

The National Palace

The National Palace, which houses Mexico's Federal Executive and the Treasury of the Federation, among other government institutions, is located facing the Plaza Mayor, in the "first block" of Mexico City's Historical Center. This is the site of the palace where Moctezuma Xocoyotzin lived, in Mexico-Tenochtitlan, when Hernán Cortés arrived in 1530.

After the siege of Tenochtitlan and the resistance of the Mexicas, Cortés appropriated the two most important buildings of the fallen Mexica city: the Old and New Houses of Moctezuma, which had been destroyed and rendered practically uninhabitable. By order of the Conquistador, in their place two ostentatious palaces were built with the Indians' blood and sweat.

Years later, the Colonial government lacked space for its tribunal and other offices. The Spanish Crown purchased these two buildings from Martín Cortés, the Conquistador's son, in 1562, and used them to house offices of the Viceroy's government. What is now the National Palace was then converted into a fortress.

One of the important modifications that the Palace underwent over time was due to the fact that it was almost entirely burned up after the rebellion of 1692, when the people rose up against mistreatment and the famine provoked by the loss of wheat and corn harvests during the previous year throughout New Spain.

After Viceroy Gaspar de Sandoval practically rebuilt the palace in 1693-94, it lost the appearance of a fortress; what remained was an enormous Baroque palace.

During the governments that followed Independence, the ministries of War, Justice, the Interior and Foreign Relations were installed there, as was the Office of the Treasury.

The seizure of the Palace in July of 1840 by the federalist group led

by Valentín Gómez Farías, which sought the overthrow of President Anastasio Bustamante, severely damaged the building, making new repairs necessary.

In 1845 the assembly hall for the House of Representatives was built in



The president of Mexico gives the "cry of independence" from this balcony each year, on September 15th.



The beautiful "Patio of Honor," one of three original patios dating from Colonial times.

the rear part of the Main Patio and the Senate was built on the upper floor of the south wing.

Emperor Maximilian charged the architect Lorenzo de la Hidalga with the construction of a grand staircase of white marble in the Patio of Honor and ordered luxurious decorations for the chambers in the public area: paintings, oil lamps, candelabra and richly manufactured French ceramics which today continue to adorn several areas of the Palace.

After Maximilian's brief imperial adventure had come to an end, from July 15, 1867 on the

National Palace housed the powers of the Republic. The consequent reorganization of government offices transformed the building's appearance once again.

In the last third of the 19th century, astronomical and meteorological observatories were built on the roof of the building; the north and south wings were remodeled; the offices of the Secretariat of the Treasury and Public Credit were radically transformed and the Bell of Dolores —used to give the famous "cry of independence" in 1821— was installed in the Central Balcony. The modifications of the

building's main facade carried out during those years gave a "Frenchified" air to its exterior.

Between 1926 and 1927 the palace underwent new transformations. In the interior the grand stairway of the Central Patio was constructed, as well as the steps and office suites belonging to the Treasury. Besides adding an annex to the building, the walls of the facade were covered with carved red *tezontle* rock and stonework for the doorframes, windows, cornices, parapets, and other finishings. The Palace was returned to its Baroque style, which it retains to this day.

The late 20th century

Besides being the seat of the National Executive, the National Palace houses other government offices. For this reason its doors are partially open to the public. To give an idea of the grandeur of this historical monument, we will take a brief imaginary tour, beginning in the private areas of the Palace.

Before entering the building through the main door of the principal facade, we encounter the central window of the first floor, located above this doorway. The window is framed by two pilasters. A niche, in whose interior is carved the Sun of Liberty, houses two small Atlases which support the Bell of Independence. The railings of the balconies which face the Plaza Mayor are made of iron.

On the third floor, around the Patio of Honor you find the four Galleries of the Rulers: to the north, in the Gallery of the Emperors, some of their likenesses are exhibited, among them Netzahualcōyotl and Cuauhtémoc; to the east and south are the Galleries of the Presidents, and to the west, that of the Insurgents, leading to a number of reception chambers. All of the galleries serve as antechambers to the Presidential Chambers and are enclosed by large windows facing onto the Patio of Honor.

In general the architecture of the Chambers as well as the Galleries is Colonial. Wooden beams support the roofs; the floors are parquet; the furnishings are in the Italian Renaissance, French and Colonial styles; carved wood covers part of the walls; Baccarat crystal lamps, Talavera-style ceramics and bronze candelabra are among other objects that decorate these areas.

On the third floor, south of the Main Stairway, we encounter the Chamber of Ambassadors, in which official activities are held, such as the presentation of ambassadors' credentials to the government of the Republic.

Continuing on we arrive at the Purple, Green and Blue Chambers and the Library, which leads to the President's private elevator. The Presidential Elevator—built in 1901 in Art Nouveau style—is worthy of special mention, since it was one of the first three installed in Mexico City.

