

# Mexico City's National Museum of Interventions



CONACULTA-INAH-MEX

The National Museum of Interventions in the Ex-Monastery of Churubusco offers a unique opportunity to look at the history of a city and a country that constantly examine the past to explain their present and build their future.

The former monastery's walls are seeped in 400 years of experience, and its rooms take us through what have been perhaps the most difficult years of our history as an independent country, when

All photographs reprinted with permission of the National Institute of Anthropology and History/Conaculta-INAH-MEX.



CONACULTA-INAH-MEX

The room of the first French intervention in 1838.

six times in a century we had to defend our sovereignty and territory from foreign aggression. The building itself even played a leading role in one of those battles, when it was the bastion from which the capital was defended against the advance of U.S. troops in 1847.

## A BUILDING WITH HISTORY

During the conquest, the Spaniards vanquished not only with the sword but also with their God, for whom they built many

hermitages, chapels and churches atop the demolished *teocallis* (temples) to the indigenous gods. So, what we now know as the Ex-Monastery of Churubusco was built on the foundations of a temple dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, god of war and principle deity of the Huitzilopochco people, whose name when interpreted by the Spaniards gave rise to the word Churubusco.

First, it was only a hermitage; then church, and finally, about 1538, a Franciscan monastery. In 1576, it was turned over to the order of the Diegan friars to train missionaries destined for the Philippines, China and Japan, an activity that continued for the entire colonial period. Later, the church was rebuilt from the foundations up and the monastery expanded.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century, the building looked much as it does today.

In the early nineteenth century, monastery operations slowed down. The war of independence interrupted links to Asia and both the religious orders and the secular clergy suffered from Mexico's political zigzags during its first years as

an independent nation. Liberals and conservatives both fought to impose their own idea of what the nation should be: the Liberals, eventually victorious, harshly questioned the privileges and wealth that the Catholic Church had accumulated during three centuries of Spanish domination.

At the same time, Mexico had to deal with different conflicts with foreign powers. The most costly, the Mexico-United States War (1846-1848), ended with the loss of a great part of our national territory, and would be the reason the Churubusco Monastery would go down in history. Located where the roads from Tlalpan and Coyoacán to Mexico City crossed, Churubusco was considered an ideal spot for defending the capital from advancing U.S. troops. The friars were evacuated and the National Guard under General Manuel Rincón fortified the site. The battle took place August 20 and is remembered in Mexican history for the courage of the Mexican troops, who fought until they ran out of ammunition and were forced to surrender. The Americans held Churubusco for 18 days and from there



Conaculta-INAH-MEX

Don Diego del Castillo and his wife were the patrons of the construction of the original monastery in the seventeenth century.

advanced on other strategic points and took the city.

Ten years later, a monument would be raised there to commemorate the bravery of those who fell in battle. The monument still stands, as do two of the Mexican cannon used during the battle, flanking the entrance to the museum. At the other end of the museum's park is a statue honoring Pedro María Anaya, remembered for his answer to the U.S. generals when they asked him where the ammu-



Conaculta-INAH-MEX

One of the cannon used to defend the ex-monastery during the Battle of Churubusco, August 20, 1847.



Conaculta-INAH-MEX

Inside entrance way to the museum.





Conaculta-INAH-MEX

preservation in its original state possible, although it deteriorated somewhat. In 1917, it was turned into the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Historical Museum, opening with an exhibit about the 1847 war. Finally, in 1939, when it was declared a historic monument, it came under the authority of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. In 1980, the building was restored to establish the National Museum of Interventions.

#### THE MUSEUM

A collection of lithographs, engravings, photographs, paintings, maps, weapons, flags, uniforms, furniture and other items displayed in 13 rooms explains the different armed invasions of Mexico during its first century as an independent nation. In an unusual museographical exhibit, the different objects, testimonies, letters and documents fit together to explain how the protagonists and witnesses thought and acted.

