

The Panteón Francés: a walk through Mexico's history

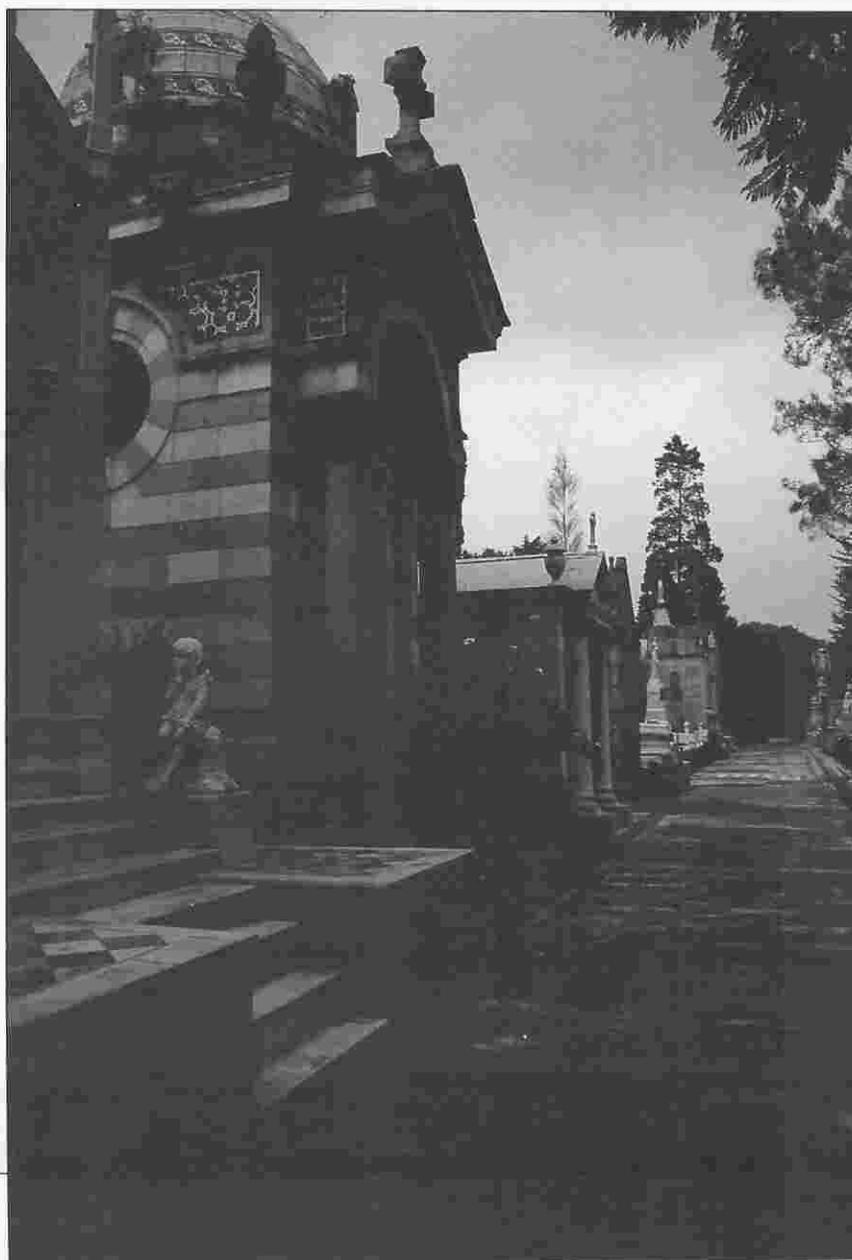
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One of the best places to stroll through Mexican history is also one of the least visited: the Panteón Francés. This Mexico City cemetery serves as a guide to much of the city's tightly interwoven high society, particularly from the Porfiriato (the dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911). To those whose interests lie in funerary architecture, the Panteón also offers an impressive collection of elaborate crypts designed to flaunt the wealth of their inhabitants. Yet every grave, simple or ornate, hides a vast array of stories that reveal much about the country and its people.

In the main avenue near the cemetery's entrance, for example, the remains of the Braniff family are housed. Tomás Braniff (1850-1905), born in New York City, started his career as a bricklayer but ended it as a millionaire. He worked as an engineer on the Mexican railroad and managed the Mexican Gas and Electric Light Company, controlled by the English company that then ran the railroad.

