



THE BELLO MUSEUM

*Arturo Cosme Valadez**

In the mid-nineteenth century, José Luis Bello y González dedicated the little leisure time he had to assiduously collecting Mexican and European paintings, not always with the best of taste. He was a multifaceted, energetic man born in Veracruz, although he had always lived in Puebla. He was in the military, a lover of the arts and an industrialist, a combina-

tion less paradoxical in the last century than in this. He fought the Americans during their invasion and took Porfirio Díaz into his home during the French intervention. He sincerely believed that bravery, good taste and progress were synonymous, but only one of his four sons shared his interests. When he died in 1907 he left him 81 canvases of varying quality by different painters which were the basis for the museum collection.

The true creator of the museum which bears the family name was Don Mariano Bello y Acedo (1869-1938), who inherited his father's insatiable thirst for collecting. Throughout his life, he patiently and persistently accumulated an enormous number of objects. Like his father he was a successful industrialist, which allowed him to invest large sums of money in his uncontrollable hobby. His cigarette factory, the Penichet Tobacco Co., produced

* Mexican writer.



Photos by Dante Barrera

The gallery.

the famous Carmencitas cigarettes, made practically by hand and wrapped in rice paper, that are still sold in some tobacco stands. A passionate devotee of painting and music, Don Mariano spent his free time among oils and paintbrushes. His work may be no more than “correct,” that of a talented dilettante, but brandishing a brush himself allowed him to refine his taste and choose the canvases for his collection with exquisite certainty. On Sunday afternoons, he would take his violin out of its case and play music for string quartets with three friends. These social afternoons always took place in his home; the musicians sought inspiration in the multicolored beauty of the furnishings and even the delicate architecture of the *Porfiriano*-style mansion.

This man’s love for beautiful things finally pushed him out of his own house. The large living rooms and parlors filled up with silks and large china pots, ivories and furniture, sets of dishes and kitchen ware, chests and religious ornaments, until



Mexican hand-carved, seventeenth-century organ.

the collection displaced the collector: he had to buy the property next door and connect it to his original house to have somewhere to live.

On a certain night in 1930, police came in through the roof and commandeered the house. These were the turbulent post-revolutionary war years, and the Cristera Rebellion (1926-1929), only recently put down, continued to give rise to all sorts of

arbitrary behavior. In this case, the pretext was that the collection included a great many religious objects, deemed suspicious by the authorities, who had fought the resistance of the faithful and clergy to some of the articles of the Constitution. The next day, Don Mariano sought an audience with the governor. He showed him his will leaving the building and all its contents to the state. After that, a detailed inventory was made of the property, which was then returned into “custody” of the owner. Despite all this, this generous man continued until his death to buy objects and show them off to anyone who wanted to see them: the fame of the house-museum had already spread and visitors came from other cities to see it.

Don Mariano Bello died in 1938. As promised, he left his laboriously gathered collection to the Fine Arts Academy, and it was later acquired by the government of the state of Puebla, which opened it as an art museum July 21, 1944. From then until now, the permanent collection has contin-



Talavera angel, 116 cm.



Talavera statue, *The Fat Man*.



Portrait of Don Mariano Bello y Acedo in the Damask Room.

ued to grow thanks to the lavishness of other collectors who also understand that beauty is enjoyed more when shared.

It is to be supposed that Don Mariano Bello's profound devotion to antiques was a sort of compensation. Married to Guadalupe Grajales, who was always afraid to travel, this restless man never left his native Puebla except to visit Mexico City. Practical individual that he was, he substituted objects from other places and cultures for the trips he could not or did not want to make. It would be unfair to say he did not know the world: he did in his own particular way, roaming through rooms and galleries, seeing in a single day the passing of historical periods and the vast diversity of beauty created by Man.

THE MUSEUM

The three storey building, located in the middle of the historic downtown area of Puebla, is dominated by a central patio.

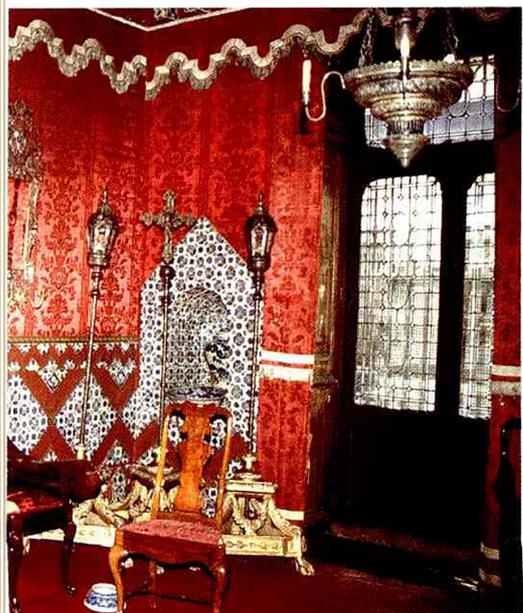


Nineteenth century English vertical string piano.