After an introduction about the difficulties Mexico faced in constituting itself as a nation, the visitor enters the room

dedicated to the first intervention, by the Spanish in 1829, who failed in their attempt to recover Mexico as a territory. Nine years later, in 1838, France attempted to get Mexico to sign a trade agreement favoring it over other countries like England; Mexico's Congress refused, at which point France positioned warships off the coast of Veracruz. The pretext was support for French citizens' claims against Mexico for losses during the independence movement. Mexico was able to successfully negotiate an end to the conflict, but its lack of military strength had been clearly demonstrated.

dedicated to the first intervention, by the Spanish in 1829, who failed in their attempt to recover Mexico as a territory. Nine years later, in 1838, France attempted to get Mexico to sign a trade agreement favoring it over other countries like England; Mexico's Congress refused, at which point France positioned warships off the coast of Veracruz. The pretext was support for French citizens' claims against Mexico for losses during the independence movement. Mexico was able to successfully negotiate an end to the conflict, but its lack of military strength had been clearly demonstrated.

This would have repercussions 8 years later when Mexico faced what was then already emerging as the leading world power. Both victors and vanquished have expounded their points of view about the reasons behind the Mexico-U.S. War of 1846-1848. For Mexico, the war meant the loss of more than 2 million square kilometers of territory, a wound that even today it is not clear if it has healed, and the awareness that the defense of national sovereignty and integrity must be pursued by means other than arms.



Conaculta-INAH-MEX

Outside entrance and facade.



Conaculta-INAH-MEX

Juárez and his government traveled throughout Mexico in this carriage during the second French intervention (1862-1867).

In 1862, Mexican territory would again be violated by foreign troops, but this time, with the collaboration of Mexicans. Mexican conservatives approved of the French intervention of 1862-1867

of the twentieth century. At that time, the economic modernization fostered for 30 years under the Porfirio Díaz' dictatorship was not accompanied by a similar political and social change, sparking

diplomatic negotiating ability got better results than guns.

The museum's last room sums up the lessons learned from these experiences and applied in the fundamental principles of Mexican foreign policy established in the 1917 Constitution: non-intervention, self-determination of all peoples and the peaceful solution of controversies.

The museum building alone is worth a visit. In contrast with the theme of the main exhibit, a walk through the cells, the rooms with their magnificent arches, traces of its original decoration and several patios manage to transmit the silence and interior peace that were so sought after in the original monastery. **MM**



Room dedicated to the Mexico-U.S. War of 1846-1848.



Throne on which Agustín de Iturbide was crowned emperor of Mexico in 1822.

and supported a foreign emperor in Mexico, Maximilian of Austria. The Liberals, led by Benito Juárez at the head of the republic, resisted until they ran the invaders out.

Here, the visitor pauses to situate the change Mexico went through at the turn

as a result the revolutionary movement of 1910.

The country would be threatened by invasion twice more. The first time, in 1914, in the middle of the Revolution, President Woodrow Wilson tried to influence events and ordered the invasion of Veracruz. Two years later, in 1916, punitive expeditions were mounted along the northern border with the pretext of capturing Pancho Villa and his bandoleros, seen as a security threat to the U.S. border. Again, on that occasion, Mexican



Piece from the colonial room, soon to be opened to the public.

*Text:* **Elsie Montiel**

*Photography:* **Dante Barrera**

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Address:** Between 20 de Agosto and General Anaya Streets in Churubusco, Coyoacán (Subway Line 2, General Anaya stop).

**Open:** Tuesday to Sunday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

**Entrance Fee:** 16 pesos; Sundays, free. Guided tours are available for groups and students. Reservations required.

The museum has a library and offers temporary exhibits, summer and extension courses and workshops, as well as lectures, round table discussions and book launches.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These amplifications were financed by Don Diego del Castillo, a silver trader from the city of Granada, Spain. It was very common for mine owners and others who made fortunes from the New World's minerals to invest part of their profits in building or opulently decorating churches and other religious buildings. The states of Guanajuato and Zacatecas have many examples of this.