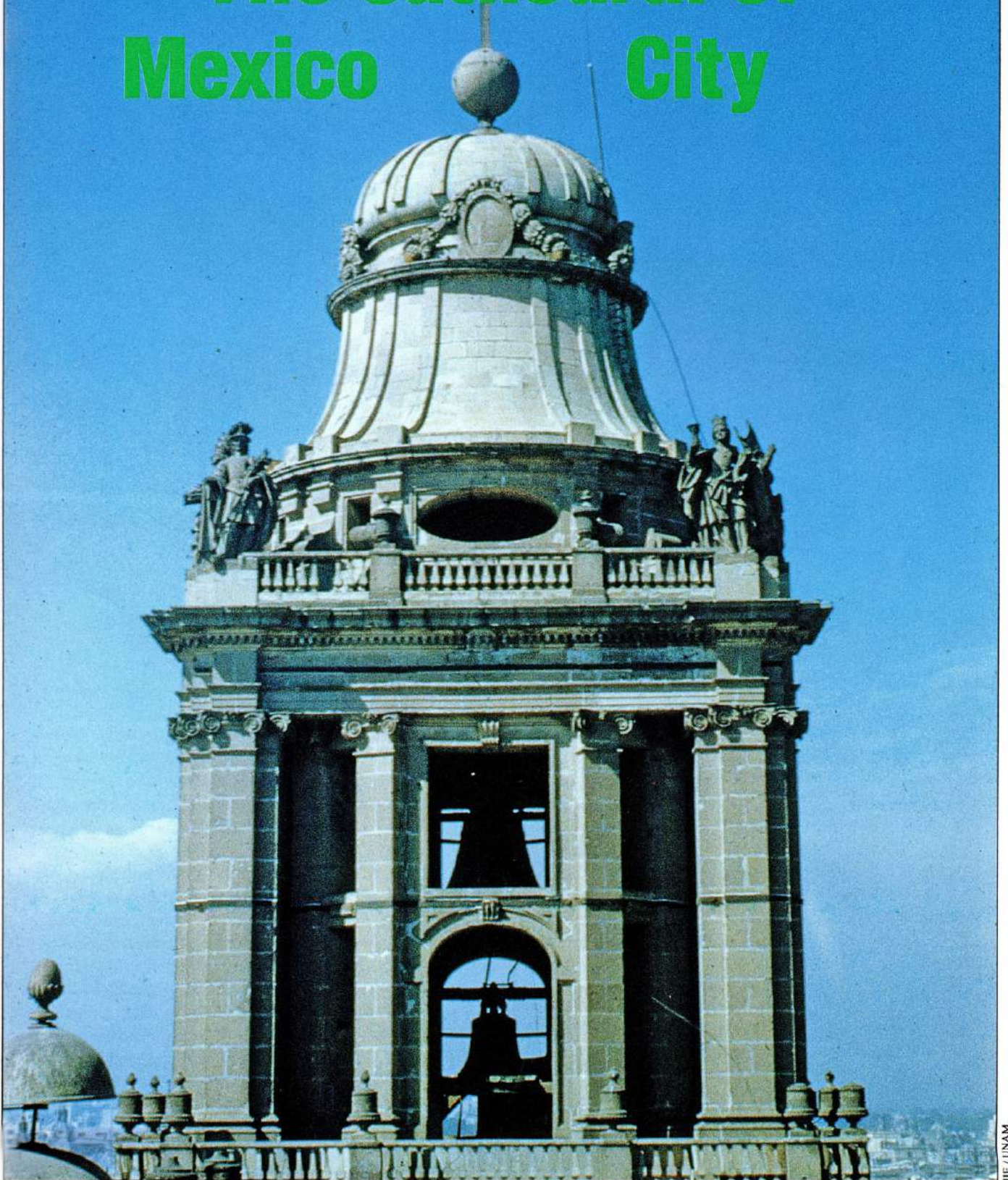


# The Cathedral of Mexico City

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO



Western tower.

