

The Palafoxiana Library

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Photos by Raúl Corfez

He who finds himself without books, finds himself in solitude without consolation,
on a mountaintop without company, on a road without a staff,
in the fog without a guide....This brought upon me the desire to leave the library
I have gathered since I began serving Your Majesty,
already one of the largest I have seen in Spain, adjacent to these ecclesiastical houses,
and leave it to the public good so that it may be useful
to all manner of professions and persons.

Juan de Palafox y Mendoza
September 6, 1646.

Puebla de los Angeles, founded in 1531 “by Spaniards and for Spaniards,” nurtured among its inhabitants through the years a feeling of nobility that led it in the colonial period to rival Mexico City, the capital of New Spain.

One of the great gems of the colonial period is the Palafoxiana Library, now a museum, declared a historic monument July 31, 1981, and today considered a World Heritage Treasure.

The library is named in honor of the venerable Juan de Palafox y Mendoza (1600-1659), ninth bishop of the Puebla diocese, who donated his personal library to the Saint John, Saint Peter and Saint Paul Tridentine colleges to aid in the education of their seminary students.

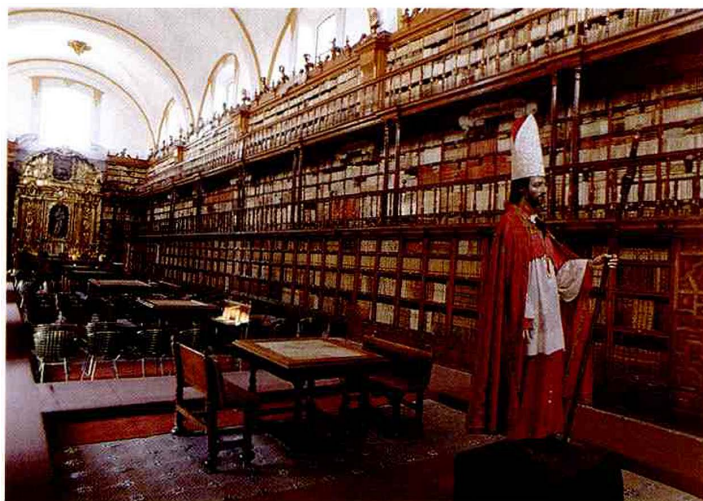
Palafox was born in Fitero Navarra June 24, 1600, into the family of the Marquisate of Ariza. Educated in the Universities of Huesca, Alcalá and Henares, before becoming a bishop, he was a man of the world who traveled throughout Europe and served at the court of Felipe IV, achieving the post of senior prosecutor of the Royal Council of the Indies.

In New Spain, in addition to being bishop, he was first judge and visitor of the provinces and later viceroy and temporary captain general. He would have been archbishop of Mexico if he had not refused the post.

Palafox’s most important achievement as patron of architecture, besides the mag-

nificent cathedral of Puebla, consecrated in 1649, was the founding of the Royal Pontifical Conciliar Seminary (also called the Royal Pontifical Tridentine Seminary because it was created based on the dispositions of the Council of Trent). Palafox based himself canonically and legally on the Saint John College (founded in 1596 by Bishop Diego Romano and

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Juan Larios) to set up the Seminary College August 22, 1644, before the notary and scribe Pedro Ruiz Sobrino and “put it under the protection of the prince of the apostles, the glorious patriarch, Saint Peter.”¹

The building was constructed across from the southern end of the cathedral, between Saint John’s College (today the

Cultural Center) and the Episcopal Palace (now the post office). These two colleges, together with Saint Paul’s—which Palafox also founded—became a center of religious learning: Mexican-born Spanish diocesan priests were trained there and they in turn trained others giving priority to “those born in the diocese, with preference for the poor over the rich, and above all, for members of indigenous groups.”²

It was for these students that Bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza purchased out of his own pocket “a library of canons, laws and philosophy, medicine and *bells lettres* which comes to 5,000 tomes more or less.”³ These he donated to Saint Peter’s College, together with the bookshelves, two celestial and earth globes, a magnet and a mirror for burning steel, among other mathematical,

astronomical and chemical instruments.

