

# The mission paintings of Mattie Fountain

Hearst family, Bank of America connections tie the story together, but who was Mattie Fountain? |



SLIDE 1 OF 9

Patricia Cullinan, director of the Depot Park Museum, examines one of the Mission in Santa Clara which had been hanging in the Bank of America on Napa Street, on Monday, Feb. 1. (Photo by Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)

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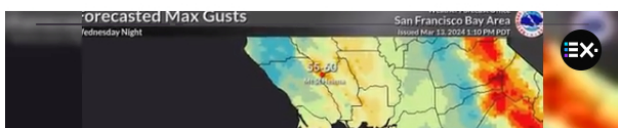
A one-of-a-kind collection of oil paintings representing almost the entire system of California Missions was handed over to the Sonoma Valley Historical Society last week by the Bank of America, which may have held the paintings for close to a century. All of the 19 paintings, from the Mexican border to the Mission San Francisco Solano in Sonoma, are by little-known 19th century artist Mattie E. Fountain.



Still life by Mattie E. Fountain, 1885.

Despite the rich repository of work that has been held at the Bank of America, little else is known about Fountain, other than that she lived in the Bay Area for much of her adult life, and was even listed in contemporary business directories as an artist - though it was as a portrait painter. Her paintings, including a still life offered for sale several years ago on an auction site, show a preference for muted natural colors, shadows and detail. She was evidently born in Vermont in 1853, as by the time she shows up in the 1880 U.S. Census, she was living in Oakland, and a widow at the age of 27.

"The Sonoma Valley Historical Society's goal is to loan the restored paintings to other missions to visually illustrate the extent of the importance of the string of missions that were so critical in the contemporary development of California," said Depot Museum director and the Historical Society President Patricia Cullinan.



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Stephen Hearst, of the Hearst family's Western Properties, contributed to help restore the paintings, Cullinan said, adding to his family tradition of supporting not only the arts, but the missions system's history.

It was William Randolph Hearst, Stephen's great-grandfather, who began the drive to purchase the Mission San Francisco Solano in 1903 with a donation of \$500. That community effort was taken up by the Sonoma Valley Woman's Club and the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, who provided much of the \$13,000 funding. The deed was passed to California State Parks on March 23, 1906, three weeks before the San Francisco earthquake.

The Hearst family's connection to Sonoma was earlier evident when, in 1891, Phoebe Hearst came to a property on Madrone Road to stay for six months to mourn her husband George Hearst's death. Phoebe Hearst also donated to the Woman's Club for their restoration of the Sonoma Plaza, and one of her life-long focuses was the independence of women. Certainly Mattie E. Fountain, as a contemporary of Phoebe Hearst, reflects the success of a woman who was self-supporting and self-determining.

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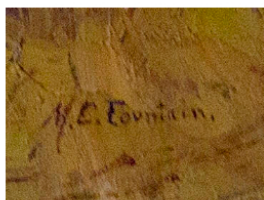
Poster announcing the 1957 opening of the Bank of America in Sonoma, where it now stands.

For the most part, it is thought Fountain's Mission series may have been in the custody of the Bank of America, which first came to Sonoma Valley in 1927. Fifty years later, the bank opened its Napa Street branch which still stands, opposite the Plaza, "a new and more commodious bank designed in the style of early-California Spanish adobes," according to their faux-historic handbill announcing an opening celebration, on Aug. 8, 1957.

Among the attractions of that opening — which included refreshments, souvenirs and entertainment (including the Valley of the Moon Swingers) — was the "premier showing of the Sonoma branch's permanent exhibit of historical paintings of California missions."

"This particular collection was housed in our Sonoma financial center, some on the walls and some in the attic. As we began renovating the center, we thought that the Sonoma Valley Historical Society would appreciate this piece of California Mission history," said Jason Foster, the bank's North Bay market president. "Bank of America has been in Sonoma since 1927 and in its current location since 1956, so we have a tremendous appreciation for the community in general and how California history and the arts fit into the community."

The collection represents the series of missions established by Franciscans throughout the length of Alta California, between 1769 in San Diego to 1823, the date of the founding of the Sonoma Mission.



Signature of Mattie E. Flowers, on the painting of the Santa Clara Mission.

Cullinan thought the original collection might have included all 21 of the missions, as one of the paintings the historical society received last week was identified as "number 20" in the collection, and a couple of the paintings suffered irretrievable water damage.

The public record for Mattie Fountain disappears after 1905, when she would have been in her early 50s, but the year of her death is uncertain. Phoebe Hearst, however, died at her home in Pleasanton at the age of 76, in April, 1919, during the worldwide influenza epidemic.

When she died her only son, William Randolph Hearst, inherited her wealth.

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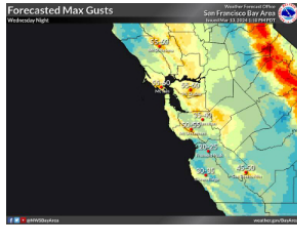
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