

ADVANCED READER

Life during Mexican-era, Alta California 1821-1846



Ferdinand Deppe, *San Gabriel Mission*, oil on canvas, c.1832

Ferdinand Deppe was a German visitor to Alta California.
He was a naturalist, artist and sea-faring merchant.

Questions about Ferdinand Deppe's painting, *The San Gabriel Mission*

What is the definition of a primary source?

What is the definition of a secondary source?

Is this painting a primary or a secondary source? Why?

What do you notice in this painting? What kind of story does it convey? Write a response from your own point of view.

Later on, you will learn more about the time period of this painting. Your ideas about it might change. Notice the various types of clothing and the various action scenes.

Ferdinand Deppe was born in Berlin in 1794. When he was young, he was a gardener at the King's Palace in Germany.

In August of 1824, Deppe decided to leave Berlin and travel to Mexico.¹ His goal was to collect plant and animals and send them back to Berlin. Other naturalists from Berlin had already brought back plants and animals from faraway places such as Egypt and Greece. Now Deppe decided to do the same in Mexico. Deppe's painting of Mission San Gabriel left an influence on how the general public has understood the California missions. You have a chance to view and study this painting too.

Before crossing the Atlantic Ocean and traveling to Mexico, Deppe had to learn skills that would help him collect animal and plant samples. He practiced drawing and painting. He also studied Spanish and English, botany, zoology, and taxidermy.² Deppe finally arrived in Mexico in December of 1824. He stayed with German merchants that were already living there.³

Deppe's journey took four months. He went from Berlin to Hamburg to Cuxhaven to London to Falmouth to Barbados to Jamaica and then finally to Mexico.⁴

Within a couple of months, Deppe managed to send back the following items to Berlin:

- several monkeys
- 17 big birds
- 1 crocodile
- 1 container with mammals, amphibians, fish, worms and insects in alcohol
- 1 box with conchylia
- 1 box with insects
- living plants
- small packages of seeds (delivered to the botanical garden)⁵

Deppe sent a letter from Mexico to Berlin, describing his living space in Mexico City during the year ca. 1825:

¹ The dates for Deppe's initial trip to London seem to differ. See the two articles about Deppe. Ulf Bankmann's 2002 article lists his departure as Aug 21, 1824 from Cuxhaven. Stresemann's 1954 article lists Deppe as arriving in London on Aug 23, 1824. Did this trip take only two days? That has not been determined. For information contained in this paragraph, see Ulf Bankmann, "A Prussian in Mexican California: Ferdinand Deppe, Horticulturalist, Collector for European Museums, Trader and Artist," *Southern California Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2002): 1-3.

² *Ibid.*, 2. / Erwin Stresemann, "Ferdinand Deppe's Travels in Mexico, 1824-1829," *The Condor* 56, no. 2 (1954): 86.

³ Bankmann, 3-5. Deppe states that he received help from German traders such as those from the *Rhinish West Indian Company* and the *German-American Mining Association*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

*"The room I rented is furnished only with a hard bed, three old chairs and a table which is covered with the collected specimens, where I prepare them and also have to eat. Out of my coat I made some kind of closet to protect my clothes from dust. On the walls are several cages with living birds; also, in lack of an additional room, I have to endure the other living animals I collected with quite a bit of trouble in the room with me."*⁶

What kinds of things do you think Deppe had on his table?

Why do you think he had to use his coat to "protect his clothes from dust?"

About how many cages do you think Deppe had "on the walls"?

What other types of animals do you think Deppe had in the room with him?



Deppe drew this lizard during his long stay in Mexico. He wrote, "I was unable to depict the beautiful blue color of the tail true to nature."¹

1. Can you think of another animal that has a blue tail?

2. Try adding a little more blue color to your copy of Deppe's lizard.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

After almost three years in Mexico, Deppe returned home to Berlin in April of 1827. By this time, this is what he had collected from Mexico:

- 93 different mammals
- 962 different birds
- 476 amphibians and fish
- 6,000 different insects
- 400 types of molluscs and conchylia
- 3 crates of rocks and ore
- 4 crates of living plants
- 3 crates with seeds
- 1 crate with bulbs and tubers
- small wax models of Aztec stone sculpture
- wax figurines of Mexican folk types, costumes, baskets, books and prints and coins

Do you think Deppe had to move out of his smaller room as he collected this second set of items?

If you were looking through Deppe's collection listed here, which item would you be most interested in?

It would seem that Deppe had collected enough! However, he returned to Mexico in July of 1828 to collect even more specimens.

During the year 1831, Deppe traveled to Mexico's northern province, **Alta California** and began work in another job.⁷ He became a Pacific coast, hide and tallow merchant.

