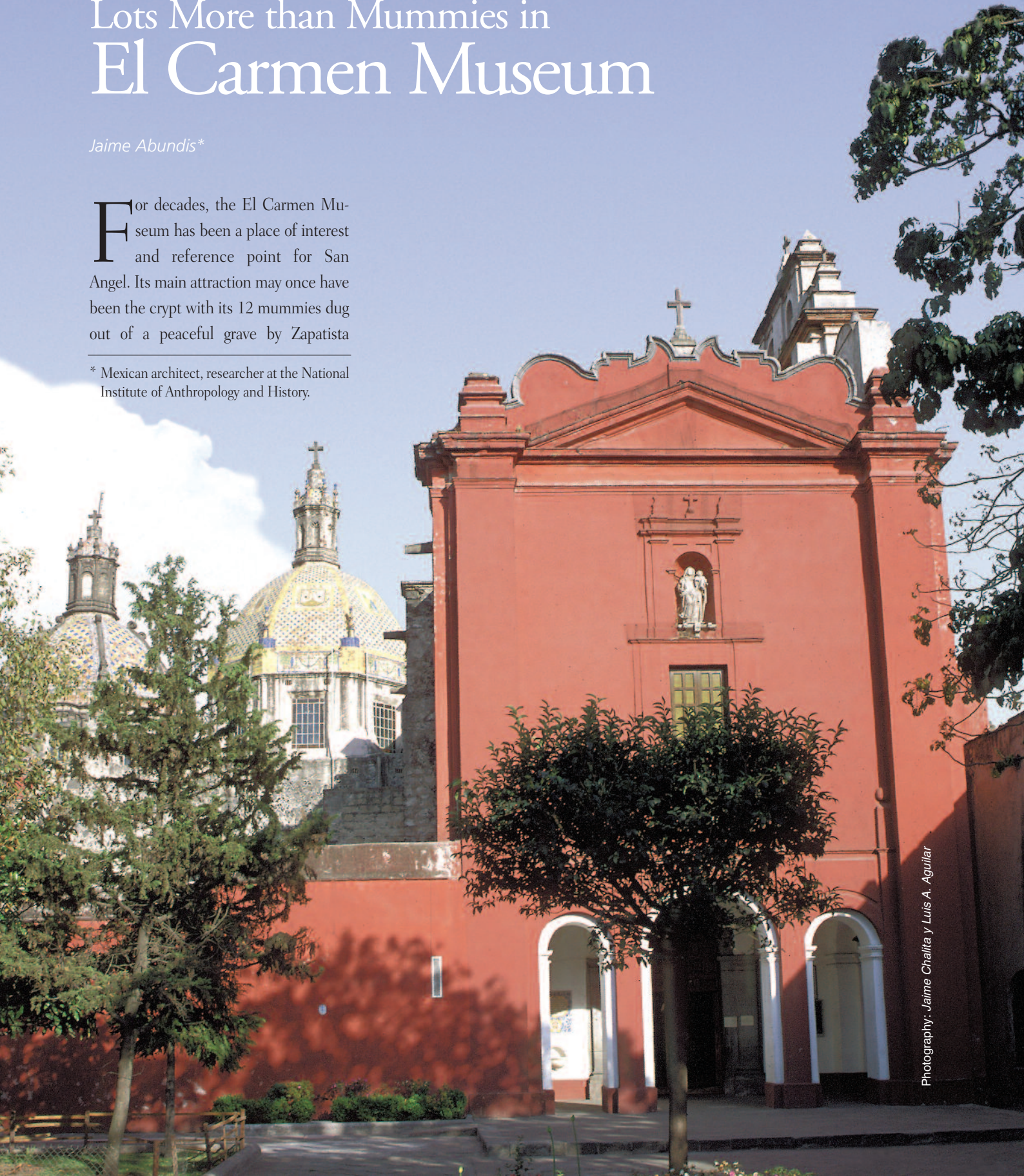


Lots More than Mummies in El Carmen Museum

*Jaime Abundis**

For decades, the El Carmen Museum has been a place of interest and reference point for San Angel. Its main attraction may once have been the crypt with its 12 mummies dug out of a peaceful grave by Zapatista

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troops in 1916, but this strange display has been superceded by the cultural attractions the museum now offers.

The museum itself is the main historical monument in the entire southwestern part of Mexico City: the old barefoot Carmelite San Angel College of San Alberto Province, popularly known as the El Carmen Convent (monastery).

