

# Sixteenth-Century Monastery Architecture in the State of Hidalgo

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The Spanish conquistadors were not satisfied with taking over these lands and becoming the lords and masters of the inhabitants.

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The goal of the Spanish Crown was to enlarge its empire with true vassals, not just new payers of tribute. A solid way of enlarging their domains was to reproduce their own culture in the recently vanquished lands. Transplanting the culture and creating a country ideologically similar to the metropolis was a truly titanic enterprise.

Nevertheless, the conquistadors had the help of an important part of the Catholic Church, undoubtedly the most active, educated and enthusiastic clergy of its time. Hernán Cortés asked Carlos V to send Franciscan friars to preach Christianity in New Spain. The friars's rules of behavior were different from diocesan priests: their vows of



Portal at the entrance of the Epazoyucan monastery, sixteenth century.

poverty, chastity and obedience were a good example for other Christians. They did not remain isolated in a monastery like monks, but lived with the people, who they comforted and preached to. They built their headquarters, then called convents, now known as monasteries, with the aid of indigenous labor and funds from the *encomenderos*, the owners of landed estates granted by the Crown complete with their inhabitants. The size and quality of these monasteries depended on the demographic and economic importance of the towns where they were built.

The first 12 Franciscans arrived in 1524; the Dominicans sent 12 friars in 1526; and the Augustinians, seven, in 1533. After that, each of these orders increased their numbers and their activities. The Franciscans were distributed in almost the entire country; the Dominicans preached in the South and the Southeast; and the Augustinians went into the state of Morelos and west to Michoacán, but they had already sent missions north and to what is now the state of Hidalgo. In that area they built some of the artistically and architecturally most interesting buildings in sixteenth-century New Spain.

These convents were not only religious centers. Along with Christianity, the friars transmitted cultural models, a new language and new customs; they adapted plants, taught skills, recovered the indigenous languages and history—even though in the end they imposed their own—and their presence determined the relocation of entire towns. In accordance with the precepts of their order, the Franciscans built simple, relatively unadorned monasteries, whose austerity transmits a feeling of serenity. An excellent example is the church of San Francisco de



The Epazoyucan Monastery, founded in 1540 by the Augustinians.

The friars did not close themselves up in a monastery. They lived with, comforted and preached to the people at the same time transmitting a new cultural model and language.



Sixteenth-century mural at the Tepeapulco Monastery depicting the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian.



The Epazoyucan Church displays monograms with the abbreviation for Christ in Latin and Greek.



Saint Paul before his conversion to Christianity, an example of viceregal art in Tepeapulco.

The conquistadors had the help of the most active, educated and enthusiastic sector of the Catholic Church to reproduce their own culture in the vanquished lands.

Tepeapulco, also of great historic importance.

#### THE TEPEAPULCO MONASTERY

When the Franciscans arrived, Tepeapulco was an important center where pre-Hispanic tradition and customs thrived. In the mid-sixteenth century, this was still the case and therefore the celebrated Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who worked gathering information about indigenous culture, decided to establish himself there between 1558 and 1560. He gathered around him several elders familiar with the indigenous religion who used pictograms and stories to describe to him different ceremonies and the deities they honored. The documents he wrote describing this were known as the *Primeros Memoriales* (First Memorials), which form part of his great opus, *Historia de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (History of the Things of New Spain).

By 1528, Friar Andrés de Olmos, a scholar of the most important indigenous languages of the time, had founded a hospital in the town dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.<sup>1</sup>

The Franciscans who arrived in the area in 1528 came from the Texcoco monastery. Friar Toribio de Benavente, known as Motolinía by the indigenous people, describes it in the following way:

The first time that friars came to this place [Tepeapulco], it was one afternoon and, as the people were gathered, they began to teach them; and in the space of three or four hours, many ... knew how to cross themselves and how to say the Our Father...This town of Tepeapulco sits on a very high hill where



Actopan. Saint Nicholas of Tolentino Church and the monastery built by the Franciscans in 1550 merit more than one visit.

one of the great, handsome temples of the Devil was, a temple they then tore down; because, since the town is large and has many other subjects, it had great *teocalli* or temples to the Devil.<sup>2</sup>

Tepeapulco relocated around the church and the monastery. The construction had a large atrium, now a tree-lined garden, from which the chapels at each end and the stone cross that should have been in the center where there is now a fountain have disappeared today. The church and monastery were built at the top of a great staircase.