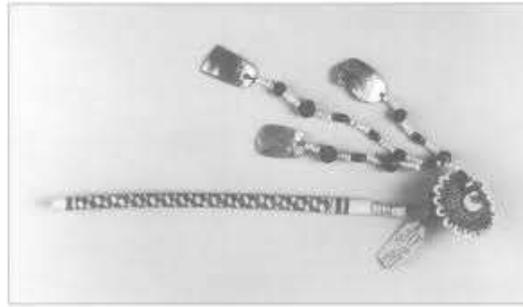
Even as a merchant, Deppe continued to collect plant and animal specimens and valuable cultural objects. This time he collected them from **Alta California**.⁸

⁷ Jeanne Van Nostrand, *The First Hundred Years of Painting in California - 1775-1875, with Biographical Information and References Relating to the Artists* (San Francisco: John Howell-Books, 1980), 96. Van Nostrand states that Deppe "made at least six trips to California between 1828-1836 in the employ of Henry Virmond, a German trader with headquarters in Mexico City and Acapulco."

⁸ Bankmann, 10-11.



This is a Chumash basket collected by Ferdinand Deppe during the 1830s in Alta California. The Chumash lived and still live in the area known as Santa Barbara, California.¹



Fancy ear ornament An incised bone tube with a doiled basketry disk at one end decorated with Olivella shell disk beads, glass trade beads, and abalone pendants, collected by Ferdinand Deppe in the vicinity of Mission Santa Clara, 1837 (as described by Ulf Bankman)(fn,page 20)
Collection of the Museum of Mankind, British Museum

Deppe's Alta California collection of "ornaments, featherwork and basketry" was shipped to Berlin.⁹ His New England friend and fellow merchant, Alfred Robinson, shipped his many crates for him. Robinson wrote a letter on May 1, 1836, asking members of his trading company to send Deppe's Alta California collection to Hamburg, Germany. Robinson wrote,

*"I have embarked in the [ship] Alert, Boxes containing specimens of Natural History addressed to your care & to be embarked in Boston the first opportunity for Hamburg...Respecting the freight, the House in Hamburg will satisfy all expenses & it is the request of Mr. Deppe that the Cases may not be opened in the Custom House if possible to avoid it – enclosed you will find a small scrap of paper on which it is written the address of the House to which the Boxes are consigned."*¹⁰

Why would Deppe ask for the cases not to be opened in the Custom House?

The head of the Berlin Zoological Museum complimented Deppe on his work as a collector. He said, *"the artful fabrics, feather garments, headdresses, basketry, household items and weapons of the Indians on the Northwest Coast of America...have been assembled by [Deppe] so very completely...and so one gets a rather good idea of these peoples' condition which is not disdainful at all."*¹¹

Deppe collected a wide variety of items used by California Indians. There are many possible reasons for this. Expand on one possible reason below. How do you think Deppe viewed various groups of Indians he encountered in Alta California?

⁹ King Friedrich Wilhelm III paid for this collection to be housed in the Berlin *Kunstammer*. This institution was founded in the sixteenth century. Ibid., 14.

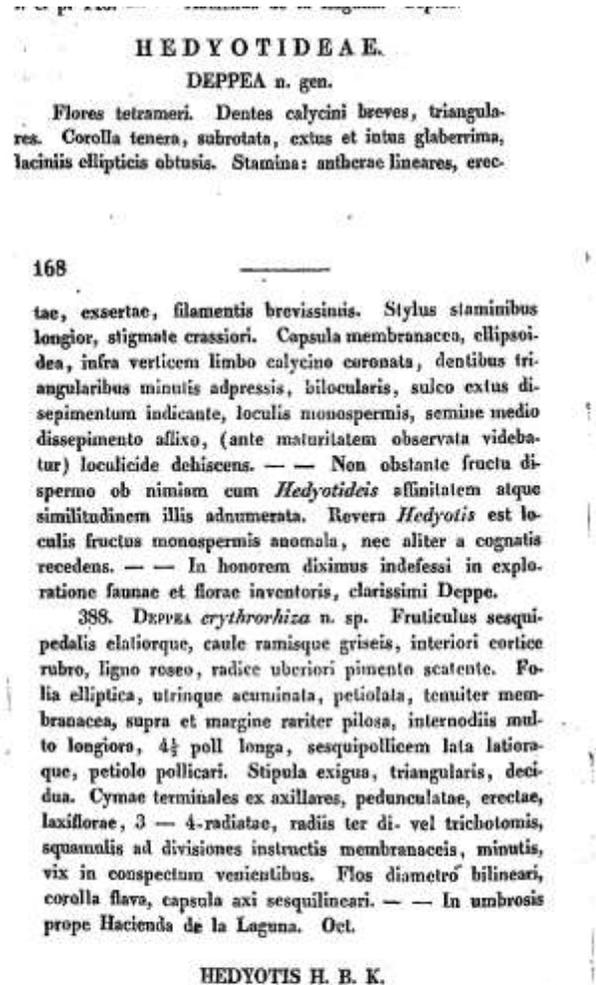
¹⁰ Adele and Alfred Robinson Ogden, "Business Letters of Alfred Robinson," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1944): 319.