The high roofs and the Frenchified details in baseboards, balconies, frames and borders tell us that its architecture belongs to the second half of the nineteenth century.

The collection is shown in 15 rooms. It is impossible to describe each in detail since their main value lies in their variety. A quick overview would note, however, that the first room, with walls covered in

red damask, contains portraits of José Luis and Mariano Bello, a lovely wooden corner table, two exquisite *secrétaires*, one Indo-Portuguese, finished in ivory, and the other Mexican with bone inlays. The second room displays canvases depicting daily life by Puebla-Tlaxcala painter José Agustín Arrieta, noteworthy because of his use of color and the transparency of their crystal; a delicate nineteenth-century Puebla jewel box with bone and painted glass inlays; a seventeenth-century Philippine chest painted with a view of the walled city of Manila; and the oldest piece in the museum, a Roman urn from the first century B.C., originally from Biblos, donated by the Lebanese government. Outstanding pieces in rooms three and four, dedicated to coppers and calamines (an alloy of gold, bronze and silver) include the painting *Supper among the First Christians* by the priest Gonzalo Carrasco, who decorated the Sacred Family Church in Mexico City; an Italian alabaster statue of La Purísima; and, of course, the



Tenebrario for religious ceremonies.



First century B.C. Roman bust.



Sacred Heart embroidered by Puebla nuns.

bouquets made of calamine used in churches to adorn the altar. Room five holds one of the world's most complete collections of Puebla Talavera china from its golden age, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The pair of angels 1.16 meters high, the fine designs on the blue and white Talavera tub, and the mosaics representing Saint Pascual Bailón, patron saint of cooks, all deserve special attention. The next room contains a large collection of lacquered items from Michoacán and little boxes from the town of Olinalá, Guerrero, framed by an altar hanging embroidered by nuns from Puebla.

Up the stairs on the second floor, we encounter delicate multi-colored stained glass windows made in Mexico City by an Italian workshop, as well as Italian marble sculptures and a terra cotta statue by Jesús F. Contreras.

The music room boasts drums from India, a trombone to which Bello himself adapted a Chinese serpent, French and English porcelain, Spanish and Italian paintings, a Chinese banjo, a nineteenth-century English piano with vertical strings that belonged to the Empress Carlotta and a seventeenth-century hand-carved Mexican organ that still works.



Mexican stained-glass ceiling; Italian marble statues in niches.

**Don Mariano's hobby
finally pushed him
out of his own house.
He had to buy
the property next door
to have a place
to live.**

Beautiful Mexican, German, Italian, Dutch and Spanish paintings from the sixteenth to the twentieth century hang in the gallery. Continuing our tour, we will happen onto two nativity scenes, one from the Seville School and the other carved in bone by nuns from Puebla. The ivory room displays Asian and European pieces, among them an admirable Chinese work called *The Spheres of Life*, with concentric spheres carved out of a single piece of material, which required the pa-



The Spheres of Life, from China, carved in ivory.

tience of several generations to finish. The same room contains miniatures of silver filigree, French porcelain and an oil by Cristóbal de Villalpando, a Mexican seventeenth-century painter.

The next room is full of ironwork, including three pairs of beautifully wrought sixteenth-century stirrups in the form of a cross, harnesses, locks, whips, reins, keys and spurs, as well as a seventeenth-century Spanish strongbox with 13 locks. The porcelain room has items from China, France and Japan as well as Chinese watercolors painted on rice paper and anonymous Flemish oils. The crystal room offers the visitor European and Mexican pieces including a unique French door made of Baccarat crystal. The area dedicated to religious ornaments displays a candlestick, silk priest's robes embroidered in gold, Italian reliquaries and a tiny canvas worked in beads and gold from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Naturally, this list is only a small part of the wonders the Bello Museum holds. Any visitor will also see the collections of coins and watches, Chippendale furniture, cabinets with inlaid work and countless other items. Hopefully, the reader will have the opportunity of going. **MM**