

# The old Colegio de las Vizcaínas

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO



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### Background and history

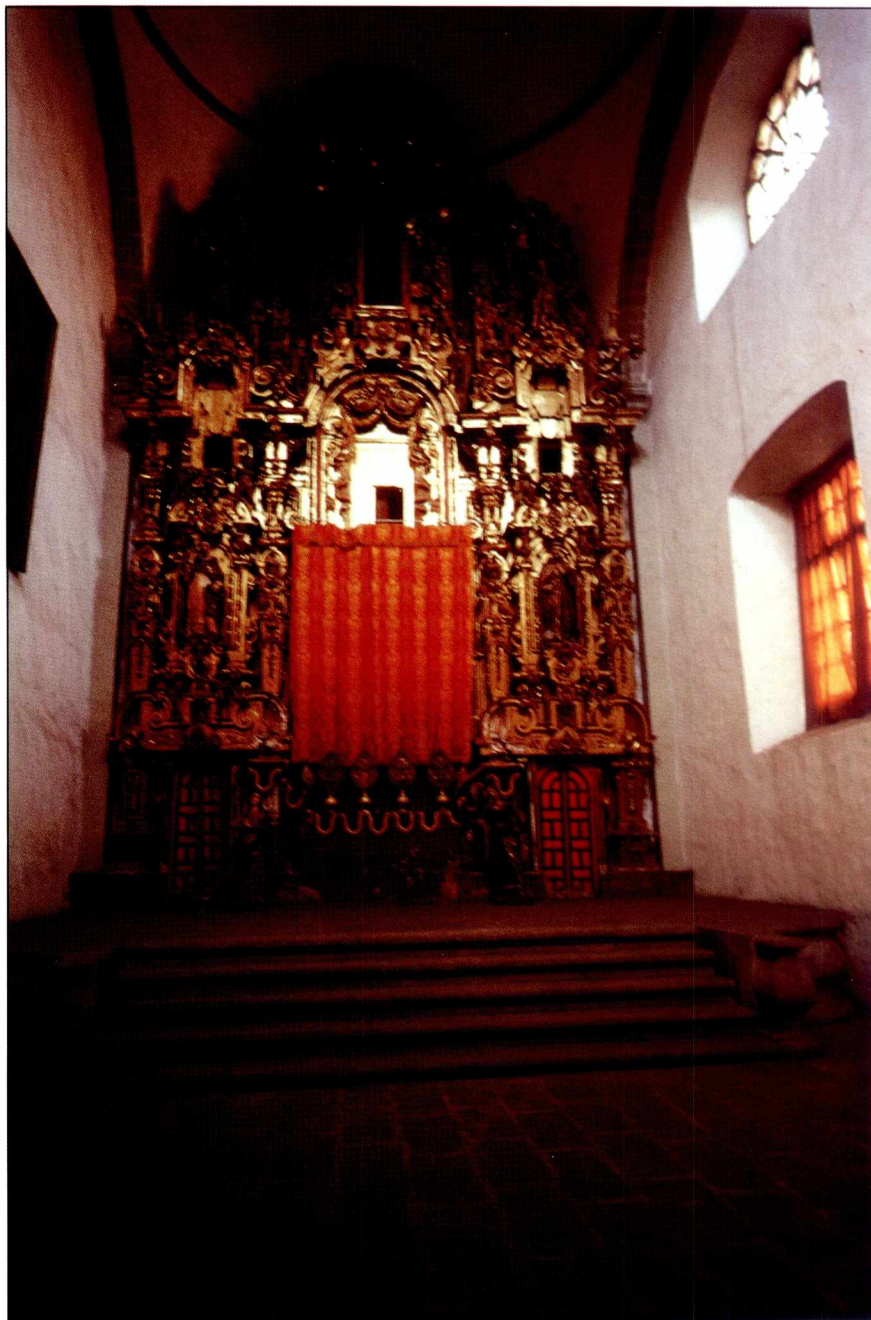
Considered one of the most important Colonial monuments of the 18th century due to its immeasurable historical and artistic value, the Colegio de las Vizcaínas (Biscayans' School) is located in the downtown Mexico City area known as the "Historic Center."

