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The Red Room's magnificent stone fireplace and lavish Russian nineteenth-century chandelier.

La Bola House Museum

Few buildings in Mexico City can boast of having kept their original structure over four full centuries, or of preserving their residents' spirit and way of life through furniture, objets d'art and everyday items that, despite the passing of time, retain traces of the pride inherited from their golden age. But that is exactly what the La Bola House Museum does.



One of the few modifications to the buildings was the addition of this terrace overlooking the garden.

FOUR CENTURIES

The *La Bola* House is a colonial mansion built at the beginning of the seventeenth century on a hill in San José de Tacubaya, today part of Mexico City. A mute witness to the lives and tribulations of its 19 owners, its walls survived almost intact the turbulent years that led to the demise of the Viceroyalty, the beginning and consolidation of independence and the coming of modern Mexico.

Its first owner was Dr. Francisco Bazán y Albornoz, apostolic inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition. Upon his death, the house was inherited by his nephew Lope Diez and, in turn, to his son. They were succeeded by others, always well-born, rich and powerful. When one of them, José Gómez Campos, lost most of what he had invested in mining, he was forced to ask the Royal Lottery to raffle off the property.

The detailed inventory done in 1801 for that purpose shows that the structure has remained practically unchanged

from that time until today. It was then a country residence, surrounded by two large gardens with all kinds of fruit trees, agaves and olive trees. The ground floor was used for producing olive oil which was kept in two large earthen jars in the main patio.

The house was raffled off September 24, 1802, and Antonio Torres Torrija, a lawyer and member of the Royal Audience of New Spain¹ was the winner. Upon Torres' death, the house was acquired by a well-known scholar and politician, José Gómez de la Cortina, Count of La Cortina. In 1849, the main house and part of the grounds were purchased by Don José María Rincón Gallardo, Marquis of Guadalupe. By that time, it was known by the neighbors as the *La Bola* House, although no one knows exactly why it was called that. The Rincón Gallardo family kept the property until it was purchased October 19, 1942, by Don Antonio Hagenbeck y de la Lama, its last owner, for Mex\$95,000. It is said that he paid this sum out in five peso bills



Master bedroom. The nineteenth century crown of the canopy is done in silk embroidery.

that he brought with him wrapped in newspaper.

BETWEEN THE MYSTIC AND THE PROFANE

Don Antonio moved into the *La Bola* House, restored it, consolidated its structure and made additions like the beautiful terrace on the top floor. Access to the terrace, built with materials salvaged from the demolition of what



Danie Barrera



In its heyday the garden had a variety of fruit trees, agaves and olive trees.

had been his childhood home on Juárez Avenue, is through the dining room.

A confirmed bachelor, Don Antonio spent most of his fortune collecting art work and antiques, transforming his home into a lavish mansion in the eclectic style of the mid-nineteenth century: ornate decoration, works of art from different periods, silk-covered walls and magnificent chandeliers and mirrors. Going through the house, the visitor cannot but wonder at its opulence, but also sense a certain singulari-

ty given the intense combination of worldly riches and the many religious objects—images, altars, priedieu and crucifixes—distributed in the different rooms. Eccentricity or true religious faith? What inspired the life of its owner? It is said that Don Antonio made a vow of poverty for his person, and for that reason his clothing and shoes were totally unostentatious. However, he did not consider surrounding himself with beautiful, expensive things contrary to his faith.

Many fantastic stories were spun around this figure of an eccentric millionaire who loved animals and concerned himself with supporting the needy. His will caused sharp polemics because he left his immense fortune to a foundation he had set up for the protection of the fauna of Mexico. He donated the *La Bola* House and two haciendas he owned in the State of Mexico and Puebla to another foundation to be turned into private museums. However, he left no funds for their maintenance and restoration. Despite

this, his artistic bequest is particularly important since it includes not only a collection of works of great quality, but three complete museums which reveal a great love of art and refinement.

A TRIP THROUGH LEGEND, HISTORY AND ART

A brick facade, stout wrought-iron balconies and a great wooden door receive the visitor at the *La Bola* House. The first thing you see inside is the beautiful colonial patio with the elegant columns surrounding it and an iron railing at the bottom of the patio leading to the garden.

To the left, a magnificent stone staircase leads to the top floor whose high walls are hung with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings. At the top of the stairs is a corridor which contains three European suits of armor and a collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century stiff-backed, leather *frailero* armchairs, two large nineteenth-



Among the pieces in the chapel is a cabinet incrustated with semi-precious gems in the seventeenth-century *pietra* style.

century Satsuma jars and drapes in yellow moiré worthy of a palace. The corridor leads into the dining room with its oak table and glass cabinets displaying East India Company plates, Limoges porcelain and Baccarat crystal.

The first of the two libraries, or the Red Room, has a colonial beamed ceiling and nineteenth-century French wooden doors; its magnificent stone fireplace dominates the room, along with an exquisite nineteenth-century Russian crystal chandelier. The second library is decorated with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tapestries, furniture and chairs, illuminated by a central nineteenth-century Bohemian crystal lamp.

The house has two bedrooms: the summer bedroom, decorated in a more sober style, is watched over by an oil painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe done in the style of the nineteenth-century Puebla school; the master—or winter—



The dining room's place settings, candelabra and pitchers are nineteenth century chiseled silver. The painting over the fireplace is of the Christ of the Column.

bedroom boasts a splendid nineteenth-century silk embroidered canopy bed. The bed's crown is covered with velvet embroidered in gold, topped with a nineteenth-century gilt wood crucifix.

The house has three salons. The Green Salon, or music room, offers the visitor a view of an outstanding eighteenth-century Mazarin boulevark desk.

The San Román Salon, furnished in Napoleon III pieces, was named after the sisters Juliana and Josefa San Román, Don Antonio's grandmother and great-aunt respectively, both excellent painters whose canvases grace the walls. Lastly, the Versailles Room, reminiscent of a palatial ballroom, is hung with six immense nineteenth-century French mirrors.



The drawing room is hung with paintings of Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI, Maximilian and Carlotta. Don Antonio baptized this collection the Altar to Sacrificial Kings. From here, the visitor has direct access to the so-called smoking room where corner sofas and a beautiful Murano chandelier catch the eye.

The last place remaining to visit in the house is the chapel, whose altar and magnificent religious figures shut out all things profane, making it a perfect place for reflection and silent prayer. Here ends the tour of the interior of the house. Going back through the corridor, you have the sensation that you have been accompanied by Don Antonio. Your visit



The Green Salon, with its magnificent Louis XIV boulevork desk.

concludes with a walk through the spacious gardens that prepares you for taking leave of this place, seemingly suspended in time. ■■■

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LA BOLA HOUSE MUSEUM
PARQUE LIRA 136
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MEXICO CITY
SINCE THE MUSEUM
IS A PRIVATE INSTITUTION,
VISITS ARE PERMITTED,
BUT BY APPOINTMENT ONLY.

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NOTES

¹In Spain's colonies in the Americas, the *Audiencias Reales*, or Royal Audiences, were tribunals as well as basic pillars of metropolitan administration together with the Viceroyalty, which acted as government councils. [Translator's Note.]