporting the ceiling are known as *vigas*. Laid on top and perpendicular were smaller planks or branches known as *latillas*. The decorative end caps are called corbels.

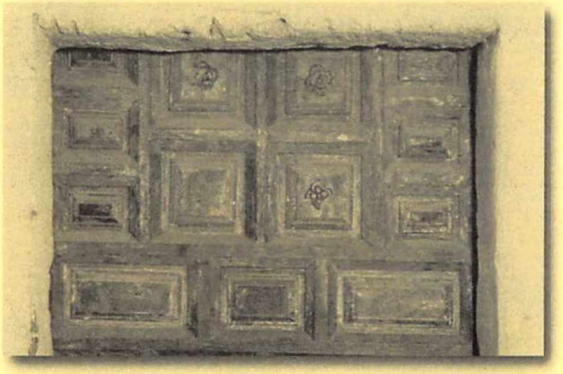
Carved "door-within-a-door" — Visitor center front doors



San Ignacio de Cabúrica, Sonora

Note the pomegranate blossom design along the top of the image. Pomegranates, usually seen as a symbol of fertility and abundance, appear in many decorative forms thoughout the missions of the Pimería Alta.

Panelled doors — Garden and visitor center doors



San Ignacio de Cabúrica, Sonora

Doors throughout the visitor center and garden emulate this concept of raised panels, common in mission structures.

Arcade — Visitor center exterior



La Purísima Concepción de Caborca, Sonora

As with many Spanish architectural traditions, the covered walkway lined with arches has its roots in Arabic and Middle Eastern architecture. The dark red painted *canales* provide drainage from the roofline.