During the Colonial period, religious fraternities (*cofradías*) played an important role in the economic and social life of New Spain (as Mexico was known under the Spanish empire). Originally conceived as societies for mutual aid, they also organized pious activities, processions and some ecclesiastical functions. When their treasuries were full, the *cofradías* carried out charitable works of considerable importance.

This was the case with the Cofradía de Aránzazu. Formed by Basques resident in Mexico, it founded the Colegio de las Vizcaínas, an economically self-sufficient, secular educational institution for girls. The Colegio would provide lodging for young girls, widows and teenagers, so long as they were legitimate children, born in Spain or daughters of Spaniards who were living in Mexico.



Stairway of the main patio.



Main altarpiece.

The Colegio's quarters were built between 1734 and 1752, under the direction of Miguel José de Rivera and using blueprints drawn up by Pedro Bueno Basori.

The Basques' vision and their independent spirit, quite modern for the 18th century, led them to envisage, as part of the plans for the Colegio, the construction of sixty annexes known

as "cup or plate," since each one consisted of two rooms, one atop the other (lodgings above, workshops below), which would be used as shops or workshops. The rent from these annexes would provide economic self-sufficiency.

Inside the annexes' workshops, students made lace and trim from gold and silver thread, as well as embroidery



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*Altarpiece of the Virgin of Guadalupe.*

which was highly prized and much in demand because of its low price and high quality. Eminent members of the nobility had their clothing made there.

A unique structure was worked out for the Colegio, making it independent from both the Church and the Spanish Crown. Because of this financial and institutional independence, during the Reform

period —when religious schools were closed— the Colegio de las Vizcainas was the only one to remain open.

The students' life was rather akin to that of nuns who had not taken vows. There, strictly cloistered, they were taught all the skills and offices which would suit them for domestic life. At the same time they received an education closely bound up with the

religious precepts and moral principles of their era.

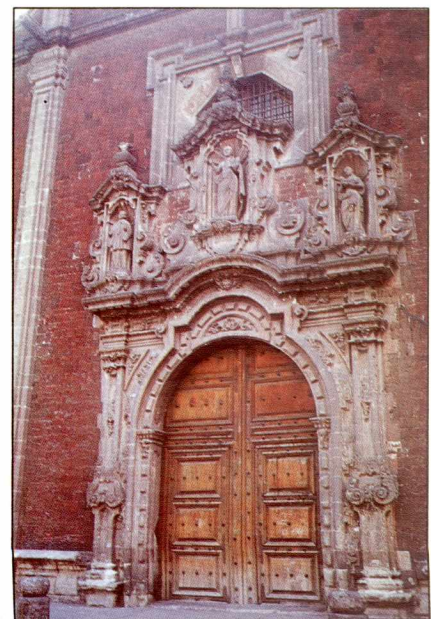
Only in 1793 did the Colegio open its doors to day students, for whom a special section was organized, and only in the 1950s, adapting to the needs of the community, did the Colegio de las Vizcainas begin a new epoch as a coeducational school.

### **Architecture**

The Colegio covers an entire block situated between the Plaza de las Vizcainas and the street of the same name. Three large doorways are set into the façade of *tezontle* (volcanic rock) and masonry. The doorway at one end is the entrance to the Colegio, while at the other end stands the doorway to the Chaplain's House; both are of a simple baroque style.

The first section of the doorway to the Colegio is framed in molding and crowned with the Spanish coat of arms. The second features a niche flanked by pilasters, while the third presents another niche at the height of the cornice, topped off with a flanked cross.

The doorway to the Chaplain's House is distinguished from that of the



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*Church façade by architect Lorenzo Rodríguez.*



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*The chapel's upper archway, belfry and cupola.*

Colegio by the sculptures occupying the niches. Here the principal niche is home to a sculpture of Saint Francis Xavier, while the upper one belongs to the Virgin of Begoña, whereas the Colegio's doorway is graced with figures of Saint Ignatius Loyola and the Virgin of Aránzazu.<sup>1</sup>

The annexes, used principally as workshops, are located in the exterior eastern, western and southern parts of the building.

