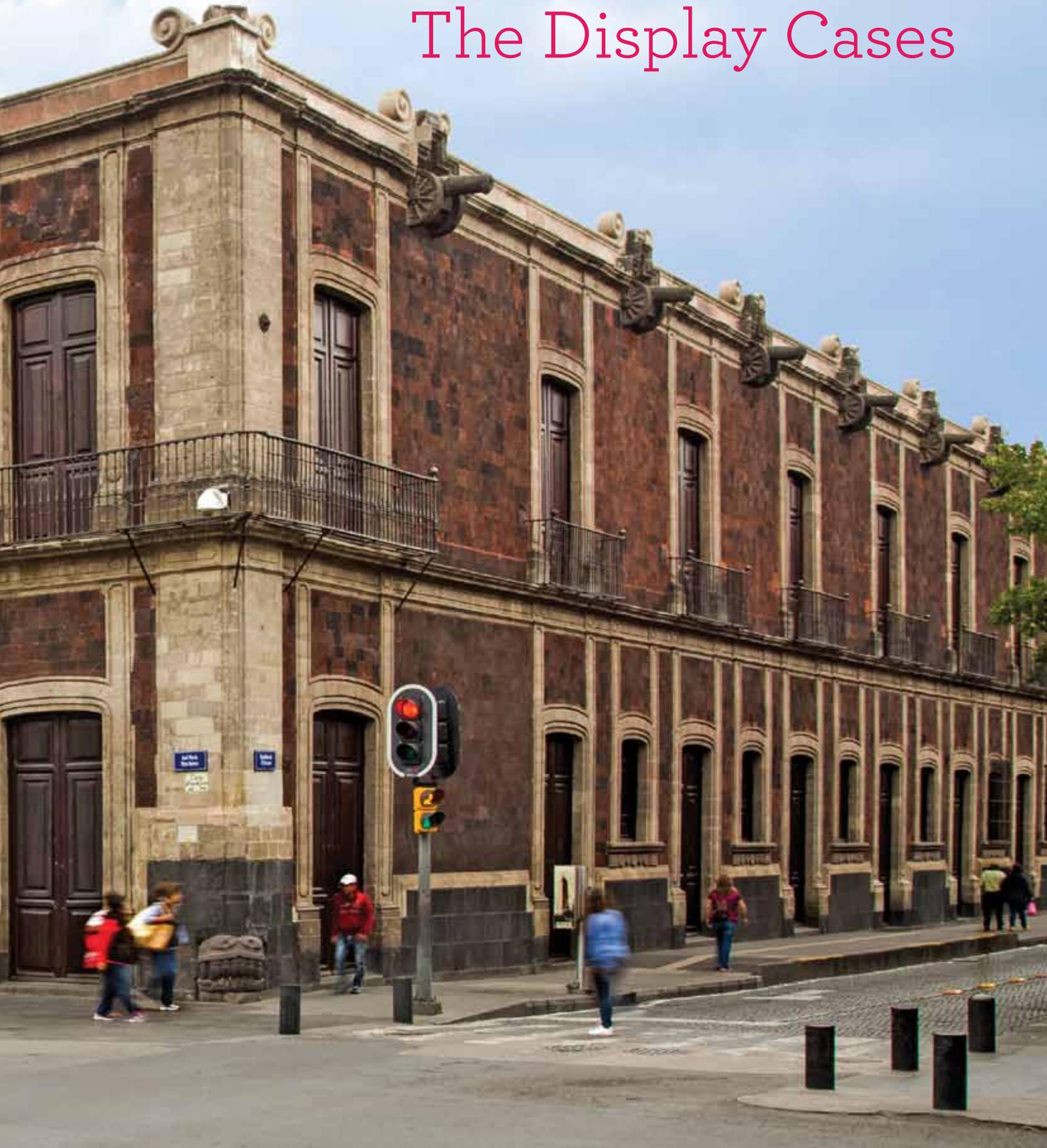




MUSEUMS

Mexico City beyond The Display Cases





Central patio. The cannon-shaped water spouts symbolize the fact that the palace's owners were members of the nobility.

