

The National Viceregal Museum at Tepozotlán

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Tepozotlán, or “the hunchback’s place”, is a small town in the state of Mexico near Mexico City.

Main attractions are the former St. Martin Jesuit Seminary and St. Francis Xavier church, masterpieces of New Spanish baroque architecture. The National Viceregal Museum, located in this group of buildings, is primarily devoted to the art of colonial Mexico.

Several indigenous groups such as the Mazahua, Otomí and Nahuatl lived in this area in the past. Their social structure was disrupted by the Spanish conquest, which brought with it the spiritual conquest entrusted to the

The National Viceregal Museum at Tepozotlán, located in a former Jesuit convent and church, built and decorated in Spanish colonial baroque style, houses a large collection of the religious art of four centuries.

Front view of the Saint Francis Xavier church.



early missionaries. First the Franciscans and after them the Jesuits came to carry out their pastoral mission aided by their knowledge of native languages, and by concentrating the surrounding population in one settlement. The Jesuits began to teach basic subjects to the children of the most prosperous natives around 1584, which subsequently established their congregation in Tepozotlán.

At the beginning of the 17th century, after the Jesuit novitiate was moved from Puebla to Tepozotlán, construction of the College of St. Francis Xavier began, next to the existing seminary buildings. The construction was made possible mainly by funds bequeathed in the will of Pedro Ruiz de Ahumada, a wealthy merchant from Mexico City.

The cloister, with its simple closed galleries arranged around the Patio of the Cisterns, dates from that period. The corridors were later decorated with paintings by Cristóbal de Villalpando, show the life of St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus. A closed atrium in front of the cloister, now the museum entrance, and a domestic chapel displaying shields of the six congregations established in New Spain on their vaulted ceilings, are also from that period.

View of the church nave.



This was the site of the most important Jesuit school, which remained active until 1767, when the Society was expelled from New Spain by decree of King Charles III.

The completion of the College and the construction of the church were due to the Medina Picazo family, who employed a Creole architect, José Durán de Almendramejo, to complete the task in 1682. The church was designed in the shape of a five segmented cross, with typically 17th century architectural characteristics.

In 1690, the College was enlarged with a series of cells grouped around the Patio of the Orange Trees. The decorations in this segment, by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, were inspired by the life of the Virgin.

During the 1730's, the building was enlarged with the Loreto Chapel, the Virgin's Alcove, and the Reliquary of St. Joseph. Their altars were the first to be draped gilded baroque lace. After the chapels were redecorated, the St. Francis Xavier church was renovated by Miguel Cabrera, a famous Oaxacan painter, and by Higinio de Chávez, an expert carver.

Cabrera not only helped create the main altarpiece, he also decorated the vaulted ceilings of the presbytery and transept, and made paintings for the



Detail of the choir corridor.

area under the choir and for the choir loft. He also did a sequence of eucharistic paintings for the sacristy, at the front of which he hung an enormous tapestry entitled *The Immaculate with St. Francis and St. Ignatius*.

The marvels of Tepozotlán are the fruit of churrigueresque baroque, an exotic variant of European baroque, born of the fusion of two mentalities differing in both imagination and sensitivity. It is difficult to describe the transformation of the nave with its three presbytery altarpieces: the central altarpiece dedicated to St. Francis Xavier and the Immaculate Conception, and the two lateral ones to St. Stanislas of Kotascka and St. Louis Gonzaga, both prominent Jesuits, in view of the numerous iconographic messages they contain. Like creeping vines, the altarpieces blossom and encompass the entire space, now celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe, now St. Rosalie, now the Virgin of Sorrows and St. John Nepomucene.

The church was completely renovated with churrigueresque baroque pilasters an innovation that uses square or rectangular bases shaped like inverted pyramids, in

place of columns. But ornamentation, rather than architecture, dominates and surpasses the altars to spill out onto the façades, symbolically showing the creole desire to grow, prosper and to praise God.

The presence of these disquieting altarpieces then becomes understandable, born as they were in the midst of colonial excess, glorified by gold, abundance and what was perceived at the time as a future without limits. However, the churrigueresque style came and went, and with it, all of the utopias that, for a time, lived as reality in Tepozotlán.

By mid-18th century a new style made its appearance and together with the founding of the Royal Academy of San Carlos (1781), neo-classicism was considered the official style of the future, whereas the baroque was severely criticized for being presumptuous and frivolous.

Churches and convents were both plundered and destroyed in the years after the Jesuits were expelled. The Colonial system's deep fissures came to the surface, and henceforth, the Catholic church never regained its former splendor.



Virgen Apocalíptica by Juan Correa, baroque painter.



Gold plated silver chalice with coral inlay.

The Jesuits returned to Tepozotlán in the 19th century only to abandon it forever in 1914. The convent complex was declared a national historical monument, restored in 1960 by the National Institute of Anthropology and History, and inaugurated four years later as the National Viceregal Museum.

Today, due to recent changes, the museum offers, in the twenty-three rooms of its permanent collection, an overview of New Spain's society, beginning from its pre-Hispanic roots and covering the Enlightenment and the 19th century. However, it is the Viceregal atmosphere that predominates and envelops the visitor in the convent's splendor, through its corridors, cells and chapels, its broad patios, and vast flower and vegetable gardens.

The collections housed in the museum are surprisingly rich and varied, but its pictorial wealth best illustrates the Colonial period, particularly in its religious aspect. It should be noted that a painting's aesthetic value was often subordinated to the need to transmit a biblical message, the better to evangelize and spread Spanish culture. In any event,

the best artists in New Spain decorated the College and the church at Tepozotlán, infusing them with original Mexican coloring.

Today the museum preserves paintings of all the styles prevalent from the 16th to the 19th centuries. It exhibits refined manneristic paintings by Flemish artists Simon Pereyns and Martin de Vos, as well as works by López de Herrera and Luis Juárez. All the periods of baroque painting are shown in works by Juan Correa and Cristóbal de Villalpando, masters of color and composition. The transition from the 17th to the 18th century is shown in paintings by the Rodríguez Juárez brothers and others, many of whom are anonymous; in their canvases they glorify Christ and the Virgin, saints and martyrs, angels and worthy friars.

Finally, other noteworthy collections include ivories, beautiful European and Oriental religious figurines; sculpture, ceramic, clothing, textiles and armor, as well as furniture and lacquer ware, all remarkable for their originality and state of preservation; all of them of interest to a broad range of taste and preference X



Inmaculada Concepción, 18th century; carved wood from Guatemala.