To the east of the Library is the Chamber of Agreements, where important working meetings are held, which frequently define the future of the Republic. Further on, in the Presidential Study, the Presidential Chair and an impressive bookshelf stand out among the Renaissance-style furniture.

The Moorish room and the dining room, witness to many an elegant banquet, as well as important working meetings, are the last of the spaces considered to make up the private area.

The general public enters the building through the central door leading into what is known as the Central Patio. This patio is currently used on special occasions, such as the annual dinner in commemoration of Mexican Independence, on September 15, as well as receptions which the President gives for heads of state visiting Mexico.

The Patio is square in shape; on each side there are ten beautiful arches with railings of solid bronze; the



The Empress' stairway.

pillars feature spires and Tuscan bases. It also has three levels of arches, corresponding to four floors. In the center it boasts a fountain adorned with a beautiful Pegasus, made of bronze and marble by the Mexican sculptor Humberto Peraza.

The Central Patio is connected to the Marian Patios. These, built in the Neo-Classical style, used to house the Jail of the Court at the end of the 17th century. In the portico which separates the two Marian Patios one observes a monument to President Benito Juárez. It was sculpted by Miguel Noreña out of the bronze from the cannons taken from the Conservative army in the battles of

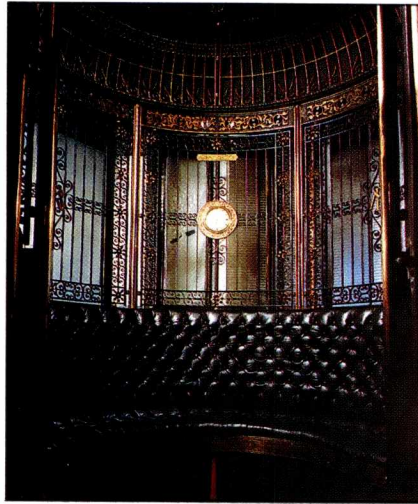
Silao and Calpulalpan in 1860, and the shells fired by French artillery during the siege of Puebla in 1863.

To the left of the central door is the main stairway, where the splendid murals of Diego Rivera, painted between 1929 and 1935, are located. As Efraín Castro remarked: "The painting in the main stairway is divided into sections where Rivera paints successive historical syntheses of pre-Hispanic and Colonial history, of the Mexico of the Independence period and contemporary times, and ultimately predicts an era of well-being and progress if the people develop science and technology

and free themselves from their traditional oppressors.”

The triptych gives a chaotic first impression because of the location of images, the mixture and abundance of colors, and the infinity of characters it depicts. These figures appear to be united in a timeless moment bringing together the diverse history that Mexico has lived. Yet it is precisely this chaotic impression which makes the muralist's work so unique.

In the north wing of the Central Patio, between 1944 and 1952, Rivera created other murals representing the daily lives of the



The Art Nouveau-style Presidential Elevator was installed in 1901.

ancient Mexicans and the great city of Tenochtitlan.

To the northeast, in the part of the building which houses some of the offices of the Secretariat of the Treasury and Public Credit, one also finds the Panamerican Room, decorated during the reign of Porfirio Díaz in a Victorian Neo-Classical style. In the Room of the Shields one may admire the shields of all the Panamerican nations, which are painted upon the walls. The Treasury Chamber stands out because of its Venetian floor mosaic in red, green, white and black, as well as the mahogany with ornamentation based on coins and cornucopias.



The Treasury Chamber is done in mahogany with ornamentation based on coins and cornucopias.



The dining room, decorated in 1901, has witnessed many an elegant banquet.

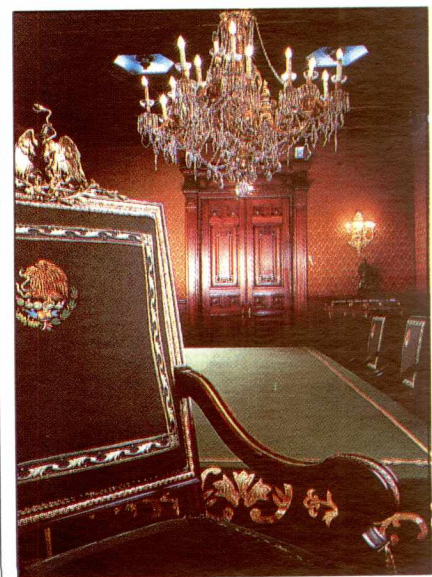


The Treasury Library was a chapel in Colonial times.

In recent times, due to construction work on the Metro and the effects brought about by the uneven settling of this area, the structure of the Palace has resettled. This gave rise to a new series of works which are presently nearing completion.

The Palace's architectural evolution reflects the history of the many changes Mexico has lived through over the course of four centuries. A close look at those changes makes us think that the National Palace has been, and continues to be, the manifestation of a society in perpetual movement ✕

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The Presidential chair, which Emiliano Zapata proposed to burn because of the ambition it awakens.