A visual, architectural chronicle of the history of Mexico's capital: that is what the Museum of Mexico City is. The ancient site of the Aztecs, even today of monumental proportions and a seemingly endless history, could only be housed in a venue of the same grandeur.

Mexico City's very long history is crisscrossed by innumerable cultural and artistic productions and is continually reconstructed and re-signified. In this metamorphosis, the artistic element has had a fundamental impact on the city's life, making it unique.

One example should suffice: the transformation of México-Tenochtitlan, the indigenous metropolis, into one of New Spain's capitals. In this process, the pre-Columbian art and architecture were replaced by European aesthetics; this led to a complete architectural transformation such that in the eighteenth century, the great metropolis was known as the City of Palaces.

One example of New Spain's architectural opulence was the Old Palace of the Counts of Santiago de Calimaya, the building that today is home to the Museum of Mexico City. Built in

* Photos by Viviana Martínez, courtesy of the Museum of Mexico City, Mexico City Ministry of Culture.

the sixteenth century —nothing is known about this first phase of construction—, it was remodeled two centuries later by Francisco Guerrero y Torres, one of the main exponents of Mexican baroque architecture. Located on Pino Suárez Street,¹ the building is itself a museum, a venue full of signs and winks at the pre-Hispanic and colonial past. To start, on one corner of the outside of the building, the visitor can see that it rests on the head of a serpent, a fragment of a foundation of the *coatepantli*, the wall of serpent heads that surrounded the Great Temple. Outstanding features include its carved stone façade, the characteristic pink *tezontle* stone,

Joaquín Clausell began painting in the impressionist style and set up his atelier on the palace's roof, where he did many paintings on the walls.



Example of architectural syncretism. Colonial construction with pre-Hispanic touches.



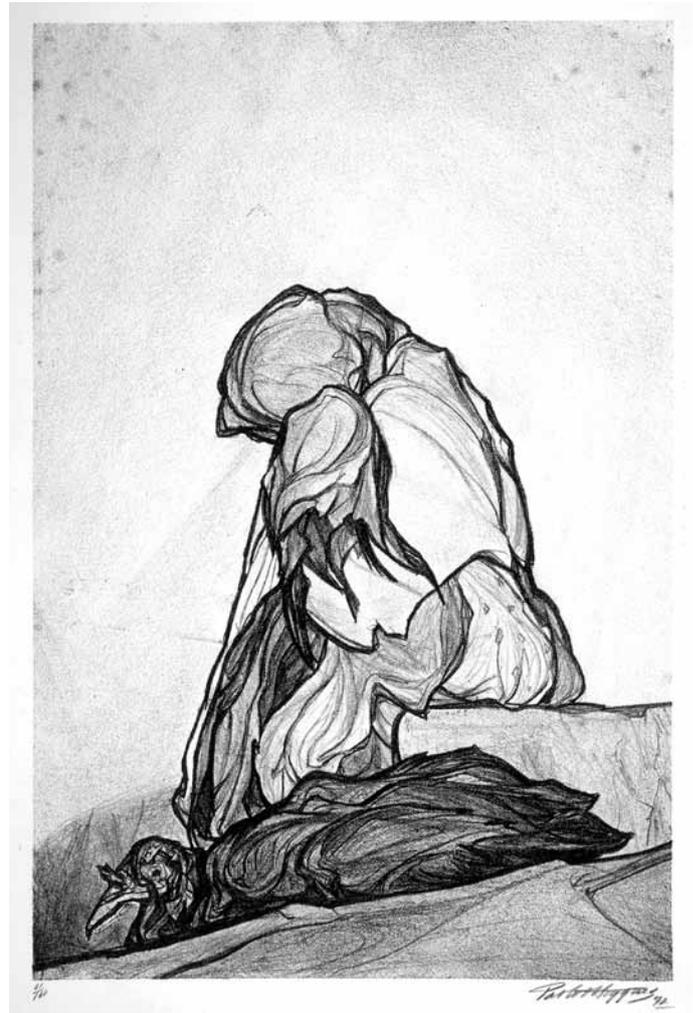
Joaquín Clausell's studio, one of the museum's main attractions.

the central patio's fountain, with its two-tailed mermaid, and the perfection of the carved mahogany doors and other wooden ornamental caps.

