

# Chapultepec, a sacred place

*Cincalco was a very pleasant and restful place, where men lived forever, without dying. It was the place of clear, crystalline waters, of great fertility, of every kind of victual and the freshness of roses and flowers.*

Fray Diego Durán.

**C**incalco was the name of the place the first Toltecs sought to settle in. They were looking for a place with caves where they could take refuge and feel protected, as in the maternal womb, with springs and trees which would provide them with food. So when they found Chapultepec they believed it was the Eden they were seeking. From that time on Chapultepec was regarded as sacred by all the pre-Hispanic tribes that lived there.

Chapultepec, Chapoltepec or Chapultepeque are variations on the Náhuatl term derived from the roots *chapul(in)* —grasshopper— and *tepe(tl)* —hill or mountain. Thus the woods with their little hill are still known by the first name it was given: “on the hill of the grasshopper.”

Tall *ahuehuate* trees with an abundance of leaves provided shade in some of the wooded areas, giving them the air of an enchanted forest according to descriptions in the ancient codices. Lakes extended throughout the woods, feeding the thirsty *ahuehuetes*; to cleanse themselves of sins and illnesses, local inhabitants would bathe in the springs that arose from the depths of the earth.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún wrote that these springs (known in

Spanish as *ojos de agua* —“eyes of water”) were related to the local peoples’ gods, who were appeased by offerings and sacrifices. All this beauty was complemented by the stony hill which could be seen from a distance, and which served the area’s inhabitants as a perfect lookout for defending their home from possible invasions.

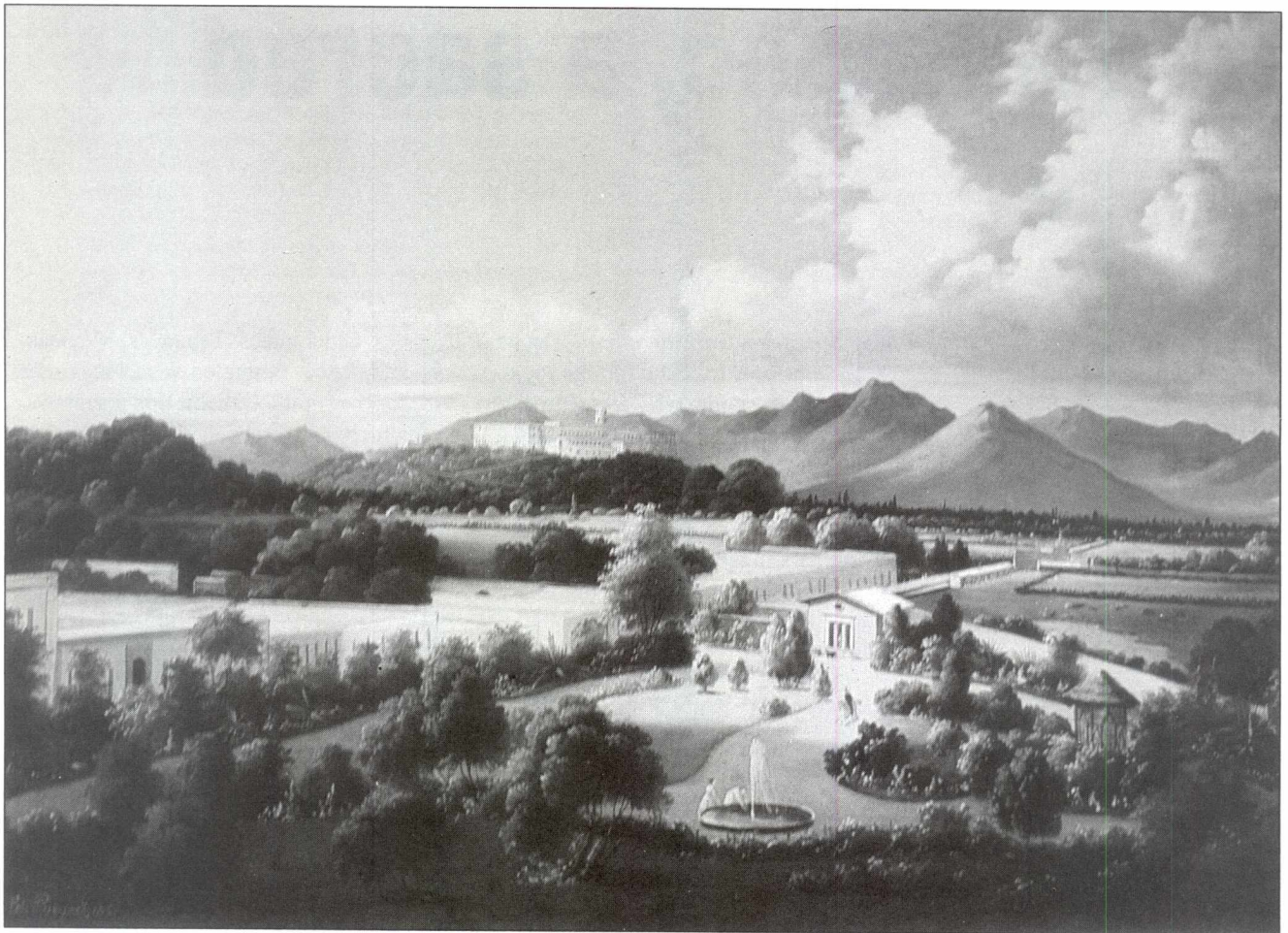
Chichimecs, Tepanecs, Mexicas and Aztecs struggled at various times for the right to inhabit this region, which was also rich in a variety of edible fauna, such as rabbits and hares, deer and grasshoppers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Grasshoppers (*chapulines*), often served with chile and lime, are still a delicacy in many parts of Mexico. (Editor’s note.)



