

# THE OLD SAN ILDEFONSO COLLEGE AND THE HISTORIC CENTER

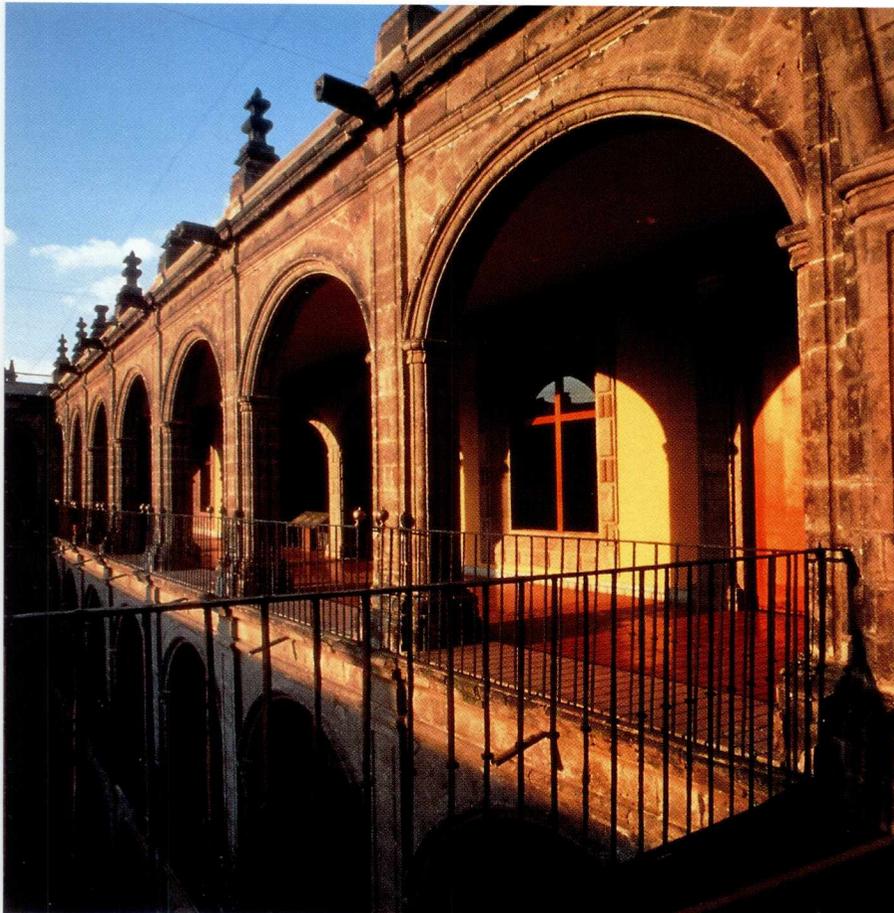
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**W**hen the first stone of what was to become the illustrious San Ildefonso College was laid, around 1588, there was no “Historic Center” of Mexico City. What did exist, however, was a vigorous city growing according to a clear, harmonious plan: well-drawn streets gave access to religious and public buildings; canals, an integral part of the city, facili-

tated transportation; and the natural surroundings caused wonder in natives and foreigners alike.

The San Ildefonso College has witnessed the transformation of a colonial city into a modern one and has itself been subject to great changes made as part of the efforts made to save the historic downtown area.

Photos by Gabriel Figueroa



Magnificent arches surround the three San Ildefonso's patios.

Heterogeneous and stratified, full of life because of its relative youth, society in Mexico City was avid for education and knowledge at the end of the sixteenth century. The arrival of the Society of Jesus in 1572 alleviated the city's educational needs. The Jesuits had two clear objectives: the evangelization of the infidels and the education of the ruling classes of New Spain. Soon, their first educational center was established in the city. On lands donated by Don Alonso de Villaseca, the Jesuits erected the San Pedro and San Pablo College which would spawn twenty-odd great colleges throughout New Spain.

More students came than were expected. Pressed by the demand, the Jesuits soon opened other seminary colleges: San Gregorio, San Miguel and San Bernardo were all opened before 1577. For some reason, these three schools were

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merged into one, San Bernardo, in 1583, and relocated at a new site around 1588. And so was born the San Ildefonso College.

Initially, this college served as the residence for students who took classes elsewhere; within a short time, however, San Ildefonso began giving its own courses, which increased in number until it became a school in its own right. By 1592 it had 150 students from all over New Spain and a building with two patios, one of which had side corridors adorned with beautiful paintings.

Both the temporary merging of the San Pedro and San Pablo Colleges and the San Ildefonso College in 1611 and the many large floods which plagued the city at the end of the sixteenth and the first third of the seventeenth century were the most likely reasons for the construction of a new building for the school. San Ildefonso went through a splendid period in its new building at the same time that other colleges proliferated in cities like Puebla, Querétaro, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí and Guanaajuato. The Jesuits also carried out the enormous task of preaching the gospel and cultural assimilation in northwestern New Spain: indelible traces of the passage of the Society of Jesus are to be found in Sonora, Sinaloa and Baja California.

The eighteenth century bonanza was felt in the college. In the second decade, it was again decided that ampler housing was needed and the walls of the old building gave way to the new. The churrigueresque baroque style made its presence felt in the Jesuit college, with the characteristics of the eighteenth century city. A series of magnificent arches surrounding three great patios organized the internal space of the college: classrooms, dormitories, refectories, a chapel, vestry and service areas. The decoration was in the new style, particularly the great panels, pilasters and cornices of grey *chiluca* and red



Patios are a central feature of Colonial architecture.