In 1882, as a representative of the Brush Electric Company, he asked the government's permission to produce and distribute electric light, and in

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Crypts along main path in the Panteón.

August of 1883 he installed 20 lights on the city's main streets (although residents were alarmed by the possible danger posed by poles and wires). He founded the wool factory of San Ildefonso and was a contributor of capital to and principal stockholder in a number of significant enterprises, including the Banco de Londres y México, S.A., which he also served as president of its Consejo.

The family lived in a "sumptuous residence" on the Paseo de la Reforma, according to one Mexico City memorist, with a living room upholstered in yellow silk. Although he was proud of his bricklaying beginnings, his wife didn't like him to mention them according to this source.

Tomás' son Arturo (1879-1970) dedicated himself to financial and commercial enterprises and was one of the first to build *fraccionamientos urbanos* (urban residential developments) in Mexico City. Alberto Braniff (1884-1966) was a precursor of Mexican aviation. He attended neither primary or secondary school because his parents knew he would inherit a large fortune. However, his parents hired the best professors available to give him private lessons in business and banking. He learned to be a pilot in 1909 in France, where he acquired a Voisin airplane which he brought to Mexico. On January 8, 1910, he was able to get the plane off the ground on the planes of Balbuena, on property owned by the Braniffs. He thus was the first native speaker of Spanish in the world to conduct a flight.

When the Carrancistas took over during the Mexican revolution, they seized the houses of the rich as booty, and split them among themselves. Tomás Braniff's house was taken over by General Buelna, and the house of Alberto Braniff was taken over by General Alvaro Obregón.

Another crypt is devoted to the Limantours, although its most famous member, José Yves, was buried in France. José Yves, finance minister during the Porfiriato, was largely responsible for the country's spectacular economic development during that period. He was also responsible for a large number of improvements in Chapultepec Park and commissioned Guillermo Kahlo (father of the artist Frida) to photograph buildings constructed during the Porfiriato.

Limantour lived in a house that faced the center of Mixcoac, where the Díaz family had a vacation home. The streetcar was then the most convenient way to travel into Mexico City, and, according to Carlos Tello in his book *El exilio: Retrato de una familia*, "On it the Díaz family often ran into José Limantour, the finance wizard, who greeted them from his seat without ever losing his composure." Limantour was also building a mansion on the Paseo de la Reforma but was never able to enjoy it thanks to the Mexican revolution.

Limantour argued vigorously for Díaz's resignation, believing only that could prevent the country from exploding. When Francisco Madero became president of Mexico, Limantour briefly considered continuing on as finance minister but then left for France, to which Díaz had already fled.

In exile, Limantour lived in one of Paris' most elegant areas and spent his days driving his car around the Saint-Cloud forest and playing the piano. He kept up with developments in Mexico through the most recently published books on the revolution, sent to him from Mexico. He eventually lost his ability to move his muscles and to function due to arteriosclerosis. "It broke one's heart to see a man so intelligent in that state," Tello quotes Limantour's granddaughter, Sonia, as remembering. He died in 1935, the last surviving member of Díaz's cabinet.

The Escandón family also played important roles in pre-revolutionary Mexico. As John Womack explained in *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, "Escandón had graced Maximilian's Imperial court, helped finance the Veracruz-Mexico City railroad, made haciendas famous, and recently, an Escandón having been appointed the



Landa y Escandón family crypt.

Federal District governor, taken over metropolitan society.