Western façade of Chapultepec Castle.





Eduardo Pingret, *San Miguel Chapultepec*, 1851.

With the arrival of the Mexicas, the forest reached its apogee in the pre-Hispanic period. They carried out the first known construction project in that area: the *teocalli*, a temple which crowned the top of Chapultepec hill. It fulfilled the functions of both shrine and fortress.

In addition to the *teocalli* there was an observatory or solar meridian on top of the hill. Antonio de León y Gamo discovered some ruins which could still be found in the late 18th century. The most lasting and “practical” constructions were the pools and aqueducts built by the Mexicas after they went to live in the floating city in the middle of the lake.

It was from Chapultepec that Emperor Moctezuma governed the great city of Tenochtitlán. For Hernán

Cortés, the wooded zone summed up his personal desire to take over property to which Indians laid claim. When the United States army invaded Mexico in 1847, it chose to seize Chapultepec Castle, which represented the key to Mexico, rather than the National Palace. For the Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian, the forest and its castle were a heartening replacement for his abandoned Castle of Miramar in Trieste, and they may have been the first things that induced him and his wife Carlota to live in the New World.

#### **The Castle**

In order to reach Chapultepec Castle, visitors climb a curved road. At the beginning of this road is the fabulous grotto which gave rise to innumerable legends, the best-known of which is

that it was the sign the first Toltecs sought for identifying their place of origin. For some time this was the location of an elevator that rose to the Castle.

Reaching the peak of this peculiar hill—the vantage point from which Huitzilíhuítl, Netzahualcóyotl and Moctezuma admired Tenochtitlán as well as the Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl volcanoes—one encounters the Castle. Today visitors look out on the panorama of the planet’s most populated city.

The Castle’s majestic salons, bedrooms and marble staircases, walls and pillars, together with decorations brought from around the world, bear witness to Mexico’s history. Looking back at that history today, we see this edifice as the result



of the plans, desires, envies and dreams of kings, viceroys, revolutionaries and presidents.

Hernán Cortés ordered the construction of a grand terrace as well as a gunpowder warehouse, the only way he saw to use this area given the Spanish crown's refusal to grant it to him as a place of residence; he also ordered that both the hill and the surrounding woods continue to be a place for public recreation.

With the arrival of the various viceroys in New Spain (as Mexico was then known), Chapultepec forest became an exclusive area for the diversion of the new settlers, who turned it into a European-style park.

During that period a small *casa de descanso* (weekend or leisure-time residence) was built, in which soirées of such magnitude were held that the Spanish crown forbade them during

the viceroyalty of Luis de Velasco, given their excessive cost; this led to the park being closed for a long time.

When Don Matías de Gálvez arrived in Mexico to take over the post of viceroy, one of his biggest dreams was to build a *casa de descanso*, but he died before he could see it constructed. His son, Don Bernardo, continued the project.