The church's facade is sober but very beautiful: its only adornment are stone carvings of flowers, and in the arch, amidst the foliage, figures of felines, perhaps ocelots, with small riders astride them. Above the arch is a relief depicting the moment in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi when Christ appears in the heavens to him with the wings of a cherubim as he prayed at Mount Alvern and transferred to him the wounds in his hands made by the nails and in his side made by the sword. Friar León, who was the only witness



Actopan's impressive cloister. The high pink stone gothic arches on the ground floor contrast with the semi-circular Renaissance arches of the upper part.



to the miracle, dozes on one side. The carving shows evidence of having been done by indigenous stone masons.

The interior has a vaulted ceiling and close to the great altar a large dome built in the eighteenth century. Simple pictorial decorations adorn the walls, among them three full-length effigies of Saint Francis, Saint Domingo and Saint Augustine. To one side of the main altar, a great stone cross was imbedded, adorned with the reliefs of symbols of the Passion of Christ; the skull, the nails and the lances, among

other things, are clear. There is a similar, but smaller, cross on the wall of the facade. One of these may have been the cross that was originally in the atrium. Next to the main church is the chapel of the third Franciscan order, its facade adorned with mortar reliefs in the baroque style popular in the seventeenth century.

The visitor enters the monastery through the pilgrims' portico, which dominates the entire atrium, used as an open chapel. In the place of the altar is a small stone cross flanked by two



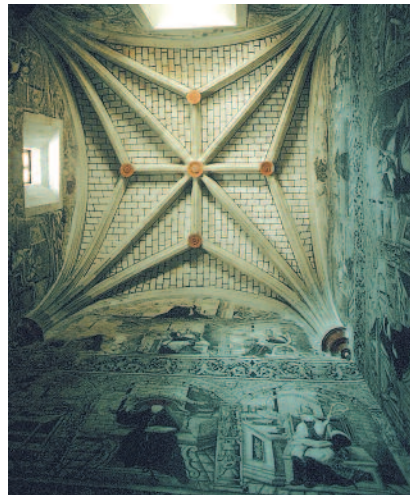
Actopan. The different sized cells are small museums in themselves, their walls covered with paintings depicting different moments of the viceregal period.



The omnipresent Christ the Redeemer, an icon for missionary work.



Actopan Monastery. The impressive main stairwell with sixteenth century paintings depicting the Augustinians' most outstanding figures from the Middle Ages until the time they were painted.



human figures. After going through the entrance, the visitor comes to the beautiful cloister whose arches surround a garden with an old cistern in the middle. At the top of the corridor's walls is a black and white border depicting symbols of good and evil. Here, we find a small museum that exhibits pre-Hispanic stone and clay artifacts discovered locally. Some of these rooms show signs of the drainage and water gathering system used in the building, left exposed by the restorers so visitors could see it. They also preserved the

old cooling system in the kitchen that worked by water flowing through conduits in the stone walls.

The corridors of the second-floor cloister still preserve sixteenth-century murals, one representing a miraculous mass officiated by Saint Gregory during which Christ appears at the altar at the moment of consecration; another shows the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, tied to a tree with his body pierced by arrows. Yet another depicts passages in the life of Saint Paul: in the first, before his conversion to Christianity,

he is holding a sword symbolizing the persecution of the Christians; in the background is the scene of his conversion, after being knocked off his horse by a lightning bolt; and last, the scene of his decapitation for preaching Christianity. It is said that when his head fell, it struck the ground three times and that each time a spring came forth; the painting symbolizes this with three circles each enclosing Christ's monogram.

South of the building was an immense orchard and vegetable garden. Today, all that is left is the portal to the field and an upper terrace where visitors can enjoy a moment of tranquility just as the friars did in the past.

#### THE EPAZOYUCAN MONASTERY

Thirty kilometers north of Tepeapulco, the Augustinians founded the Epazoyucan Monastery in 1540. Thanks to the size of the population, they were able to raise a small church and their monastery in just a little over seven months. A few years later, this building was replaced by the current construction, finished around 1562. The atrium

is a large square with several little, beautifully decorated processional chapels on the ends and a stone cross at the center. To the west there is a large stairway and, above, an open chapel, the church and the monastery. The stone doorway is sober and elegant, flanked by slender columns and sturdy moldings, all drawn in perfect balance and harmony with the open chapel and the tower.