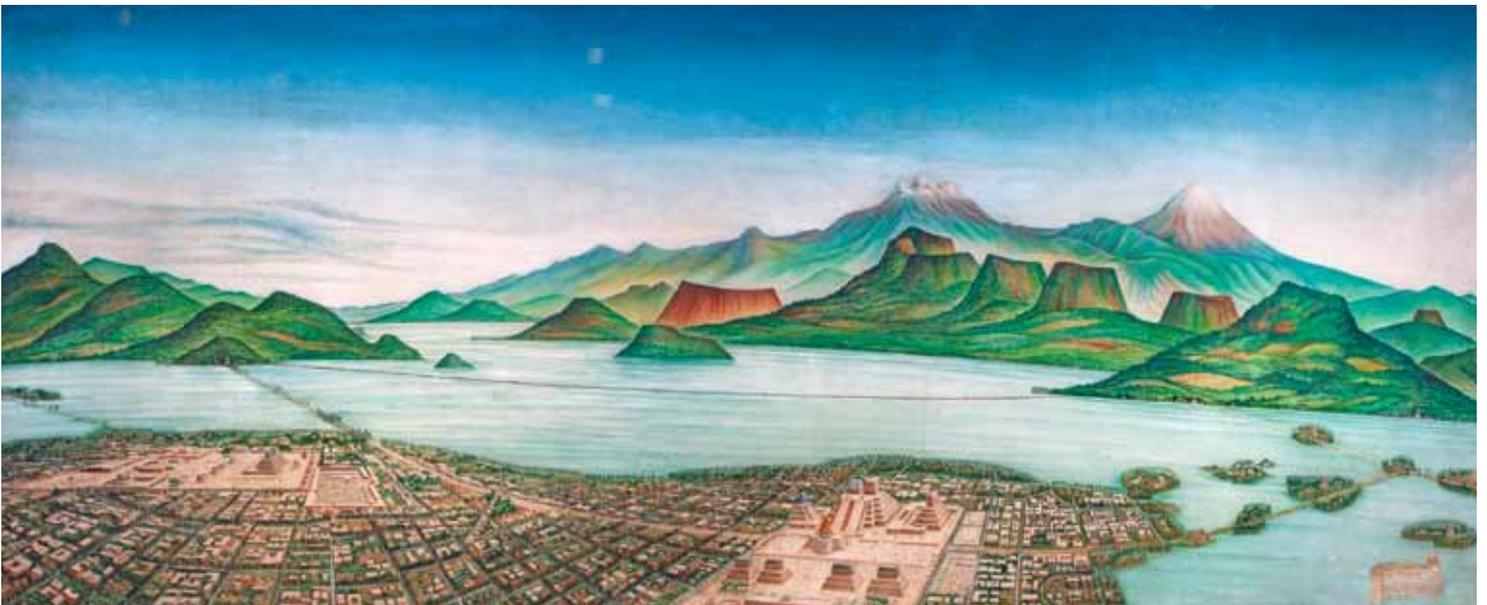
Throughout its history, the palace has been used for different activities: from being a home or store fronts, to becoming a tenement in the early twentieth century, when many families moved to the city's modern suburbs. In the 1960s, Mexico City's Federal District government expropriated the huge home where the family of Mexican impressionist painter Joaquín Clausell had lived to turn it into the Museum of Mexico City. The four walls covered with images painted by Clausell in his studio became part of the museum's permanent collection and are today one of its most important attractions.

The building was restored by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, who also built the National Anthropology Museum, and was inaugurated as a museum in 1964 with a permanent exhibition that didactically told the story of Mexico City, including items representative of its origins, development, traditions, and artistic and monumental splendor.

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Pablo O'Higgins, *Separation*, 66.5 x 50 cm, 1972 (lithograph).



Luis Covarrubias, *Mexico Tenochtitlan, the Valley and Lakes in the Fifteenth Century*, 210 x 569 cm, 1963 (oil on canvas).



The building is itself a museum, a venue full of signs and winks at the pre-Hispanic and colonial past.