Crossing the threshold of the main door and passing through two vestibules, one enters the central patio with its double archway of finely worked masonry, making up a truly majestic whole.

In the central part, on the northern side of the great patio, three arches give way to a huge, monumental bifurcated stairway; this central area ends in three more arches and a high corridor covered with a cupola.



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*Fountain in the main patio.*

Six more patios provide an enormous beauty to the building: the patios of the Tiles, the Clock, the Star, the Chaplains, the Cedars and the Arch. This last patio is adorned with a lowered arch which supports the iron balustrades of two low balconies.

Opposite the central patio we find the classical 18th-century Chapel, which consists of a single nave without a transept and with upper and lower choirs; this is one of the loveliest places in the Colegio. It was originally conceived as a private oratory. However, the subsequent



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*Altarpiece of the Virgin of Loreto.*

plan to open the building's doors to the public made ornamentation necessary. This in turn led to the creation of the chapel's marvelous altarpieces, which are attributed to José Joaquín de Sayagos.

These altarpieces, covered with a thick coat of burnished gold, have the same overall characteristics: a central part housing a niche with the titular

<sup>1</sup> Begoña is a town near Bilbao, in the Biscay area of Spain; the Virgin of Begoña is the patron saint of the Basque people. Aránzazu is a 16th-century sanctuary, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, in Guipúzcoa, Spain. (Editor's note.)

saint, and at the sides a series of vaulted niches filled with full-length statues. All this is profusely decorated with medallions as well as leaf and floral motifs.

The central part of the Main Altar is occupied by a crucified Christ of a distinctly Mexican type. At the sides are two sculptures representing Saint Nicodemus and Saint Joseph, while the lower part holds sculptures of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic—all in ornamented wood.

While the altarpieces devoted to Our Lady of Aránzazu, Our Lady of



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*Altarpiece of Our Lady of Aránzazu.*

Dolores, Our Lady of Loreto and Our Lady of Guadalupe were made at different times, they all clearly show the influence of the 18th-century baroque style.

The first two evidence certain holdovers from the Balbasian style, while the latter two are more original works bearing the stamp of the artist's personal style. The whole of the altarpiece of Our Lady of Guadalupe, made up of altarpiece, door, confessional and tribune, is one of this era's most beautiful creations.

In what was the Chaplain's House, a museum is being built which



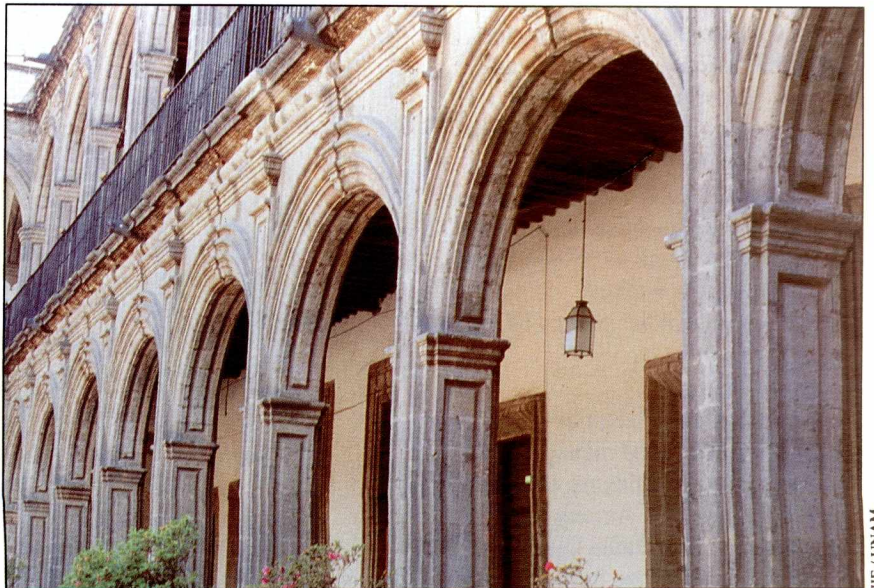
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*Detail of arches in the first patio.*

will exhibit valuable pieces of furniture from this era, ranging from typically Spanish to characteristically French pieces; manufactured artwork in silver, crystal, porcelain and wax; an extremely rich collection of embroidery made by the Colegio's students; and some very well-made paintings from the Mexican school of the 17th and 18th centuries, including works by Cristóbal de Villalpando, Miguel Cabrera, Ibarra, and others.

