

The Franz Mayer Museum

*Héctor Rivero Borrel **



Franz Mayer, an outstanding collector

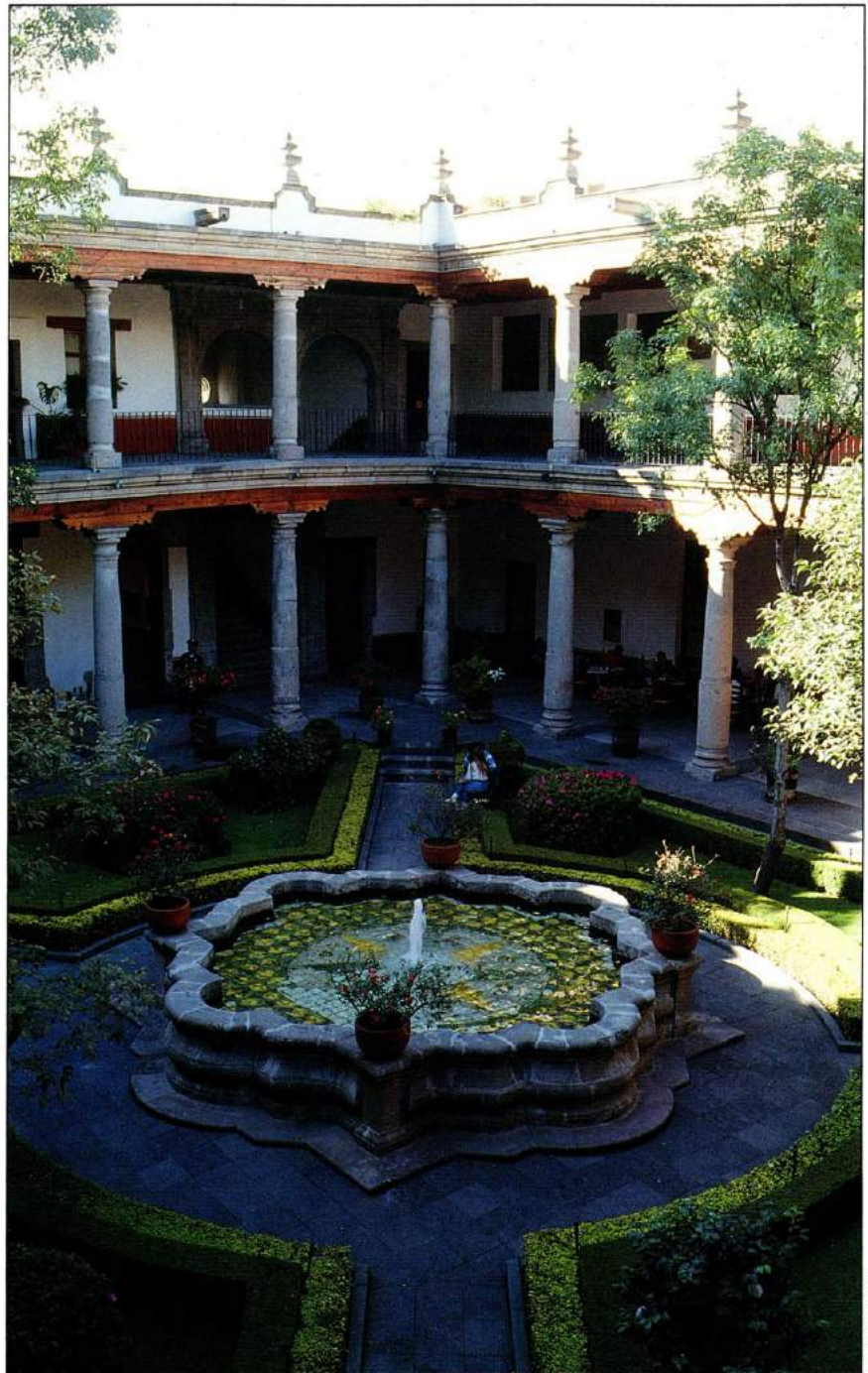
In 1905 a young German arrived in Mexico City, eager to conquer success. Franz Mayer was his name and he was 23 years old. Tireless and persistent, one day he would reach his goal.

