

*The Potosí  
Regional Museum*

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When the conquistadors arrived, the arid San Luis Potosí highlands were populated by groups of Chichimecs, subjugated in the late sixteenth century by the Spanish army under the command of mestizo Captain Miguel Caldera.

The military and spiritual conquests took place simultaneously. The first religious to arrive in the area were Franciscans who settled on the site of what is today the capital of San Luis Potosí in the second half of the sixteenth century. They then began building the monastery they would later occupy in 1592, when San Luis Minas del Potosí de la Nueva España was founded.

The San Francisco Monastery was closed and divided up as a result of the Reform Laws in 1859. A blacksmith's shop, plumber's and other workshops, a school of arts and trades, a funeral home, private dwellings and a Masonic lodge were all set up in the building. By order of General Jesús González Ortega, Hermenegildo Galeana Street was opened up, definitively dividing the

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Photos by Mauricio Degollado.

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building in two. The monastery's old stables became what is now the Aranzazú Plaza, a very typical corner of the capital city.

Beginning in 1874, attempts were made to establish a museum in the building and different boards were created to do so, but they were not successful until the mid-twentieth century. Under the initiative of a group of local citizens, the Aranzazú Chapel and its annexes were turned over to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in 1949, which began restoration work to turn it into a museum. Both the chapel and the San Francisco Church were declared national historic monuments.

The museum was inaugurated November 20, 1952, forming its initial collection with donations. Remains of ceramics found and classified by historian Joaquín Meade were the start of the archaeological collection. The purchase and donation of different pieces of sixteenth-to-nineteenth-century wrought iron make up the largest collection of this kind of any museum in the country.

Fossils, minerals, crafts, different Meso-American pieces, oil paintings and other works constitute the rest of the collection.

#### A VISIT TO THE MUSEUM

The museum entrance is on the ground floor; in the vestibule is a museum shop which offers publications, reproductions, jewelry and souvenirs. The visit begins in the Meso-America Room, whose pieces are organized by place of origin: the Gulf of Mexico region is represented by several objects from the Totonac and Olmec cultures; ceramics from Western Mexico, with groups that inhabited the current states of Nayarit, Colima, Jalisco and Michoacán, are also exhibited. From the Maya region there are figures from the Island of Jaina, Campeche, and ceramic receptacles. The museum boasts several urns from Oaxaca that represent Cocijo, the Zapotec god of rain, and ceramics from the Mixtec culture. Lastly, the room contains an exhibit of objects from the cultures of the Central Valleys: pieces carved in obsidian, ceramics and stone sculpture, the work of the peoples of Tlatilco, Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan.

Next is the Huastec Room with its introductory space describing the region's geography. The room also displays pieces referring to ethnic and funeral customs. Anthropological studies have shown, for example, that the Huastecs practiced the deformation of the body and the skull: they perforated their noses, tattooed their bodies and mutilated ears and teeth.

The room also displays a chronological chart of the Huastec culture and a typical Huastec burial: the body is laid out horizontally with a receptacle on the head known as the "capital vessel."

The next stop is Room I, which describes the first Huastec settlers, their habits, their dwellings, etc. Since the evolution of the Huastec culture can be traced through its dishware, examples of utensils and outstanding pieces of Huastec ceramics are displayed here.

Next is the description of Huastec society, organized around ceremonial centers used for civic-administrative, trade and craft production activities, indicating that the society was already divided into different strata. Several atypical archaeological objects found in the Huasteca show that ancient inhabitants carried out intense trade with central Veracruz and the central highlands.

The Huastecs adorned themselves with nose and ear plugs, decorating their bodies with paint and tattoos which they applied with clay seals like the ones displayed in this room. In addition, they wore the necklaces and metal, shell or clay pectorals exhibited here.

The room also contains an exact replica of one of the most important sculptures found at the El Consuelo (Tamuín) archaeological site, "the adolescent," which portrays a nude young man carrying a child, believed to symbolize the god of corn. A large part of his body is covered by pictures relating to agriculture and fertility, which is why he is identified as a representation of a priest of Quetzalcóatl himself. The original piece is displayed in the National Museum of Anthropology.

Room II begins by examining religion. Among the Huastecs, natural phenomena took on a magical, religious meaning that gave rise to a cult of nature rooted in fertility. They worshipped the sun, the moon, the wind, corn and the god of animals. It is thought that one of their main deities was Quetzalcóatl and a goddess of fertility and the moon. The Huastecs are considered the main exponents of the cult of the phallus, as well as great warlocks and wizards, and this room displays extraordinary, high-quality pieces of sculpture related to these topics. The museum boasts an important piece of Huastec art: the Goddess of



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Fertility, an adult woman with characteristics typical of this culture: a cone-shaped cap and a feathered head-dress, a naked torso showing her breasts, the symbol of maintaining and creating life, with the palms of her hands on her belly.

Room III offers a description of the Tamtoc archaeological site, the most important in the Potosí Huastec region of northeastern Mexico. It displays work in shell where the Huastecs depicted extremely well executed mythical-religious scenes and other objects made of shell.

The visit ends upstairs in the Temporary Exhibit Room and the Aranzazú Chapel, built in late 1749 under the initiative of the monastery's guardian Friar Joaquín de Bocanegra, with the moral and economic support of Don José de Erreparaz, the monastery's treasurer. The chapel is a prime example of Potosí baroque architecture and its stone façade, with its slender reversed pyramid pilasters and elongated back-to-back figures, greets the visitor, surprising everyone because of how uncommon it is to find this kind of construction on a second floor. The shallow niches and the mesquite door with its original high-relief carvings are of note; the stairway leading to the chapel was built in the early twentieth century to create an independent entryway.

The chapel includes a painting gallery which, among other valuable pieces, displays two eighteenth-century paintings: one by Oaxaca-born painter Miguel Cabrera depicting Saint Rosalie, crowned with flowers and accompanied by an archangel, and the other of Our Lady of Candelaria by an unknown artist. **MM**

### Museo Regional Potosino

Plaza Aranzazú s/n, Col. Centro  
 San Luis Potosí, C.P. 78000  
 Phones: (444) 814-3572 and 812-0358  
 Open to the public Tuesday to  
 Sunday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.  
 Admission: \$34 (discount available  
 for teachers and students with ID)  
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