But the city is much more than didactic material. So, it was decided to put away part of its collection and exhibit more recent trends. In 1998, then, when it was classified as part of Mexico City's cultural heritage, the museum changed its approach to include temporary exhibitions and other kinds of artistic and cultural events like conferences, lectures, performances, and workshops, all featuring the history, art, and life of the country's capital and its inhabitants.

Its collection boasts almost 3 000 pieces of art, documents, objects, and period furniture, with examples ranging from the seventeenth century until today. But, the palace also hides a treasure: the Torres Bodet Library, specializing in topics related to the city, with more than 10 000 titles and documents.²

To give the reader an idea of the spirit of this diverse, inclusive exhibition center, open to new artistic expressions, we can point to two recent shows:



Maurice Bernouly, *The 1985 Earthquake, 30 Years On*, 2015 (photograph).

The enormous value of the exhibition “The Soul Recognizes No Races” is that it made visible the racism and discrimination we Mexicans exercise.

- “The Soul Recognizes No Races” (September 2016). The enormous value of this exhibition is that it made visible the racism and discrimination we Mexicans exercise, sometimes without being aware of it. The exhibition’s almost 300 paintings, objects, photographs, and scientific documents demonstrated the power of the prejudices and images in the construction of racist stereotypes. The museum showed capital residents just as we are, but also the way forward to know what we don’t want to be.



“To See You,” an exhibition on racism in Mexico.



Jorge González Camarena, *Xitle Erupts*, 105 x 220 cm, 1962 (oil on canvas).

- “Light and Imagination” (February 2017). A collective show made up of experiences and sensations that used light and sound technologies to guide the public through the capital’s history, its origins (when this great city was a lake region), its transformation, its urbanization, and its chaotic growth.

This year, 2017, the intense activity carried out on site made it clear a comprehensive remodeling was required. It

was decided to re-inaugurate the museum showing the history of the city through “Mexico City in Art. A Journey of Eight Centuries,” a show to run from November 2017 to April 2018, exhibiting the marvelous art that has narrated the city’s development.

In addition to visiting this magnum show, we should always keep abreast of what is happening there, because they say that there’s always something new about the city in the palace.



Portraits, Mapfre Collection.



Joaquín Clausell, Mexican Impressionist (1866-1935)

Clausell's determined, rebellious personality led him to explore both physical and experiential territories that inspired his art. When still very young, he was expelled from his hometown for publically confronting a governor who wanted to name the state of Campeche after himself. That was when he came to live in Mexico City, where he studied law and worked as a newspaper reporter. He wielded his pen in complete opposition to General Porfirio Díaz, landing him, once again, in lots of trouble; after a short stint in jail, he went to the United States and lived for a time in New York, and then on to Paris. There he met Camille Pissarro, who he became friends with and who introduced him to impressionist painting first hand. On his return to Mexico, he married María de los Ángeles Cervantes, a descendent of the counts of Santiago de Calimaya, and they set up their household in the family palace.

Encouraged by his friend Gerardo Murillo, the landscape painter known as Dr. Atl, Joaquín Clausell began painting in the impressionist style and set up his atelier on the palace's roof. There, he did many paintings on the walls —not only landscapes— in a huge collage of unconnected images; today, this is one of the museum's most valuable assets. **NMM**

Museo de la Ciudad de México (Museum of Mexico City)

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Centro 06060, Mexico City

Telephone: +52 (55) 5522 9936

Open to the public: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.,
Tuesday to Sunday

Admission: Mex\$29 with 50 percent discount
for students, teachers, and seniors

Guided visits, bookstore, lectures, concerts,
library



In his studio, Joaquín Clausell began by cleaning his brushes on the walls, and those brushstrokes later became the mural *The Tower of 1000 Windows*.



NOTES

¹ José María Pino Suárez was a vice-president of Mexico, assassinated during the military coup that brought down President Francisco I. Madero during the period known as the “Decena Trágica” (the Tragic 10 Days), from February 9 to 19, 1913.

² Jaime Mario Torres Bodet (1902-1974) was a renowned Mexican poet, diplomat, and politician.