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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Natural History Museum Unveils Portrait of Juana María, the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island

Local Artist Holli Harmon Creates Likeness Based on First-Hand Accounts

Santa Barbara, California (February 21, 2018) — The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History recently unveiled a historically accurate portrait of Juana María, the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island. Fictionalized as “Karana” in Scott O’Dell’s novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, she was a real person who lived by herself on San Nicolas Island. Accidentally left behind in 1835, when the last of the native inhabitants were conveyed to the mainland at the request of the Santa Barbara Mission priests, she resourcefully caught her own food, made her own clothes, and built her own shelter for 18 years. In 1853, Carl Dittman and sea otter hunter Captain George Nidever found the woman alive and well. She willingly returned to the mainland on his ship, living with Nidever’s family in Santa Barbara for only seven weeks before she tragically fell ill and died. The Lone Woman was conditionally baptized with the name Juana María and buried at the Santa Barbara Mission.

Harmon’s piece is the first painting to be based on historical records. Most representations of Juana María to date have been based on the romantic image popularized in O’Dell’s book. A research team including archaeologist Steve Schwartz, historian Susan Morris, and Museum Curator of Anthropology John Johnson supplied local artist Holli Harmon with historically accurate descriptions of the Lone Woman. Using oil on canvas, Harmon completed the work in just over a year.

The painting is set in Corral Harbor, the most notable landmark on San Nicolas, and likely the site from which the rest of the Nicoleño departed the island. Eyewitnesses reported that the Lone Woman was in her 50s, of medium height, and weighed 100-130 pounds. She had relatively fair skin, with shoulder-length hair that had become matted and sun-bleached to a reddish-brown color. In this vivid and detailed portrait, she wears a cormorant-feather dress – sleeveless, ankle-length, with a sinew belt at the waist – which she resourcefully sewed from bird skins. She holds her watertight basket for carrying water, an artifact which was later donated to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco (where, incidentally, it was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire). The companion dog in the portrait resembles the Plains Indian breed, which archaeological studies have identified as once living on San Nicolas Island.

Harmon’s piece hangs at the Museum in context with artifacts relating to the Lone Woman’s story, and to the daily life of the local Chumash people. Although she was not Chumash, her story is an important part of the history of Native Americans in the Santa Barbara area. The new depiction pays authentic tribute to her unique and enigmatic life, and hangs in a place where locals and visitors alike can be touched by her remarkable story.

The portrait is now on display at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History’s Chumash Indian Hall and can be viewed with paid admission every day from 10:00 AM-5:00 PM. For more information, visit www.sbnature.org.

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About the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Founded in 1916, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History strives to instill a passion for learning and discovery among its patrons. The Museum aims to build relationships with the Santa Barbara community as well as encourage members and all visitors to seek a better understanding of the world around them. For more information, visit www.sbnature.org.



Portrait of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island by Holli Harmon – 2017, oil on canvas

Photo credit: Baron Spafford Photography