

Yesterday Is Today at the El Carmen Museum

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Centuries ago it was a large fruit orchard in the town of San Ángel. Today, it is a traffic-clogged thoroughfare in southern Mexico City. Here, in the midst of daily chaos, the El Carmen Museum emerges like bookends enclosing chapters of history.

Built in the seventeenth century — 1615 to be exact — by Friar Andrés de San Miguel to hold the College of the Discalced Carmelites of Our Lady of Santa Ana, El Carmen was this religious order's home, school, and monastery. The Carmelites had their origins in ancient hermits who lived in a community on Mount Carmel in Palestine around the thirteenth century. Later, they spread to different countries. Some of them established themselves in Spain, and the order was reformed by Saint Teresa of Ávila, which is when they took the name of barefoot or discalced Carmelites. That is, they renewed their order under a mandate of austerity and asceticism. Like other religious orders such as the Jesuits or Dominicans, the Carmelites traveled to spread the Gospel, and in the seventeenth century, they established themselves

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All photos, courtesy of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.





Aqueduct patio.



El Carmen's domes.



Student's patio.



Crypts.

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Cloister with Talavera-tile-covered fountain.

in different places in Mexico and what is now Mexico City, in Desierto de los Leones and El Carmen, where they built their monasteries.

Going inside the El Carmen museum/monastery today is to enter into the presence of change and permanence, moving through three centuries of the art and history of Mexico. From the point of view of history, this building projects the ideological and economic power the religious orders possessed in New Spain during the Viceroyalty, as well as the enormous influence they exerted on education through their teaching of the Christian Gospel.

While it is true that in their daily lives the Carmelites followed the precepts of austerity and even poverty, this was no impediment to their possessing large tracts of land, monumental buildings, and works of extraordinary artistic value. The purpose of these goods was neither accumulation nor profit, but a way to guarantee this religious order's consolidation and area of influence in the "New World." It should also be pointed out that the religious art's purpose was not to be sumptuous, but rather to serve the worship of the divine.

A witness to the viceregal period, El Carmen also tells the story of Mexico's independence, which was the beginning of its end. The Carmelites had to abandon the monastery due to the Law on the Disentailment of Ecclesiastic Goods passed by the Liberal government in the late nineteenth century. A large part of their land was sold to private citizens, and the majority of the goods confiscated; El Carmen was abandoned and sacked, left to fall into ruin. In the time between when it was abandoned and when it was recovered by the Ministry of Education in the third decade of the twentieth century, El Carmen was occupied by different people and institutions: at one time, it even served as a jail. At the end of the 1920s, the National Institute of Anthropology and History began restorations, finally closing the splendor-abandonment-recovery triangle. From that time on until today, important restoration work has been carried out both on the buildings themselves and the art works in the museum, be they paintings, sculpture, or frescoes.



Photo: Michel Zabé.

Juan Correa, *Saint Teresa, Pilgrim*, seventeenth to eighteenth century (oil on canvas). El Carmen Museum Collection.

In 1929, the doors to the past were closed, and El Carmen opened as a museum. In honor of its artistic and historic value, in 1932, it was declared a historic monument. Visitors are called upon to focus their attention on two main aspects: the Carmelite architecture and the viceregal art collection. The combination of the two makes it easy to get an idea or mentally reproduce the day-to-day existence of the Carmelite friars, as well as the aesthetic-religious codes of the viceregal period.

BETWEEN WALLS AND GARDENS

Despite the building's sobriety and simplicity, the construction is monumental. All the monastery's spaces and corners also have a function and make sense for the monks' living, working, dedication to the religious life, and learning. When entering the museum by the concierge's hall, you can still detect vestiges of the murals that covered the roof and walls, and in some cases, the underlying images have benefited from the stupendous work by other artists, the restorers. This is the case, among many others, of the fresco on the walls of the main access portal, which portrays three figures significant for the Carmelites: their founder and prophet, Elijah, and the order's reformers, Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross. Once inside, you can see the different architectural techniques of the period used in its construction and



Photo: Michel Zabé.