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*Façades of the Cathedral and Shrine.*

### **The old Cathedral**

Once the great Templo Mayor of the old city of Tenochtitlán had been destroyed during the Conquest, Hernán Cortés ordered that an enormous quadrangle be laid out, in what is today the Main Square of Mexico City. The Conquistador ruled that this would be the site of the first Great Church of the capital city, predecessor of today's Metropolitan Cathedral.

Close by the ruins of the Aztec ceremonial center, and using some monoliths from the Aztec temple for foundation stones, master of works Martín de Sepúlveda directed

construction from 1524 to 1532, when the building was finished thanks to the determination of Fray Juan de Zumárraga.

This first church, which originally served the Franciscan order and was later turned over to the lay clergy, was considered modest and insufficient in light of the growth of the Colonial capital, and inadequate for the seat of government of a large country in which Christianity was rapidly expanding.

On August 8, 1544, a communique was therefore issued in Valladolid ordering the creation of another church, of larger dimensions and greater majesty.

### **The new Cathedral**

The Metropolitan Cathedral, located near the National Palace in Mexico City's *Zócalo* (Main Square), is the master work of Mexican Colonial architecture. This building contains the most representative examples of the arts from the three centuries of the Colonial period.

The construction (1573-1813) was carried out according to plans drawn up by Claudio de Arciniega and a model made by Juan Miguel de Agüero. But there is a long list of architects who were responsible for the works over a period of more than two centuries. Among them

were Juan Gómez de Trasmonte, Francisco Antonio de Roa, Pedro de Arrieta, and Miguel Espinosa de los Monteros, to name but a few. A large number of artists also made their mark on this architectural monument, such as Jerónimo de Balbás, Alonso Vázquez, Simón Peryns, José Nasare, Cristóbal de Villalpando and Juan Correa.

Above and beyond the different schools and styles, all of these artists and architects subordinated themselves to a “single idea” which guided the work. Neither the mannerism of 17th-century Baroque nor the excesses of the following century’s Churrigueresque style—excesses which were, in fact, highly representative of the Colonial spirit—found their way into the building’s fundamental elements.

The participation of Indians in building the temple, which replaced their former ceremonial center, was massive but anonymous. Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta wrote in 1592: “But if 100 or 200 Indians are clearly enough for building the great church of Mexico City, then why must thousands be taken there, with so much violence and sorrow?”<sup>1</sup>

Abuse, neglect and suffering are among the words to describe this participation; imprints in time without which such grandeur would not have been possible.

#### Architectural treasures

A description of the Cathedral’s outstanding features gives an idea of the magnificence of this historical monument. In the main entranceway, in front of the vestibule, we find a mixture between the classic Doric of the first part and the beginnings of Baroque, embodied in the decorative reliefs and Solomonian columns of

the second part of the doorway. The upper area displays a number of important creations by Manuel Tolsá, including the national seal with spread-winged eagle.

On one of the side doors we see the relief of *Jesus Giving the Keys to the Church to Saint Peter*; on the other, *The Ship of the Church Plying the Seas of Eternity*.

The east and west towers, created by the great Mexican architect Damián Ortiz de Castro, hold two enormous, oval-shaped stone bells.

In the interior, the cathedral has five naves. The central nave is the highest and features a barrel vault, bounded by the Great Altar and choir. This “obstruction” was an old custom in Spanish Renaissance and Baroque



Main portico of the Shrine.

<sup>1</sup> *La Catedral y el Sagrario de México* (The Cathedral and Shrine of Mexico City). Monografía de Arte, INBA.

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*Altarpiece of the Virgin of Zapopan (detail).*

cathedrals, giving a greater feeling of weight to the liturgy.

The choir is bounded on the southern side by the Altar of Forgiveness; on the north, by a magnificent grille of tombac (an alloy of copper, bronze and gold), which was made in Macao in the early 18th century.