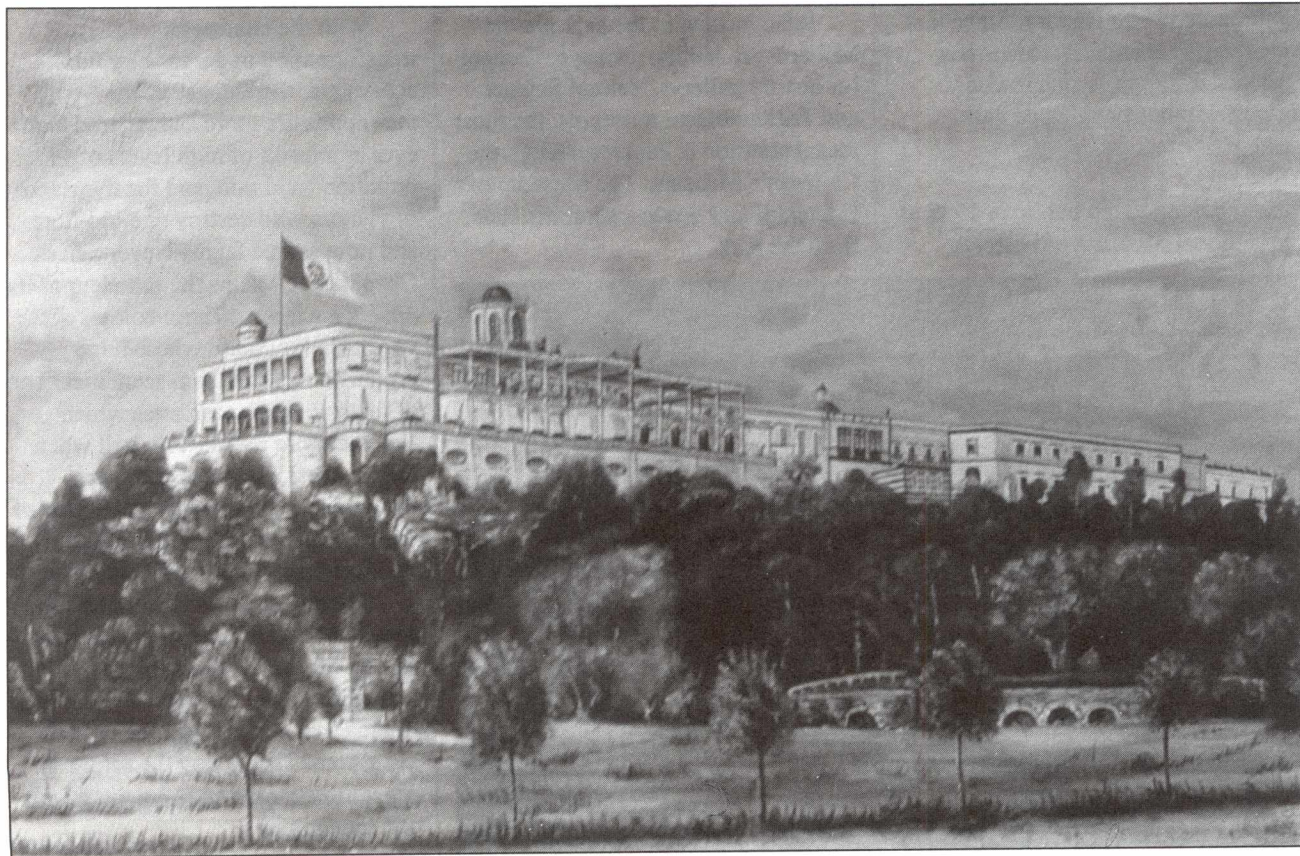
Master architects Don Josef Joachim García de Torres and Don Francisco Antonio Guerrero y Torres made the original plans, and with the death of Viceroy Gálvez Don Manuel Agustín Mascaró drew up new ones. The work lasted two years, two months and eight days, from August 16, 1785 to October 24, 1787, but the younger Gálvez was also unable to witness the conclusion of what already began to be called the Castle: he died a year before its completion.

After then, up to the Insurgency war, the Chapultepec Castle "remained abandoned like an eagle's nest on a mountain peak. People said that the spirit of Count Gálvez lived there on the heights."<sup>2</sup>

The Castle was completed in 1842 and made into the headquarters of the Military College. In 1847 it suffered the second of two explosions: the first had occurred at the end of the 18th century when the gunpowder warehouse blew up, and the second resulted from bombardment by U.S. army troops.

The building that bore the greatest resemblance to today's edifice was the product of reconstruction and remodeling of the abandoned Castle,

<sup>2</sup> Miguel Angel Fernández, *Chapultepec, historia y presencia* (Past and Present of Chapultepec). Mexico City, private edition published by Smurfit Cartón y Papel de México, 1988, p. 70.



Chapultepec, oil painting by unknown author, ca. 1900.



as well as the beautification of the woods, ordered with great enthusiasm by Emperor Maximilian, who under the reign of Napoleon III arrived to rule Mexico in 1862.