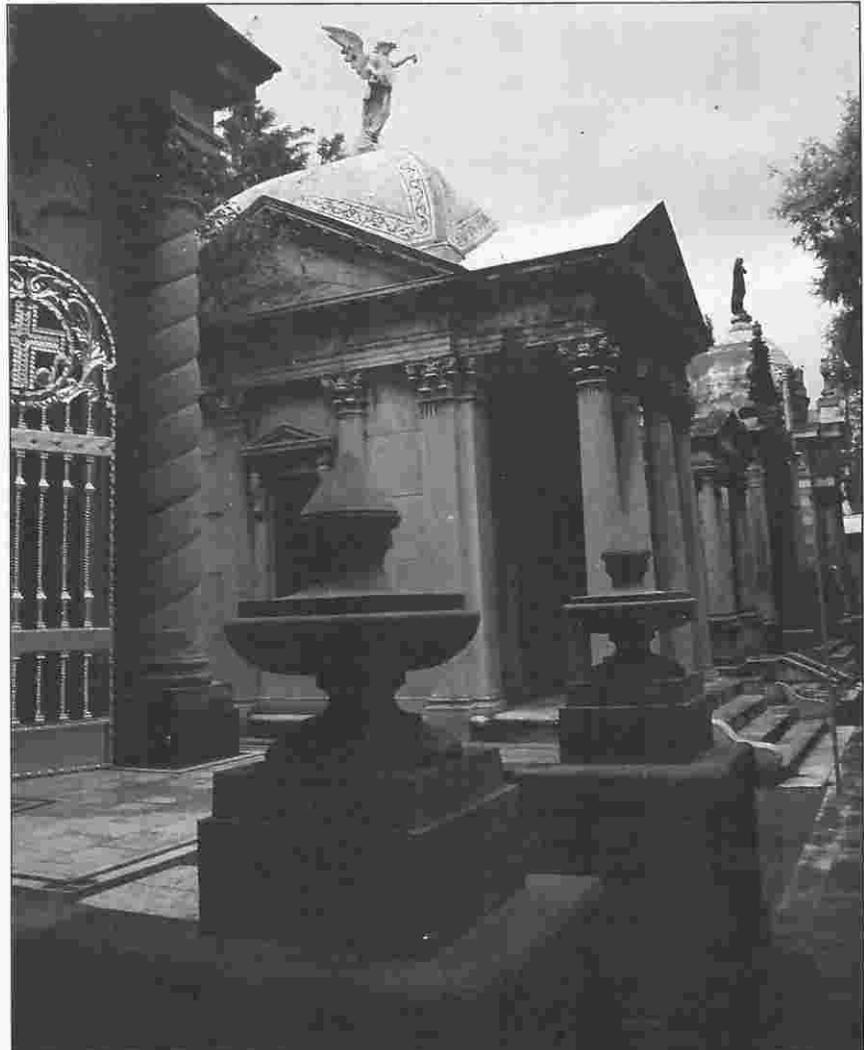
"Among Mexico's fanciest showplaces, veritable luxury-rate tourist attractions, they had shown off for so long that by 1900 they had almost lost their capacity for anything else. In the early years of the new century the name Escandón still appeared prominently in the newspapers—but in the society columns. Of this mighty, dying tree, Pablo was the last frail twig."

Pablo was a member of Díaz's staff until appointed governor of Morelos prior to the Mexican revolution. Other Escandóns of note included Manuel, one of the richest men in Mexico at the beginning of the Porfiriato; the successful Mexican capitalist Antonio, who donated to the city the monument of Christopher Columbus that was built in 1877; and Guillermo de Landa y Escandón, who was governor of the Federal District during the Porfiriato.

It was Guillermo Landa y Escandón who introduced Porfirio Díaz to high society, and because of that Díaz had a special appreciation for him. Landa y Escandón made a great deal of money through the *Dos Estrellas* mine. His daughter Sofía married Guillermo Limantour, son of finance minister José Yves.

The Quintanilla family has a grave on the cemetery's Sixth Avenue. The family members buried here reflected much of the Porfirian spirit. Ana María del Valle Lerdo de Tejada de Quintanilla was born the year Díaz took power by overthrowing her uncle, President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada. A descendant of the grand Chamberlain of the Court of Emperor Maximilian and one of Empress Carlota's ladies-in-waiting, she embodied the merging of one of Mexico's great conservative with one of its great liberal families.

Ana María was born in France, the country which served as a model for so



Branif and other family crypts along main path.

much of Mexican high society, and was the daughter of Count Pierre del Val (the family had changed its name after moving to France following Maximilian's demise). She spent most of her life there until curiosity caused her to journey to Mexico to visit her mother's family. At the opera, she met her future husband, Luis Quintanilla y Fortuno, a descendant of an aristocratic family with the oldest lineage in Mexico, the Rincón Gallardos, whose crypt is on the Panteón's Avenida Central.

Much of their married life was spent living in Paris, where Luis served as a diplomat in the Mexican

embassy, and traveling throughout Europe. Their patronage of the arts included financial support of and close relationships with the poets Amado Nervo and Rubén Darío. When the Quintanillas returned to Mexico after the revolution, their home in Coyoacán served as a meeting place for many of Mexico's most prominent artists and intellectuals, including Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Also buried in this grave is the couple's son José Quintanilla del Valle, who visited his parents in Coyoacán with his lover, the photographer Tina Modotti. ✕