The choir houses a number of rich works of art, among them the Altar of Forgiveness, a fine Churrigueresque altarpiece built by Jerónimo de Balbás in the years 1718-1736. It was given this name because it was said to provide souls in purgatory with perpetual pardon for their sins. The walls feature two monumental organs, which were finished in 1736. One was built in Spain by Don Jorge de Sesma and assembled here by Don Tiburcio Sáenz. The other was built in Mexico by José Nasare; it has sixty-nine stops. Each organ has five hidden blowers. Their soundboxes, grand examples of

Baroque engraving with sculptures of angelic musicians, measure 52 feet in width and 31 feet in height. All this is finished off with 3,350 metallic pipes and majestic carvings in precious wood adorned with marble figures.

Together with the choir, the first great altar made its debut in 1673. In the 18th century it was replaced by another extraordinary creation of Jerónimo de Balbás. However, in the mid-19th century, motivated by the desire to follow the artistic fashions of the times, the Cabildo (ecclesiastical governing board) decided to replace it with another structure in the neo-Classical style, designed by Lorenzo de la Hidalga. This one too eventually disappeared, as it was dismantled due to the restoration of the Cathedral in 1943, and was never returned to its original location. An alabaster altar, consisting of a table and altar step, was put in its place.

At the sides of the main nave there are two processions, generally used by the churchgoing public. Each of the lateral naves consists of seven chapels. Only two of these still have the original wooden baluster bars; the rest of the grilles are recent copies.

Outstanding among the chapels on the eastern side of the Cathedral are those of Our Lady of Anguish, distinguished by its Solomonic altarpieces, and of the Holy Christ of the Relics, which features a large altarpiece and a number of paintings by Juan de Herrera. On the western side, the Chapel of Solitude has a magnificent Solomonic altarpiece.

In the apse one finds the monumental Altar of the Kings, built by Jerónimo de Balbás during the years 1718-1725. The altarpiece features four great pilasters in the shape of inverted pyramids. These were the first to be made in Mexico and later had a great influence on the Baroque architecture of New Spain.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mexico was known as New Spain when it was part of the Spanish empire. (Editor's note.)

This altarpiece may be the most important artistic treasure found in the Metropolitan Cathedral.

In the center there is a black Christ, which inspired the following legend: in the Dominican temple of Porta Coeli, a priest, in his daily worship before the figure of a white Christ, would pray for an enemy who hated him. At the end of his prayers he would piously kiss the feet of the Crucified One.

Filled with hatred, the enemy smeared deadly poison on the white feet of the Christ. The next day, when the priest tried to kiss the feet of Jesus, the Christ figure pulled its legs up and began to turn completely black. The revenge-seeking enemy, repentant before this miracle, begged the priest's forgiveness and converted. Since that day, great veneration has been bestowed on the figure popularly called the "Lord of

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*Chapel of Saints Cosmo and Damian (detail).*

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*Altarpiece of the left lateral nave (detail).*

Poison," the image considered to be the most miraculous in the Metropolitan Cathedral.

The sacristy, which was finished in 1623, has a doorway in the Herrera style; its ceiling is Gothic with gilded ribs. It is adorned with beautiful 17th-century murals painted by Cristóbal de Villalpando and Juan Correa.

The Chapter House, whose lathed wooden grille recently served as the model for the new Sacristy grille, displays the iconography of the archbishops of Mexico.

The Metropolitan Shrine, a building constructed in the shape of a Greek cross, is located to the northeast of the Cathedral. Its main altar was made in the Churrigueresque style by the Indian artist Pedro Patiño Ixtolinque.

The area between the choir and the presbytery holds the pulpit, which, according to Francisco de la Maza, is the oldest still existing in Mexico. It was first used on August 15, 1683.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of various ecclesiastical and government institutions, not all of these treasures have weathered the ravages of time and events.

#### Of losses and looting

More than a dozen inventories of the treasures of the Mexico City Cathedral have been preserved. While incomplete, they provide a record of the quantity and value of the Cathedral's riches, their importance for the history of Mexican art, and the inevitable losses brought about by the passage of time.

