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Outlaw Art



A carving for sale at the hobby shop

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The penitentiary at San Quentin opened on a rocky North Bay promontory in 1852, and rehabilitation and educational programs for inmates were introduced in the 1940s. Inside the prison hobby shop, a plain room just outside the gates, the walls are lined with paintings and prints, and the display cases are filled with jewelry, leather goods and other pieces made by the inmates.

BOAT GOING NOWHERE

In the early 1850s, criminals were held on Angel Island and on a ship anchored in the bay. The prison was built at what was known as Point Quentin. Quentin was an Indian chief taken prisoner by Mexican soldiers here in 1824.

ARTIFACTS

A museum on the San Quentin grounds is dedicated to the relationship between the prison and the state's history. It displays homemade knives crafted from various items and confiscated from the prisoners, as well as a bloodstained noose from the last execution by hanging, in 1937.

PASSING TIME

Of the nearly 5,000 men imprisoned here, over 700 are on death row. The condemned, who live in solo cells, are allowed knitting needles. Their baby blankets and stuffed bunnies are sold in the shop.



STARVING ARTISTS

Louis Daniels, an inmate, produces over 400 carved miniature cable cars each year, priced from \$36 to \$95. A black-and-white pointillist painting by William Noguera recently sold for \$1,200. Prisoners receive 80 percent of the sales receipts; regular prison work pays 35 cents to 95 cents an hour.

LIVING

Martha Stewart sculptured a Nativity scene while she was in prison in West Virginia in 2004, but clay is not allowed at San Quentin. Prisoners could use it to make decoy body parts to fool guards during bed checks.

CAPTIVATING

Striking murals of California history painted by Alfredo Santos in the 1950s cover the prison's mess hall. After his release, Mr. Santos, a convicted heroin dealer, drew caricatures at Disneyland.

TERMS AND CASH

Minimum-security prisoners sometimes work in the shop, where sales are cash-only. Johnny Cash played his first prison concert here in 1958; Merle Haggard was in the audience, doing time for attempted robbery.

TROMPE L'OEIL

Prisoners in the H-Unit have been painting murals for over five years. Among the prehistoric landscapes are 14 hidden images, including likenesses of Jimi Hendrix and Marilyn Monroe. The dormitory there is said to be cleaner than others.

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