Inside the church, the choir is worth seeing, built with enormous carved wooden beams, with an inscription in Latin and Nahuatl on its upper railing. The walls are decorated with monograms with the abbreviated name of Christ in Latin and Greek, which reach up to where the vault begins. The entrance to the monastery is decorated in stone in the plateresque style with spirals carved on each side and small birds in the arch, a small masterpiece of sixteenth-century art.

The portico that led into the monastery crumbled and some of its arches were rebuilt only two decades ago. The cloister has more to offer the visitor in the way of art. Its two floors are held up by stone columns that support slender round arches. The mural of symmetrical designs with foliage, window lattices and arches motifs is worthy of note. At the ends of the corridors are paintings depicting the Passion of Christ, some very well done like *The Road to Calvary*, a reproduction of a fifteenth-century German engraving, copied later by a French artist and reproduced here by an anonymous painter. Other scenes include *Calvary*, *The Descent from the Cross* and the *Ecce Homo* or *The Presentation of Jesus Scourged*. Above the door leading to the stairway is *The Assumption into Heaven of the Virgin Mary*, the moment when she dies surrounded by the apostles,



Actopan. This baptismal font is still in use.

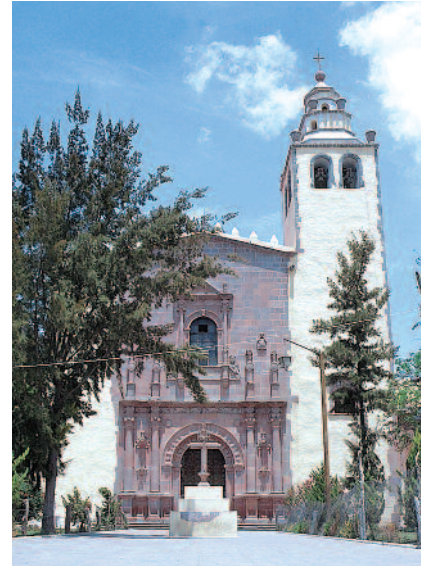


Actopan's entrance hall. A great mural depicts the legendary history of the founding of the order and the life of the Augustinians in New Spain.

with a contingent of angels at hand showing that her body will be borne to Heaven. Above that scene is another in which the Virgin is crowned queen of the heavens by the Trinity, as written in the Psalms. This is undoubtedly one of the best examples of mural painting from sixteenth-century New Spain.

Around the cloister are the refectory and its anteroom, which also conserve remnants of murals, as well as the kitchen. Closer to the church is the old

sacristy that boasts another interesting series of paintings about the Passion of Christ: *The Last Supper*, *The Mocking of Christ the King*, *The Flagellation*, *Calvary* and *The Descent from the Cross*. There are remains of *The Resurrection*, *The Descent into Hell* and *The Ascension*. The font in which the priest washed himself before officiating mass is another beautiful example of plateresque art, with its relief of the Augustinian crest, framed by two small col-



While the Franciscan friars' vows of poverty are reflected in their buildings, the Augustinian monasteries and churches are more ostentatious, as any visitor to Ixmiquilpan can attest to.

umns with shafts in the form of a spiral or tresse and a small arch decorated with rosettes.

The upstairs part of the cloister was used for the friars' cells, although many have been rebuilt and they only preserve pieces of borders painted with religious sayings. Visitors can also view a photographic exhibition about the monastery and life in the town of Epazoyucan, as well as an exhibit of pre-Hispanic objects.

#### THE ACTOPAN MONASTERY

The Augustinian monasteries were the most ostentatious, as any visitor to Actopan can attest. We begin with its monumental open chapel, renowned as one of the largest vaulted spaces built during the sixteenth century. It measures 17.5 meters long and more than 12 meters high making it larger than the vaulted ceilings of the cathedrals of Amiens, Paris and all of

the ones in Spain except Gerona's.<sup>3</sup> Its interior is painted with colorful scenes from the Bible, from the Creation to the Final Judgement, useful to the friars in explaining Christian doctrine.