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The San Ildefonso facade exemplifies the eighteenth-century churrigueresque style.

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*tezontle*<sup>1</sup> which framed the two carved stone facades and windows. The Society of Jesus, however, enjoyed its new, handsome building, completed in 1749, for only a few years: the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Spanish territories in 1767 marked the beginning of a new stage in the life of the college.

After the departure of the Society of Jesus, the college had different uses, but it functioned mainly as an educational center until it became the home of the National Preparatory School in 1867. In 1910 this institution became the basis for a reopened National University, which set up its offices in the college. The Preparatory School continued functioning until 1978, when it moved to another location. Finally, in 1992, the San Ildefonso College was selected as one of the most appropriate sites for international exhibits in Mexico City,

to which end the old eighteenth century building was restored.

### The College and Its Urban Surroundings

In the second half of the twentieth century, Mexico City grew immoderately, first toward the west and the north-west and then to the south. The new city abandoned its traditional places. Financial centers and government offices moved to modern buildings in search of efficient solutions to the problems posed by a growing metropolis.

<sup>1</sup> A porous volcanic rock, used in construction by the Aztecs. [Editor's Note.]

The victim of a paradox, the “City of Palaces” became something foreign to the metropolitan area. It stopped being the nerve center of the city and stagnated dangerously. The protagonists of that prestigious city —palaces, convents, hospitals and colleges—, witnesses to three centuries of history, lost their vocation, and, like a ship without a captain, sailed aimlessly.

For centuries, buildings had been constructed to fulfill either public or private needs. With migration, many of the downtown area’s vital functions went to different points of the city and these venerable monuments lost their identity. The state, responsible for their conservation, has had to confront the difficult task of giving them a new identity and a new vocation to keep them alive.

The invention of the concept of a “historic center” responded to the double need of recognizing an exceptional patrimony and of creating legislation that could protect and defend it. In April 1980, the historic center of the old colonial city was declared a zone of historical monuments. In 1988 the UNESCO declared this group of buildings, streets and plazas World Heritage Treasure.

The project which converted the San Ildefonso College into the Old San Ildefonso College illustrates this process of revitalization of the historical downtown area very well.

In May 1992 the National University of Mexico (UNAM), the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CNCA) and the Mexico City government (DDF) signed an agree-

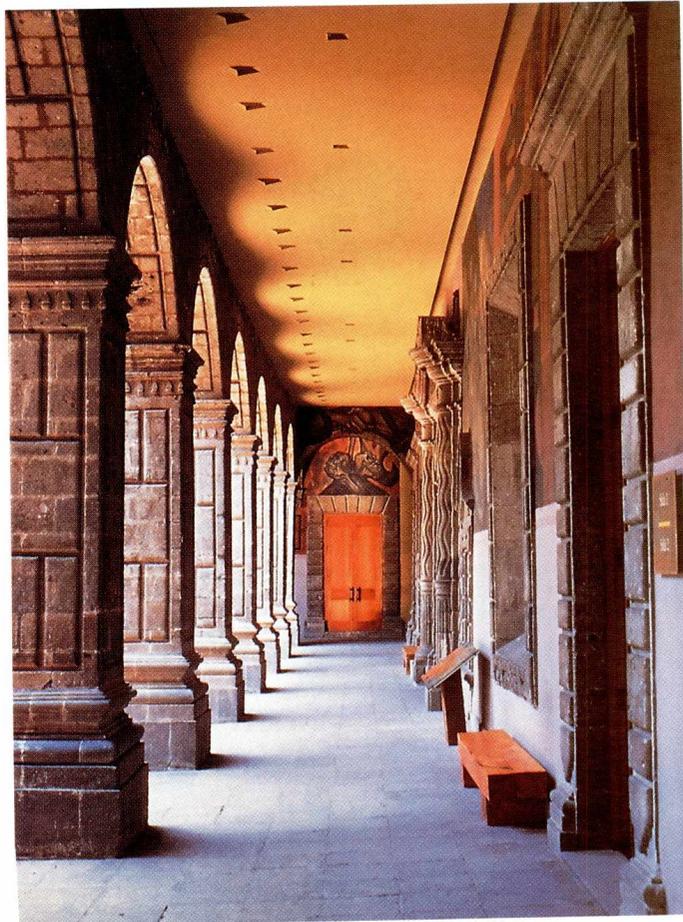
ment to restore the San Ildefonso College, until then closed to the public and being used by different UNAM offices, and present the exhibition “Mexico, Splendors of Thirty Centuries.” The formidable response from the public —800,000 visitors— confirmed the need of having a space for temporary exhibits. The project was made permanent March 14, 1994, with the creation of a commission involving the same three bodies, the UNAM, the CNCA and the DDF.

The San Ildefonso College has always been a place of academic excellence. By becoming a place for art and culture, it follows naturally in that tradition of excellence.

Since the summer of 1992, almost two million people have visited the building, despite sometimes difficult access and heavy traffic in the area. The widely varied program of exhibits and the great diversity of its artistic programming, both for children and for adults,

has attracted a large and heterogenous public to San Ildefonso and to the Historic Center.

The growing interest of the residents of this great metropolis in getting to know and love their colonial city, as well as the numerous programs through which institutions seek to give new uses and functions to these monuments allow us to think that a new stage has begun, both for the Historic Center and for the Old San Ildefonso College. Hopefully we are not witnessing a simple truce, but the beginning of a long period of peace and prosperity. ❧



Students walked these halls from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.