Maximilian decreed the construction of Emperor Road, uniting Chapultepec with the city center, so he could travel to the National Palace each day; this road followed the trail that had been blazed back in the days of Tenochtitlán. Under the regime of Porfirio Díaz it became the present-day Paseo de la Reforma. When Maximilian's empire was overthrown by Benito Juárez, the Castle was once again left in oblivion.

The lands of Chapultepec reached their greatest splendor during the "Belle Époque" of Don Porfirio. But in 1939, by decree of General Lázaro Cárdenas, the building whose construction had been ordered by Count Gálvez came under the jurisdiction of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. Since that time the presidential residence has been at Los Pinos, which is also located within Chapultepec Park.

### Museums

Since opening to the public in 1939 as the National Museum of History,

Chapultepec Castle has become one of the locations with the largest number of visitors in Mexico. In the meantime other important museums have been built in the park, covering themes related to history, nature, science, technology and several fields of art.

There are seven in all, including the National Museum of Anthropology, which features the world's most complete exhibition on pre-Hispanic Mexican culture—from the traces of the first inhabitants through the maces and shields used against the Spanish conquerors. On its upper level and in its storerooms, the museum also houses an impressive ethnographic collection. It is home to the image of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, symbol of the earth as creation and destruction, mother of women and men, as well as the Sun Stone, better known as the Aztec Calendar. An interesting sidelight is that several of the pieces were discovered nearby, in the pools of Chapultepec.

Also located in the park are the Modern Art, Rufino Tamayo, Caracol (or history gallery), Natural Science and Technological museums; the most recent addition is Papalote (Kite), the Children's Museum. The Museum of Contemporary Art is a short distance from the park.

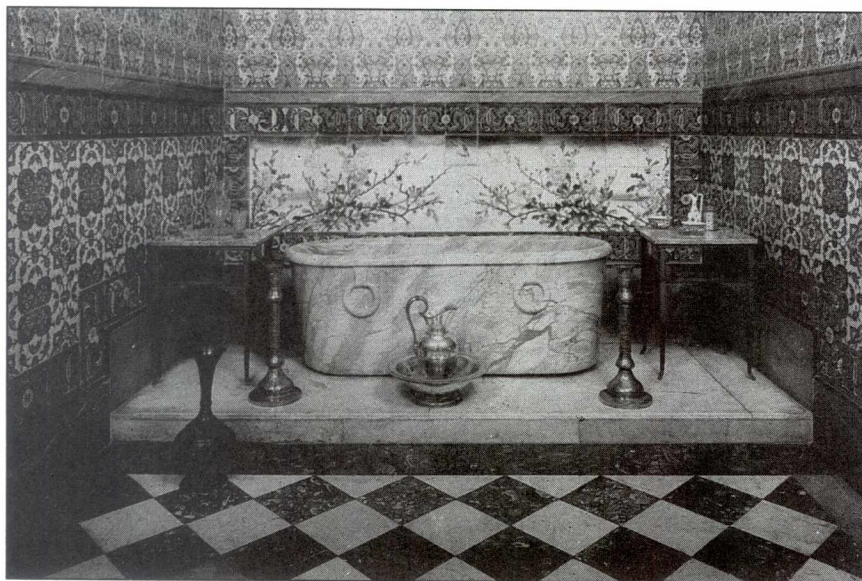


*Malachite room.*

Chapultepec Park offers visitors a wide variety of activities, in the realm not only of culture but of recreation as well. Among its features are the Zoo, recently remodeled to provide greater freedom and comfort for the animals, and the National Auditorium, which is considered the second best show center in the world.

With the enormous transformation undergone by this ecosystem, the "lungs" of the metropolis are more endangered than ever as a result of high levels of pollution, acid rain, and the thousands of visitors who destroy age-old flora and now-scarce fauna. Nevertheless, Chapultepec retains the grandeur of its *ahuehuate* trees, "Those colossi of the vegetable kingdom, whose huge proportions make them seem creations of fantasy; these aged ones which become more melancholy still when their leaves, like green tears, are contemplated in the thick reflection of the swamps" (in the words of the 19th-century writer Paul Duplessis).

Their mystery is still revered by some, such as the chess players who loyally arrive for afternoons of relaxation in the park, or those who go rowing in the lake when the crowds are absent. They enjoy the refuge and peacefulness offered us by the woods of Chapultepec. ❧



*Bathroom with marble tub which belonged to the Empress Carlota.*