The walls have small paintings depicting the most common sins of indigenous people and Spaniards. But, what most captures a visitor's attention are the sinners' being tortured in Hell by different kinds of demons in



a sea of fire. Despite their deterioration, the paintings are still impressive.

Saint Nicholas of Tolentino Church is also worth seeing. Its crenelated walls flanked by sentry-boxes makes it look like a fortress; its square tower, measuring almost 38 meters high, and the plateresque facade features several pairs of columns and a large trumpet-shaped arch decorated with rosettes. At the top are the coats-of-arms of the Augustinian order, hearts pierced by arrows of divine love. The interior has graceful vaults, and the sacristy preserves the remains of a sixteenth-century mural.

Friar Andrés de Mata began the construction of this monastery in 1550. The entrance is a three-arched door held up by solid pillars reminiscent of Roman arches of triumph, with back-to-back pilasters decorated with three medallions. The interior of the portico was completely decorated with paintings and the vault with sets of bows and ribbons in geometric Mudéjar-style designs. The effigies of the Virgin Mary and several saints were placed on medallions. On the north wall is a painting of Saint Augustine (A.D. 354-420) depicted as a bishop and founder of the

The interiors and exteriors of anything built by Augustinian monks are always both aesthetically and ideologically symmetrical and spectacular, as in the case of the Ixmiquilpan Monastery.

order, protecting his flock under his cape (although strictly speaking, the order was not founded by Saint Augustine, but by congregations of friars inspired by his writings in the Middle Ages).

The monastery's cloister is impressive, with high pink stone Gothic arches reinforced with buttresses. The upper part, in contrast, boasts Renaissance semi-circular arches held up by beautiful small columns in the Tuscan style.

The room that was once the entrance hall, also known as the De Profundis room, has a great mural depicting the legendary history of the founding of the order and the life of the Augusti-

nians in New Spain: the young Augustine reading the Gospels that converted him is followed by scenes of his baptism and his life of retirement and meditation. It also contains a miraculous scene in which Saint Augustine attempts to understand the mystery of the Trinity and the Baby Jesus appears to him on a beach to say that it is easier to put all the water of the oceans into a small hole than to explain that mystery. Above, we see the saint explaining to the friars the rules of their order, the friars at prayer, penitence and study. On the right side of the mural are the friars on solitary walks, confronting wild beasts, finding refuge in caves, building churches and in general carrying out all the activities of spreading the Gospel in the missions in Hidalgo's Sierra Alta Mountains and New Spain in general, in their attempt to banish the Devil that stood in the way of the Christianization of the natives. The mural also includes the defeated Devil abandoning New Spain.

On the south side is the monastery's enormous kitchen and refectory, its painted vaulted ceiling covered with sunken rosettes and the pulpit tradi-



tionally used by one of the friars to read to the community during meals. Outside is what is left of the orchard and vegetable gardens and a great elevated gallery used by the friars to meditate, walk or rest.

The main stairwell that leads to the upper story boasts sixteenth-century paintings depicting the order's most outstanding figures from the Middle Ages until the time they were painted. Saint Augustine and some of his contemporaries appear in 38 scenes, and as the visitor climbs the stairs he or she sees theologians, bishops, cardinals, generals of the order and exemplary friars like Saint Nicholas of Tolentino (1249-1305) and Saint Guillaume of Aquitaine (twelfth century), whose names are written in ribbons over their heads.

The upper hallways, whose vaulted ceilings and walls are also covered with paintings, lead to the friars' cells. Here, near the choir, is a room called "The Chamber" painted with a Calvary, a large Augustinian coat-of-arms and an enormous crown of leaves held up by angels monogrammed with the name of Jesus. Some of the cells have seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sculptures and oil paintings.

In the early seventeenth century, this monastery housed the most important school in the province. The Augustinians left Actopan in 1750 and were replaced by a diocesan priest. During the nineteenth century, the atrium, the open chapel, the orchard and surrounding areas were nationalized and sold to private individuals. Today, the

main buildings of the monastery are managed by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History.

The size and decoration of the building makes it merit not one but several visits. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Luis Azcué y Mancera et al., *Catálogo de construcciones religiosas del estado de Hidalgo* vol. 2 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 1940-1942), p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Friar Toribio de Benavente, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1969), pp. 80-81.

<sup>3</sup> John McAndrew, *Open Churches of Sixteenth Century Mexico* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 479, 481 and 700.



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