With a great talent for business, he had no trouble making his way in financial circles, and by 1908 he was registered as an independent stock broker, thereby beginning what would turn into a highly successful career.

In 1920 he married Doña María Antonieta de la Macorra, only to be left a childless widower when she died two years later. He was nationalized as a Mexican citizen, after having sought to become one for many years, on December 29, 1933.

In addition to his work, to which he devoted himself with tenacity and determination, he dedicated his free time to a number of activities. He practiced several sports, among them hiking, rowing, skiing, hunting and fishing. Photography was one of his favorite pastimes, and one which he mastered with flying colors. The marvelous collection of photographs which he took in every corner of Mexico bears witness to his great love for this country.

But what truly absorbed his interest and time was his passion for art, which led him to become an outstanding collector. He made innumerable trips both within Mexico as well as abroad, where he recovered, for our cultural heritage, many works of great value which had been taken out of the country years before.



Colonial patio and fountain.

* Museum Director.

Franz Mayer

He was born in Germany in 1882 and enjoyed all the advantages of the *belle époque*, one of the happiest epochs for Western man. You could travel from country to country without problems, and work wherever you wanted. At the age of 19 he was already in London, striving to learn business and finance. After two years he was looking for broader horizons.

At that time, the beginning of the 20th century, the United States was the promised land, the destination for millions of Europeans displaced from their own countries. It was the land of open sky, immense territories, democracy, freedom, and opportunities for making money.

Young Franz set his sights on New York City. Yet despite all the appetizing features of life in the United States, it did not turn out to be the land Franz Mayer was looking for. He decided to visit Mexico. From the vantage point of his offices in the Merrill Lynch stock brokerage, Mexico seemed to satisfy two of his requirements for a potential new motherland: the opportunity to make money, and the exoticism and beauty of the objects found in a land laden with history.

Mayer arrived in Mexico in 1905, during the reign of General Porfirio Díaz, at a time when a thousand multi-millioned business projects were underway in the capital city—still small at that time, with less than half a million inhabitants—which did everything it could to look like Paris. The peace prevalent in Mexico, together with the security of life and property guaranteed by Don Porfirio's government, meant the country was in the full swing of prosperity. Franz Mayer found the Mexico of those times to be to his taste, and decided to stay on as the local representative of the company he had worked for in New York.

He demonstrated his financial know-how and a great capacity for work. Investors eagerly heeded his advice, and in short order he had founded a stock credit company which soon became part of the National Bank of Mexico, the most important bank of the day. When the Mexican Revolution overthrew General Díaz, the young financier had to suspend operations for two years, which he spent in the United States. But at the end of this period he returned to Mexico to take up where he had left off.

Mayer liked the Mexico that arose anew from the Revolution and began a new life in the 1920s. His financial genius found new outlets, led to new relationships and began to bring him the fortune which, over time, would become considerable indeed, but which he spent on the passion that ruled his life: collecting beautiful objects and living amongst them.

He was a collector of great passion and great resources, which allowed him to gather an impressive variety of Puebla ceramics, marble which had been brought from China, quilts and wood carvings, furniture of various periods, paintings, books (his collection of different editions of *Don Quixote* came to approximately 800 volumes), textiles, timepieces, nautical instruments and cooking utensils.

These objects filled more than 30 rooms at his house in the upper-class Lomas de Chapultepec neighborhood. Mayer organized a network of suppliers throughout the world, while regular trips to La Lagunilla—Mexico City's Sunday bric-à-brac market—were *de rigueur*. He also made constant trips to other parts of Mexico in search of objects for his collection.

He died in Mexico City at the age of 93, bequeathing his rich collection to the country he had adopted as his own.

Felipe García Beraza.



Tray made by Mattheus or Markus Wolff of Augsburg, ca. 1680, partially gilded silver.