¹¹ Bankmann, 12. Head of the Berlin Zoological Museum from 1813-1857, Hinrich Lichtenstein speculated that the Chumash creators of the baskets and feather garments "might have worked for years to complete these objects."

Deppe's Name is still with us today

More than 86 plants are named after Deppe in today's botanical science.

Some of the names appeared shortly after Deppe's earliest travels to Mexico as early as 1830 in Berlin's *Journal of Botany*. Some of the pages are featured here.



This photograph shows a type of tree named after Deppe. It's called the *Juniperus Deppeana*. This tree also goes by other names, including its Spanish and Aztec names: 1
Tascate blanco (Spanish)
Tascal (Aztec)
Alligator Juniper
Checkerbark Juniper
Cedro
Cedro Chino
Tascate ¹

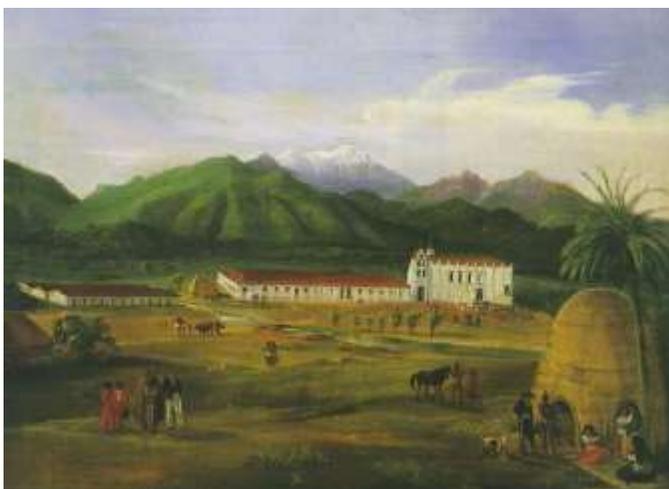
Mexican-era California was visited by many different kinds of people. This is a part of California's international culture today.

During the time Deppe was collecting cultural and natural items in **Alta California** and working as a merchant, he painted *Mission San Gabriel* in 1832 or 1835.¹² This was the first oil painting created in California.

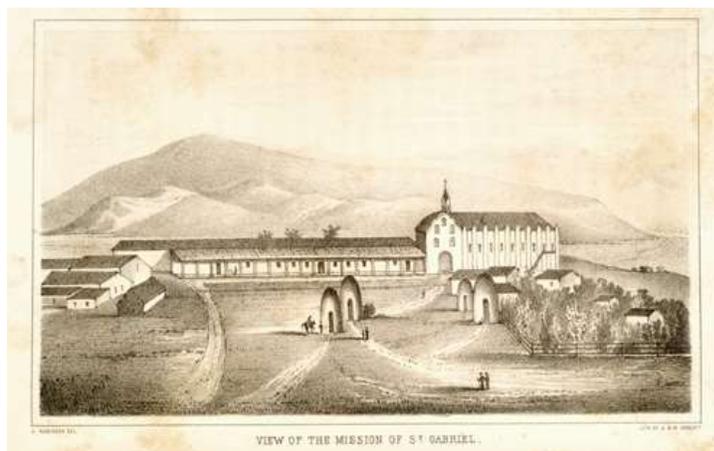
Deppe traveled throughout Alta California with his New England merchant friend, Alfred Robinson. Both of them worked as merchants and naturalists and both captured the California Missions through their art.

Why do you think they drew the Mission in similar ways?

Why do you think they drew the Mission in different ways?



Ferdinand Deppe, *San Gabriel Mission*, oil on canvas
c.1832



Alfred Robinson's *View of the Mission of St. Gabriel*
c.1829-1842¹

¹² Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Register of Pioneer Inhabitants of California, 1542-1848* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1964), 778.

The Alta California items Deppe collected are in the *Dahlem Gallery of Native American Art and Artifacts* today.¹³



Deppe returned to Berlin for good in 1837. He became a gardener again, growing local as well as foreign plants and flowers, such as those he found in Mexico. Many people visited him to see his gardens. As a world traveler, surely Deppe remembered his adventures in Mexico as he lived out the rest of his life in Berlin.

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¹³ During the Cold War, the Berlin Museum did not exhibit items from Deppe's collection. Since 1999, however, the collection has been on exhibit at the *Dahlem Gallery of Native American Art and Artifacts*. Bankmann, 16.