### **Time, nature and looting**

The Colegio de las Vizcainas has had to withstand the storms of nature and society. In addition to the ravages of time, it has faced natural disasters such as the torrential rains and floods of 1789-1790; the "San Juan de Dios" earthquake of 1800; and the devastating September 19, 1985 earthquake, in which a large part of the building collapsed. Political events have also affected the Colegio, among



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*Detail of the main patio's archway.*



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*Main patio.*

them the American and French invasions during the middle and late 1800s, respectively, in which troops from both countries occupied and destroyed large parts of the building; the 1913 “Decena Trágica” events during the Mexican Revolution, in which the building was fired upon by troops stationed in the Ciudadela; and the anti-clerical drive of 1926, which led to serious looting. Yet this important monument continues to form part of the historical and cultural heritage of the Mexican people, thanks to the remarkable work of reconstruction that has preserved it.

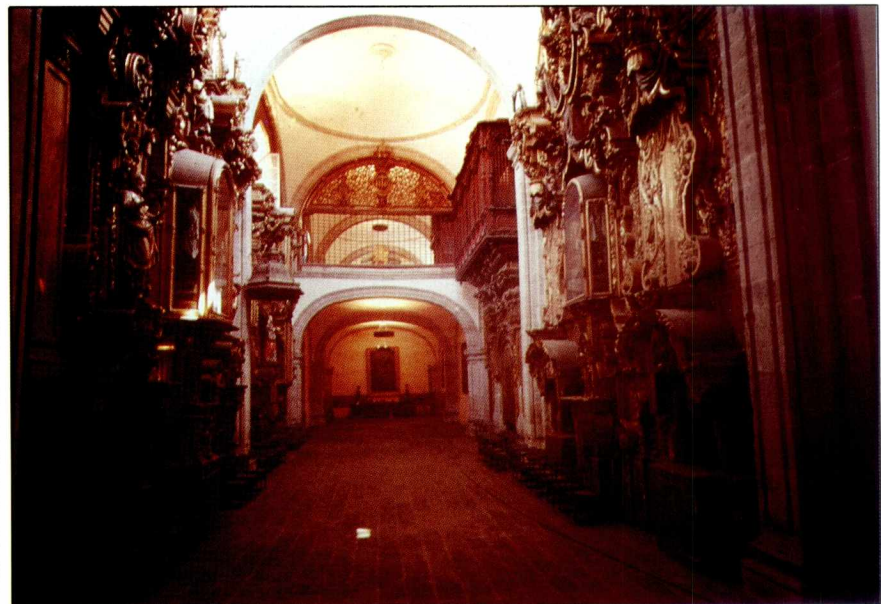
#### **Activities**

Thanks to the enthusiasm of the Colegio’s trustees and management, non-academic activities are presently held on the grounds. Among them is the project for the “Bidea Izartu” Women’s Institute (the Basque words mean “fill the path with stars”), which

is to occupy part of the Vizcainas building. After restoration and remodeling work, this institute will feature workshops in arts and crafts,

as well as academic courses adapted to Mexico’s end-of-the-century needs.

Also planned is the creation of an orientation center to be used by



*View of the chapel choir.*

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Main façade.

women seeking legal, psychological, educational and health-related advice and counseling, and a skills workshop for handicapped women.

The Colegio also provides workshops on restoration and on Basque music, principally aimed at students and their parents.

Concerts are held in the chapel from time to time. The Chaplain's House Museum will begin its activities at the end of this year, with guided tours for members of the public.

The Historical Archive, whose holdings include specialized documentation on education from the 16th century on, remains open for researchers' consultation.

The great Colegio de las Vizcainas remains in its place with the same steadfastness that has characterized it since its "first stone" was laid, despite all the political, economic and ideological changes it has weathered. On a par with such buildings as San Ildefonso, it has been preserved as one of the most valuable architectural jewels bequeathed to us by the 18th century ✕

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Second-floor corridor, door and window with stone frames.