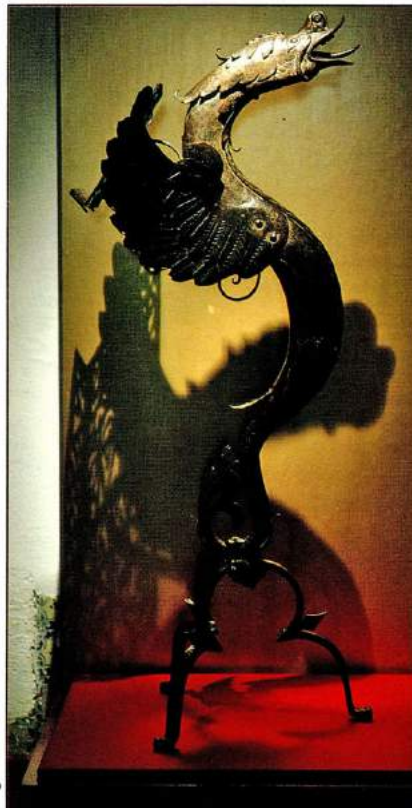
As a young man he had already begun to collect ceramics from Puebla, traditional shawls from San Luis Potosí, *sarapes* from Saltillo, and other examples of the applied arts.

With much dedication, patience and the knowledge he acquired over time, he put together an impressive collection of a great variety of objects of different materials, styles, periods and areas.

Aware of his collection's importance, he decided to organize and inventory it. With the aid of several advisors, he finished the huge inventory project in the early 1960s. By that time he had already decided to pass on his collection in order to promote interest in the fine and applied arts.

He chose the Bank of Mexico as trustee for a contract which stated his "desire to constitute a trust for the establishment and maintenance of an art museum in Mexico City."

This trust was established on December 3, 1962, with a Board of Trustees appointed by Franz Mayer himself.



Forged iron lectern in the shape of a griffin, Spain. 16th or 17th century.

The contract specifies that the museum would be located in Mexico City and that pieces from the collection could be lent to other recognized institutions whose objectives were similar to those of the museum. It also categorically prohibits the transfer, sale or exchange of any of the objects making up the collection, and states that the trusteeship shall seek to found a library, organize exhibitions, contests, conferences and courses, carry out publishing activities and promote by any suitable means the development of the fine and applied arts.

The position of the Board of Trustees can be summed up in the following words of its president, Rogelio Casas-Alatrliste: "I have always maintained, and I believe I express the feeling of the other trustees, that the Franz Mayer Museum should be 'a living museum.' In other words, we want to maintain an institution which will generate culture, not just a warehouse of cultural goods."



Sergio Dorantes.

Carved wooden sculptures.

St. Michael the Archangel, 18th-century Mexican tecali sculpture.



Sergio Dorantes.

Engraved bronze clock, Germany, 17th century.



Sergio Dorantes.

"Talavera"-style pottery from Puebla.

Sergio Dorantes.



Sergio Dorantes.

The Virgin of Guadalupe, painting with mother-of-pearl incrustations, 17th century.



Sergio Dorantes.

The Eternal Father with Christ in His arms, wooden sculpture, Mexico, 17th century.

Ferdinand van Kessel, *Brazilian Allegory*, oil on canvas, Flemish school.



Sergio Dorantes.

Diego Velázquez, *Unknown Woman*, oil on canvas, Spanish school.



Sergio Dorantes.



Sergio Dorantes

Reproduction of 17th-century pharmacy bookshelf.

A museum devoted to the applied arts

The Franz Mayer Museum is an important member of Mexico City's magnificent community of museums. No other museum is devoted to the applied arts; in those cases where examples of the applied arts are exhibited, it is within the context of an exclusively historical message.

The applied arts are distinguished from "pure art" because, while reflecting an ideal of beauty, they are subordinated to functional objectives.

Most objects considered to be examples of the applied arts are works of anonymous authors which illustrate the creativity of a people, its sensibility and way of life, at the same time that they enrich the cultural legacy of humanity as a whole.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the Mayer Collection is the section devoted to Mexican Colonial ceramics. Although the ceramics of Puebla—the main pottery center of New Spain (as Mexico was known in Colonial times)—were originally known as *loza blanca* (white earthenware), they later came to be known as *talavera poblana* ("Talavera"-style pottery from Puebla). The vases, trays, bowls, urns and tiles made of this ceramic

provide a magnificent example of Colonial art.

Chinese porcelain and Spanish ceramics are also found in the collection, illustrating the background to the ceramics of Puebla.

An important part of the museum's holdings consists of beautiful and interesting Mexican and Spanish furniture: chairs, chests of drawers, tables, consoles, corner-cupboards. The outstanding Mexican furniture pieces come mainly from Chiapas, Michoacán, Oaxaca and Puebla. Of the Spanish pieces, the elegant cupboards are particularly striking. This valuable section is filled out with many pieces of 18th- and 19th-century Central European furniture.