The library was to be used by the students and any person who wished to study, whether clergy or lay person, from 8 to 11 a.m. and from 3 to 5 p.m. They were allowed to copy anything they pleased, but it was totally prohibited for anyone to sell or remove the books or their adornments.

In October 1649, the Tridentine course of studies began and the Palafoxiana Library opened its doors. Its first librarian was Bartolomé de Sos y Vergara, the secretary of the chamber of Bishop Palafox.

The Palafoxiana Library, built on what was then Saint John Street—later San Pantaleón Street and now 5 Oriente—is on the upper floor of the building that

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housed Saint John's College. Up the stairs on the extreme left of the patio, the library can be seen on the right, with its baroque marble facade and its wooden doors fit together totally without nails, carved with the crests of the House of Ariza and Bishop Palafox.

The great vault with lunettes which holds the library was built on the initiative of Bishop Francisco Fabián y Fuero in 1773. He also added two levels of beautifully worked cedar shelves depicted by José de Nava in his late eighteenth century copperplate engravings. The third level of shelving, done in the original baroque style of the first two, was added by Bishop Francisco Pablo Vázquez in the first third of the nineteenth century.

The fine cabinet-work is set off by a stucco and transparent marble altar dedicated to Our Lady of Trapana, whose image is painted in oils at the center between four columns. The four columns also set off an oil painting of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, also known as Dr. Angelicus, who, with the sun on his chest, radiates wisdom, and with pen in hand invites us to reflect and study as the road to perfection, guided by the Holy Spirit, also depicted on the altar.

All this makes for an impressive whole: a parallelogram, 43 meters long and 11.75 meters wide holds 824 sections covered with wire mesh, perfectly symmetrical with the six marble and wood tables, donated by Bishop Pedro Nogales Dávila. The entire room is very well lit thanks to 10 large windows—five to the north and five to the south—and five doors onto the balconies which also face south.

The library's initial collection of books has been added to over the years with donations from the cathedral assembly,

Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz and His Excellency Francisco Fabián y Fuero, who in addition to donating his personal library, made a gift of those of the Jesuit colleges (the Holy Spirit, San Jerónimo, San Ildefonso, San Ignacio



The altar dedicated to Our Lady of Trapana.

and San Francisco Javier) after they were expelled from New Spain in 1767. Later contributions were the libraries of Bishop Francisco Pablo Vázquez Sánchez Vizcaino and the canon José Francisco de Irigoyen. The Palafoxiana Library has held 43,000 volumes since the mid-nineteenth century.

The oldest text in the library, the Chronicle of Nuremberg, written by Hartman Schedel, dates from 1493. This *incunabula*, printed by Anton Koberger and illustrated with 2,000 engraved figures by Wilhelm Pleydenwuff and Michael Wolgemut, Albrecht Dürer's first painting teacher, is written in gothic characters on sober linen paper that gives it a permanently fresh appearance. Some of the pages are illuminated in color, depicting charts, military feats, towns, maps, etc.

Other valuable books are the *Doctrina Cristiana* of 1575, written in Spanish and áhuatl by the Augustine monk Friar de

la Anunciación, and the *Biblia Poliglota* or *Biblia Regia*, written by Benedicto Arias Montañón in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Chaldean between 1569 and 1573. Its Hebrew characters were engraved by Guillermo Lewbe.

Among the maps is the *Atlas de Ortelius*, by Abraham Ortelius, celebrated Flemish cosmographer and cartographer, the royal geographer of Felipe II and author of the *Theatrus Orbis Terrarum* and the 1578 *Synonymia Geographica*.

Today, the Palafoxiana Library is still consulted by specialists familiar with the classic languages and houses the Institute for Bibliographical Research, which has recently printed *Los impresos de la Biblioteca Palafoxiana* (The Publications of the Palafoxiana Library), confirming the value of the bibliographical museum's collection.

At the entrance to the library is a full-length statue of Palafox y Mendoza, dressed in his bishop's robes. From there, he seems to survey with satisfaction his achievement of having "left a seminary to the church and a source of light to the state."³ ■■■

NOTES

¹ *Autos fechos con motivo de la fundación del Colegio de San Pedro 1649*, anonymous MSS in Palafoxiana Library Historical Archives, Puebla (n/fol.).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

FURTHER READING

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