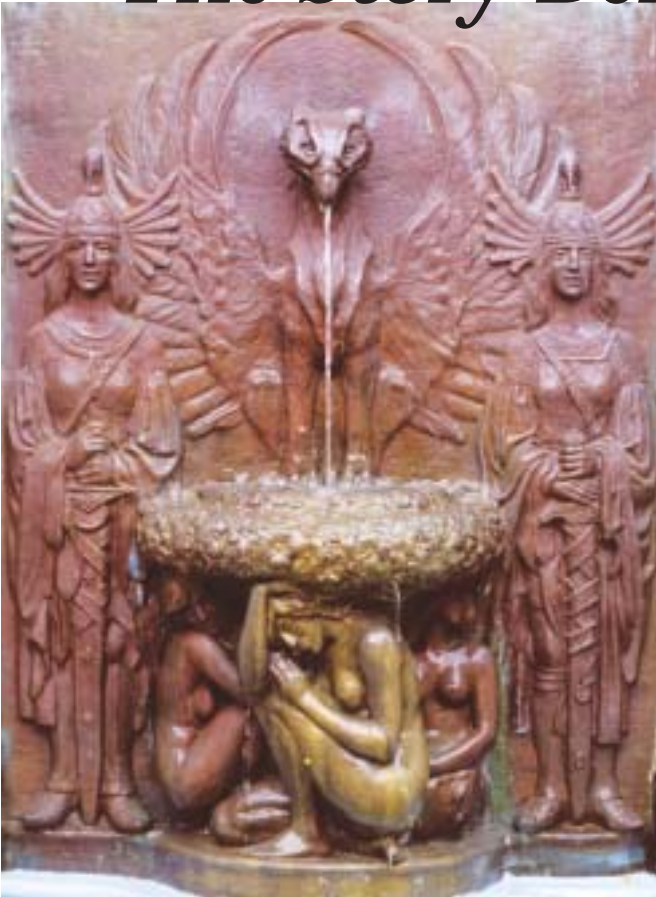


# Califia

## The Story Behind the Legend

by Peter Hiller



**F**or a state that continues to attract people from around the world, it should come as no surprise to discover that its name, California, most likely came from half way around the world as well. The mythology of California's place name opened up wonderful opportunities for artists to interpret the visual image of this magnificent state's name.

There is no precise explanation for the origin of the name of our state-California. There are many thoughts and theories. The Indians of Baja used the words *kali for not* to mean 'high hills' 'mountain' or 'native land'. The Arabic words *caliph* (supreme ruler), *calophat* (sovereignty) and *khalifah* (successor) all exist as possibilities. The key may be in the Spanish word *califa*, which also derives from Arabic and lends itself to the leading theory about the name origin.

In 1862, the literary scholar Edward Everett Hale translated the Spanish novella *Las Esplandian de Sergas* into English. Upon doing so, he found the first printed use of the name California. The Spanish writer Garcí Ordóñez de Montalvo, as a sequel to the popular story *Amadis de Gaula*, wrote the novella in 1510 and most likely coined the name California himself.

The story depicted the fictional adventures of Esplandian who visits, "on the right hand of the Indies, an island called California, very near to the Terrestrial Paradise, which was peopled with black women, accustomed to live after the fashion of Amazons...their arms were full of gold." They were strong and hardy bodies, of ardent courage and

great force, who lived without men in a female culture.

The women rode great beasts, half eagle and half lion, called griffins. The griffins were symbolically the guardians to the road to salvation and were fed the voyaging men that found their way to the island. Wood nymphs populated the island according to the novel as well. Their island was the strongest in the world, with its steep cliffs and rocky shores. Ruling California was the mighty Queen Calafia...the most beautiful of them all.

As Spanish explorers were discovering the 'New Spain' (Mexico), and more specifically what is now Baja California, it is very likely that they were familiar with the popular book of Montalvo's and that the name California was first used by one of them. At this time Baja was considered to be an island and had been explored by Fortun Jimenez in 1533, who was sent by Cortés and by Francisco de Bolanos who sailed both sides of Baja in 1541.

Hale wrote that, "This romance of Montalvo's was the yellow-covered novel of their (Cortés and his men) day. 'Come,' said one, 'let ▶ 63



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us name the new island California. Perhaps some one will find gold here yet and precious stones...and so the romance, the peninsula, the gulf and afterwards the state got its name.” The name itself, however, did not appear on any maps until 1562.

On at least two occasions artists have been called upon to visually depict various aspects of the mythology of California’s name. In 1926, Charles Peter Weeks, a leading San Francisco architect, approached Maynard Dixon and Frank Van Sloun to create a series of murals illustrating the history of California. These paintings were to become part of the interior decoration in the newly completed Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill in San Francisco. The centerpiece, at Weeks’s insistence, of the nine panels was to be Queen Calafia. In the painting, she is protected by amazons on both sides and seen, holding gold, in a robe decorated with images of griffins.

The murals were actually painted in the spaciousness of the Palace of Fine Arts and then moved to their intended destination, the ‘Room of the Dons’ in the hotel, where they currently reside. These noted artists were able to compromise their visions into a singular work that reflects the style of them both and a wonderful representation of the history of California.

In 1912, United States Senator James D. Phelan had commissioned artist and writer Jo Mora to participate with him in the creation of a fountain for his estate in Saratoga, California-Villa Montalvo. The villa was intentionally named after the writer who first used the name California. Mora was so taken with the story of Queen Calafia, that he included her as the introduction to both of the cartes (maps) that he created to illustrate the state of California and its history. His first

*Jo Mora’s inscription on the Montalvo fountain, created 1921:*

MDXXI  
KNOW  
ORDONEZDE MONTALVO’S  
FAME  
DID HE NOT SEE  
IN FANTASY  
OUR CALIFORNIA GROW  
OUT OF OLD SPAIN  
CONFERRED HER NAME  
FORETOLD  
HER GOLD  
A PARADISE  
FOR EAGER EYES  
HIS DREAM CAME TRUE  
FOR ME AND YOU  
MCMXII

California carte was printed in 1927, and then in 1947, he made a smaller version of the same historical subject.

Phelan had created a west coast ‘salon’ at his estate, where both men and women gathered as artists and statesmen, in mutual support, for the enlightenment of all. Mora, working in bronze, sculpted a central griffin, protected on both sides by amazons standing guard above wood nymphs-all characters from the story by Montalvo. The fountain, found in the Spanish court of the estate, was a centerpiece of attention during these constant social events that took place at the villa.

It is Phelan’s own words, that adorn the top half of the fountain, in his tribute to his estate’s namesake:

It is with no doubt that Phelan and Weeks both believed in Garci Montalvo’s story of California, and its glorious potential, which is made all the more interesting by learning the fascinating history and interpretations of her name.

Jo Mora’s tribute to the story of California can still be found at Villa Montalvo, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga, Ca.

*An elementary school art teacher, Peter Hiller is also a contributing editor for Arts and Activities magazine. He was the guest curator at the Monterey Museum of Art for their retrospective exhibition Jo Mora Artist and Writer in 1998. His interest in the story of California’s name stems from his interest in the multifaceted accomplishments of Jo Mora.*

**Gold Rush fever and gold strikes may have occurred on the streets every day in 1849, but the name California truly had been predicted from a legend created by a sixteenth-century poet.**



Mural by Maynard Dixon and Frank Van Sloun

**In 1912, United States Senator James D. Phelan had commissioned artist and writer Jo Mora to participate with him in the creation of a fountain for his estate in Saratoga, California-Villa Montalvo.**