The now famous mummies have been a must for visitors to the crypts since the Zapatistas dug them up, as was the adjacent church with the Chapel of Our Lord of Contreras' three golden baroque altars.¹

In 1929, the college was turned into a historical museum following the old museological guidelines. The few pieces of furniture, paintings, sculptures, household goods and ornaments left from the religious order after the pillage of the college were used. Gradually, objects from other monasteries and museums were added, making for a heterogeneous collection that turned the venue into a religious art museum.

In 1996, the old museum was renovated to include a permanent exhibition dedicated to the barefoot Carmelites. The idea was to bear witness to the rise and evolution of this religious order and its important contribution to our cultural heritage.

A BRIEF WALK THROUGH THE MUSEUM

The visitor enters through the college's old portal after crossing the atrium of the adjacent church. Here, he/she can see the remains of eighteenth century murals depicting an allegory of Mount Carmel, with Elias flanked by Saint Teresa de Jesús and Saint Alberto of Sicily. Passing



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In addition to the decorative art covering many of its walls, cupboards and caisson and vaulted ceilings, the museum boasts oil paintings by some of New Spain's most distinguished artists.



through the porter's hall, he/she will find him/herself in the first room dedicated to the order, which includes important pieces like the Gabriel Canales oil painting *Saint Peter Thomas with Our Lady of Carmen* (1752); *Our Lady of Balbanera* by Manuel de Arburu (1781); the allegory of *Saint Alberto's Province*, showing the monasteries founded by the order, painted by Friar Miguel de San José (1723); a European engraving of an allegory of Mount Carmel, depicting distinguished Carmelites and their benefactors; as well as fine oils of saints and defenders of the order.

The college's lower cloister is a splendid example of seventeenth-century Carmelite architecture embodying the vocation for poverty and austerity preached by Saint Teresa. From there, the visitor has a good view of the tile-covered dome over the transept and monumental belfry. On its east corridor is the door that leads to the primitive sacristy anteroom with its multicolored, Mudéjar-influenced caisson ceiling and a canvas by Cristóbal de Villalpando depicting the presentation of the Child Virgin at the Temple of Jerusalem.²

To the south is the sacristy with its golden caisson ceiling, its cupboards, its drawers of incrustated wood and the famous five Villalpando oil paintings: *King of Mockery*, *Saint Teresa Castigating Herself*, *Our Lord of the Column*, *Saint John of the Cross Castigating Himself* and *Prayer in the Orchard*. Other oils by the same painter can be seen on the walls: *The Betrothal of the Virgin* and *Saint Joseph with the Child*.

East of the sacristy anteroom is the lavatorium with its majolica ware-covered basins and its unique geometrical vault. From there, stairs lead down to one of the



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most attractive parts of the museum: the crypts. The space itself is extraordinary, with an altar and majolica-ware covered wainscots, walls and vaults decorated with paintings, alabaster fonts and an altar with an oil painting attributed to Pedro de Campaña.³ *Our Lord of the Column with Saint Peter*. Next door is

the crypt of the monks and the mummified remains of some benefactors.

Upstairs from the lavatorium, on the second floor, the visitor comes to the east corridor of the higher cloister and the rector's cell with its anonymous nineteenth-century oil portrait of Friar Antonio de San Fermín, one of the col-

leges most illustrious rectors. Other spots to see are the cells, the anteroom to the choir-loft, the platform with a view of the church, the library and the corridors filled with paintings, sculptures and objects of daily use that give us an idea of the life of contemplation, study and prayer that the friars led in another time.

But all these parts of the top floor are surpassed by the household chapel or oratory, which holds the only surviving original altar, decorated with oil paintings by Francisco Martínez, a reliquary at the center and an exceptional sculpture in majolica of Our Lady of El Carmen. The walls are hung with eighteenth-century paintings by Acosta of passages from the life of *Saint Teresa of Avila*, Juan Correa's *Saint Teresa the Pilgrim* and Juan Bezerra's *Saint John of the Cross*. On the west side of the building is the sacristy which holds more objects and a cornstalk paste Christ from Michoacán.

A new section next to the aqueduct was opened to the public in January 2000 with a temporary exhibit, "Time and Millenarianism: Myths about a Reality." Soon, this section will also show pieces from the Franz Mayer permanent collection about New Spain's craft guilds.

The El Carmen Museum's future is bright, fortunately for both San Angel's inhabitants and visitors. **MM**

NOTES

¹ These altars were lost in a fire in August 1936.

² Cristóbal de Villalpando, together with Juan Correa, were the most distinguished late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century painters in New Spain.

³ This Flemish painter never actually came to New Spain.