It is interesting to note some of the causes of these losses. A recurrent one during several periods was the replacement of pieces due to the inescapable influence of fashion. Thus, some works were melted down to provide material for the creation or restoration of others.

Political changes also led to looting. After Independence, many of the Cathedral's treasures were destroyed by members of the Liberal

and Conservative factions, whose need to support their troops left them little option but to violate even the holiest of precincts.

During the era of Mexico's civil wars, the federal government imposed a forced loan on the Cathedral to help pay military expenses.

Priceless jewels of 17th- and 18th-century art were melted down for this purpose. But since the most highly-prized booty was precious stones, gold and silver, many other objects and works of art managed to be preserved.

The fire which broke out on the night of January 17, 1969, due to a short circuit, also caused serious losses in the Metropolitan Cathedral. Among the objects destroyed were: the structure and decorations of the Altar of Forgiveness, including paintings by López de Herrera, Juan de Zumaya and Peryns; in the choir, 75 of the 99 chairs, a painting by Juan Correa, the central structure, which had been brought over from Manila, and most of the books; the interior and exterior

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*Main altar.*

façades of the organs, whose pipes and trumpets melted, as well as two magnificent paintings —Rafael Jimeno y Planes' *Assumption of the Virgin* and Juan Correa's *Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin*. Two of the paintings from the Altar of the Kings, both by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, were damaged: the *Assumption of the Virgin* and the *Coronation of the Kings*.

Despite these losses, the Cathedral's stock of treasures has grown through donations from private individuals, the acquisition of some pieces and the transfer of others from churches which were closed to worshippers but whose works of art were salvaged.

### Restoration and new foundations

The history of the Metropolitan Cathedral is also the history of its improvements. Changes in secular and ecclesiastical government, the

building's age, the inclemencies of time, the clayey soil on which the cathedral was built—all this has led to many works of restoration and the laying of new foundations.

A detailed description of these efforts would go beyond the scope of this article. As an example of these works we will limit ourselves to a brief listing of the efforts carried out after the fire of 1969 and the current work of laying new foundations.

In 1972, under the direction of the architect Jaime Ortiz Lajous, a program was undertaken for laying new foundations, structural rehabilitation, conservation of masonry and roofing, restoration of the towers as well as the Chapel of the Souls, the altars of Forgiveness and of the Kings, the choir, the organs, and the paintings in the sacristy, as well as other works.

An interesting facet of the restoration was that when the organs' pipes and conduits were dismantled for repair, a number of documents were found behind the paper which served to prevent air leaks. Among these was a copy of the document appointing Hernán Cortés Captain General of New Spain, made from the 1529 original. 51 paintings were found behind the Altar of the Kings.

A serious problem which the Cathedral currently faces is the slow sinking of the edifice, resulting from the clayey ground on which it was built; the extent of this sinkage has become alarming indeed. The southwest side of the building has sunk more than six feet below the original level.

In August 1992, due to the seriousness of the sinkage, the Metropolitan Shrine shut its doors to the public; the work of laying a new foundation still continues. In order to cause controlled sinkage which would allow a gradual settling of the building, excavations have been made and large quantities of clay have been removed. The spaces

created thereby have been made into crypts which are sold to the public. The funds acquired from these sales help pay the costs of Cathedral reconstruction.

### Religious and cultural activities

Activities connected with religious worship, such as masses, confirmations, weddings, first communions and baptisms, continue to be held in the Cathedral, as in any church.

During August of each year there is a season of concerts given by Mexican organists invited by church authorities. On special occasions the Cathedral choir gives recitals or provides accompaniment to religious activities.

However, the Cathedral's most significant cultural activity has to do with the great number of Mexican and foreign tourists who come to visit. Alone or in guided tour groups, visitors take in this monumental "museum" which is a home to marvelous objects and works, representative offspring of Mexican culture and art.


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Chapel of Our Lady of Antigua (detail).