The section devoted to gold and in particular silverwork is of special importance, containing a rich variety of objects, whether liturgical, utilitarian, sumptuary or simply decorative in nature. Most of these pieces are from Spain and Colonial Mexico.

The collection of 115 timepieces is noteworthy for the rarity, quality, beauty and above all the sheer quantity of the items exhibited. It consists of 15 grandfather clocks, 35 table clocks, 4 wall clocks, 23 pocket watches, as well as 31 sundials and 7

sandglasses. The oldest piece in the collection is a "lantern-clock" dating from approximately 1680.

Classic *sarapes* and traditional shawls (*rebozos*) are among the most striking pieces in the textile section. This collection includes European tapestries and carpets from various countries, as well as some extremely beautiful examples of religious attire.

The museum also includes a valuable set of paintings, engravings and sculptures. The painting collection is divided into two large groups: European works, mainly of the Spanish, Italian and Flemish schools; and Mexican works, mainly from the Colonial period as well as a number of paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries—featuring works by such artists as Cabrera, Villalpando, Arellano and Correa.

Also striking are the "feathered" pictures and paintings which include applications of mother of pearl, especially a splendid Virgin of Guadalupe and a four-panel folding screen displaying scenes of the Conquest.



Sergio Dorantes

"Talavera" urns and bronze mortars, 17th and 18th centuries.



Sergio Dorantes.

Ironwork objects, Mexico, 18th century.

The museum's building

While the contents of the museum are important, the building itself is interesting as well. The museum occupies a building from the latter part of the 16th century. The changes, extensions, reconstructions, multiple adaptations and modifications it has undergone in its 400 years of existence have left but few of the building's original components.

In 1586 the municipal government gave Dr. Pedro López, a learned physician and philanthropist, a building which had been devoted to "the weighing of flour," so that he could use it as a "hospital for the poor and the care of children." Rearranging the house and naming it the "Hospital of the Epiphany," he provided care to blacks, mulattoes and *mestizos* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry); one section, designated the "Hospital of the Abandoned," was made into a refuge for abandoned children. Dr. López founded the confraternity of Our Lady of the Abandoned Ones, located in a small hermitage which he had built for the purpose.

When the doctor died, his son Jusepe López sought to continue his father's work, but due to economic

difficulties he had to turn over the trusteeship to King Philip II of Spain. By that time the orphanage had become more famous than the hospital, and its name, Hospital of the Abandoned, had eclipsed that of the Hospital of the Epiphany.


In 1604 the institution was turned over to the Friars of St. John, who converted the run-down old building into an extensive general hospital for all the sick and the poor. In 1734 they inaugurated a large church, the Church of St. John of God, which replaced Pedro López's small chapel.

In 1766 the hospital was almost destroyed by a fire. The friars rebuilt it, but in the year 1800 it was damaged by a powerful earthquake, only to be reconstructed once again by the friars.

In 1820 a decree of the Spanish Cortes (assembly) suppressed the monastic hospital orders, as a result of which the building was closed. Four years later it was converted into a convent for teaching nuns, until the nuns were transferred to the Bethlehemite order and the building became a hospital once more, this time for contagious diseases, staffed by the Sisters of Charity.

In 1865 the Emperor Maximilian regulated prostitution and created a hospital for women suffering from venereal diseases. This institution was installed in the St. John of God building, under the care of the Sisters of Charity, until 1874, when President Benito Juárez decreed the suspension of religious orders. In 1875 the name was changed to Morelos Hospital. In 1937 it was declared a national monument.

In 1969, a presidential decision turned the building over to the Secretariat of Commerce and Industry, which used it to house a museum and an arts and crafts market. In 1980 the building was given to the Secretariat of Housing and Public Works, which gave the Franz Mayer Cultural Trusteeship authorization to use it to house a museum of art.

The museum's inauguration made real the dream of Franz Mayer, who had carefully assembled the objects that make up its collection, with the noble objective of increasing the Mexican people's cultural legacy and knowledge of itself as well as humanity as a whole 

*Reproduction of an 18th-century Puebla kitchen.*

Sergio Dorantes.