Anonymous, *Apology of the Carmelite Order*, second half of the eighteenth century (oil on canvas). El Carmen Museum Collection.



Cristóbal de Villalpando, *The Vessels*, seventeenth century (oil on canvas). El Carmen Museum Collection.

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its later remodeling. A visit includes the cloister, with its Baroque fountain covered by seventeenth-century Talavera tiles from Puebla; the Patio of Arches; the Patio of the Aqueduct —the monastery had a water supply system fed by the Magdalena River at the time—, used to irrigate the orchard; the reading room; the sacristy; the domestic chapel; the ossuary; the crypts where the remains of monks and benefactors were deposited, including mummified bodies; the monks' lavatorium and cells; as well, of course, as the pleasant stroll through what was once the orchard, where a small number of fruit trees have been preserved.

THE COLONIAL ART GALLERY AND OTHER OBJECTS

Upon recovering the art collection, it was decided to store a great deal of the New Spain iconography in this museum,¹ which is practically synonymous with religious and Baroque art. Not all the pieces come from El Carmen because works from other churches, convents, and monasteries are also on display here. While some of the artists or works cannot be situated chronologically because they are not signed —at that time, anonymous or collective production



Photo: Michel Zabé.

Anonymous, *Our Lady Maria Auxiliadora*, seventeenth century (oil on canvas).
El Carmen Museum Collection.



Photo: Michel Zabé.

Anonymous, *Our Lady of Carmen*,
seventeenth century (Talavera ceramics from Puebla).
El Carmen Museum Collection.

were frequent—, it is possible to easily recognize the school that each belongs to. This is the case of the painting *Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria*, attributed to Miguel Cabrera’s workshop-school, if not by the master himself, or the painting of Friar Severino Francés, attributed to Luis Juárez. The collection also includes works by other celebrated New Spain artists like Juan Correa (*Saint Teresa, Pilgrim*) and Cristóbal Villalpando, who painted the polyptych *The Passion. Saint Joseph with the Child* and other works.

In addition to paintings, the museum exhibits other kinds of work from the period: some are parts of the furniture and others are ornamental, like sculptures, multi-colored wood carvings, silver items, altarpieces, and ceramics. Together, they testify to the monastic life and viceregal spirit.

EL CARMEN AND THE INHABITANTS OF SAN ÁNGEL

The residents of the San Ángel neighborhood are a living part of the museum community, and every year they participate in the events that recreate Mexican folk art.

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Just as centuries ago, in July, San Ángel residents participate in the flower fair in honor of Our Lady of Carmen. This celebration brings together neighbors —and others, of course— to take part in flower arranging contests, flower sales, a fair, and artistic exhibits.

In November, El Carmen’s famous altars for the Day of the Dead usually pay homage to important San Ángel residents who have passed away. In 2015, for example, the altar was dedicated to the mummies in El Carmen’s crypts, thought to have been friars and benefactors of the Carmelite order.

The traditional Nativity scenes close the year in December. These pieces bring together the best of Mexico’s folk art as well as that of other countries that the El Carmen Museum invites to share their Christmas festivities.

Visiting the El Carmen Museum is a way to see first-hand a privileged document-witness to the history of Mexico. In addition, it has one of the most outstanding catalogues of New Spain sacred art, with works dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Plus, participating in its fiestas is a pleasure, a luxury we can still give ourselves in this chaotic area of Mexico City. **MM**

El Carmen Museum
Avenida Revolución s/n,
San Ángel Mexico City,
C.P 01000
Phone: +52 55 5616 1504
Open to the public
Tuesday to Sunday,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

NOTES

¹ The country’s main colonial art gallery is the National Viceroyalty Museum located in Tepotzotlán in the State of Mexico.



Prior's cell.

Photo: Michel Zabé.