

DEEP ROOTS

A San Antonio native traces his family history to a legendary craftsman

Story and photograph by Cynthia J. Drake

On a recent sunny afternoon, **Vincent Huizar** sat under a tree-shaded bench at Mission San José and chiseled rose petal shapes and religious symbols out of a soft, white limestone block. The 66-year-old San Antonio native and former tradesman does this a couple of days a week, teaching himself how to sculpt rock the way he believes his great-great-great grandfather, Pedro Huizar, did at the mission in the 1700s. He said spending time around the mission's stone walls brings him closer to his family history—and to the history of San Antonio.

Huizar has dedicated his retirement years to learning as much as he can about his ancestors through baptismal records and documents dating back to the 18th century. “The first time I heard anything about it was from my mom,” he said. “My dad passed away when I was still in my mother’s womb. She told me, ‘Your dad told me not to forget to tell you when you are old enough to understand that one of the missions around here ... there’s a window, and one of his grandfathers carved it.’ I never forgot that.”

Huizar’s father was referring to the Rose Window (pictured), a legendary baroque window on the church’s south wall. Ornate carved-stone vine tendrils curl around its frame, a feat of artistic whimsy remarkable for a frontier mission. Rumors have swirled



around the origin of this window. Some believe that Pedro Huizar, a young Spanish artisan at the time, carved it in honor of his love, Rosa, who was lost at sea.

Experts argue about the meaning of the image, but they tend to agree about its significance today. “Starting around the turn of the 20th century, the Rose Window really was adopted by the city of San Antonio as an emblem of the city,” said Susan Snow, archaeologist for the missions. In fact, the image has been emblazoned on class rings and the exteriors of buildings downtown.

Can we say for certain that Pedro Huizar carved it? He’s generally credited with the work, Snow said, but it’s impossible to say for sure. “We know Pedro Huizar was an important person

in the colonial period,” she said. “He is predominantly described as a carpenter or a master craftsman, but there is one source—a census—that lists him as a sculptor.”

Meanwhile, as the city has been preparing to celebrate its tricentennial, Vincent Huizar has been busy honing a craft inextricably linked to San Antonio’s past. The soft-spoken man whose black truck is embellished with Pedro Huizar’s name cherishes his connection to San Antonio’s earliest roots. “I’m tied to the Huizars who are tied to the church in the 1700s,” he said. “They had no cranes, no electricity, and this guy built something so beautiful here. We were probably some of the first so-called Americans, and our story is being passed down.”

Austin-based writer Cynthia J. Drake loves sipping a manguonada under the twinkling lights of the River Walk.