

THE PALACE OF THE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

And the Museum of Mexican Medicine

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Eighteenth century colonial building, today the Palace of the School of Medicine. The shield at the top of the facade dates from when the building housed the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

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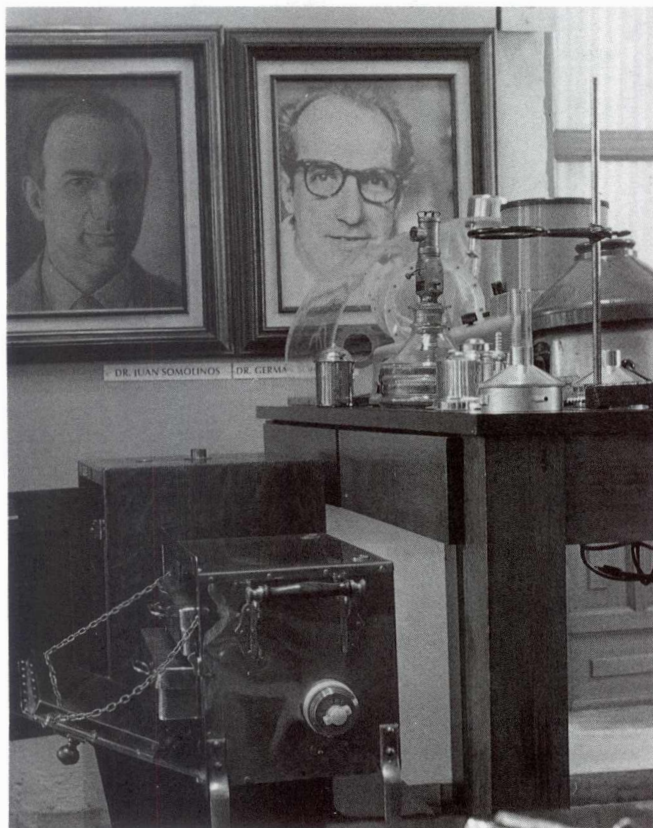
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Today's Palace of the School of Medicine is none other than the former Palace of the Inquisition, which became a medical school in 1854.

Located on one corner of the Santo Domingo Plaza a few blocks from Mexico City's Zócalo, or central square, it is an old colonial palace built by Pedro de Arrieta, the same architect who built the Basilica of Guadalupe and the La Profesa Church between 1732 and 1736.

The Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition had its headquarters in this building until 1820, except for a brief period in 1813 when the Courts of Cádiz suppressed it temporarily. It later housed the offices of the government of the State of Mexico, the National Lottery¹ and, in 1828, while being used as barracks, it was the first home of the Military College. Later on, students and professors of the Lancasterian "Sun" School and members of the Conciliar Seminary walked its halls and patios.

¹ All revenues from the governmental National Lottery are used for public charitable activities. [Editor's Note.]



Reproduction of a mid-century clinical laboratory.

The school of medicine, meanwhile, wandered from place to place. Once the National Papal University of Mexico closed in 1833 and the six "establishments of the sciences" were founded to substitute it, the Establishment of Medical Sciences was first set up in the Bethlehem Convent and Hospital. Expelled from that building after being caught in a cross fire of vested interests, it was housed successively in the San Juan de Letrán, San Ildefonso and San Hipólito buildings (the latter was given to the school in lieu of back wages) and even in some private homes of professors. Finally the old palace was made its definitive address in 1854.

With an implacable sense of progress, the Establishment of Medicine began adapting the building. Classrooms were needed, as was an anatomy amphitheater and even a stable for the mule that pulled the cart to transport cadavers. With the growing needs of the student body and advances in medical science, a third floor was added. Simultaneously, all architectural harmony was destroyed very quickly: the monumental shield of the Inquisition was replaced by a neoclassical frontispiece with a simple inscription announcing the new use to which the building was being put; the carved stone pilasters that flanked the first floor balcony were extended to the second using plaster. For a while, the main patio was covered over with an iron and glass structure and the statue of Saint Luke by Mexican painter and sculptor Juan Soriano was moved from a corner to its center. Later, the statue was moved to the vestibule of the salon, then into the salon itself and finally to the great stairway. In this way, a baroque palace was transformed into a modern school of medicine. The great figures of Mexican medicine have passed through its halls: Miguel Jiménez and Francisco Montes de Oca, modernizers of hospital attention and surgery; Manuel Carmoña y Valle and Eduardo Liceaga, innovators in the teaching of medicine; Fernando Zárraga and Rosendo Amor, creators of a whole school of surgery; Ignacio Chávez and Salvador Zubirán, founders of the institutes for medical specialization.

Great changes were made in 1933 to celebrate the First Centenary of the Founding of the Medical Sciences Establishment. Old walls and structures were renovated and strengthened and other parts of the installations modernized. José Villagrán, clearly breaking with the previous style,

built in Art Deco a library, classrooms and laboratories, and an auditorium in what had been the Orange Grove Patio.

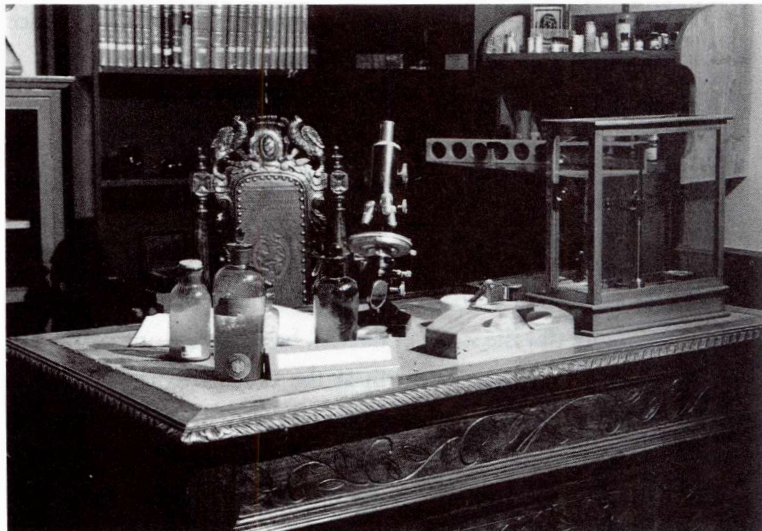
When the National School of Medicine was incorporated into the UNAM and moved to University City, the palace declined considerably until the Department of Medical History and Philosophy took up residence there in 1972.

The fund-raising project with the slogan “Let’s Breath Some Life into the Past” to restore the building was very successful. The Department of Medical History and Philosophy familiarizes undergraduate students with the constant research carried out in the most important areas of the medical humanities. The department offers researchers books and documents from one of the most important collections of its kind in Latin America. The Museum of Mexican Medicine also creates a high profile for the discipline by explaining the vicissitudes of its history. Also, the building’s auditoriums and rooms host all kinds of academic events to keep medicine up to date in Mexico, with the participation of members of the medical profession and representatives from medical institutions from all over the country.

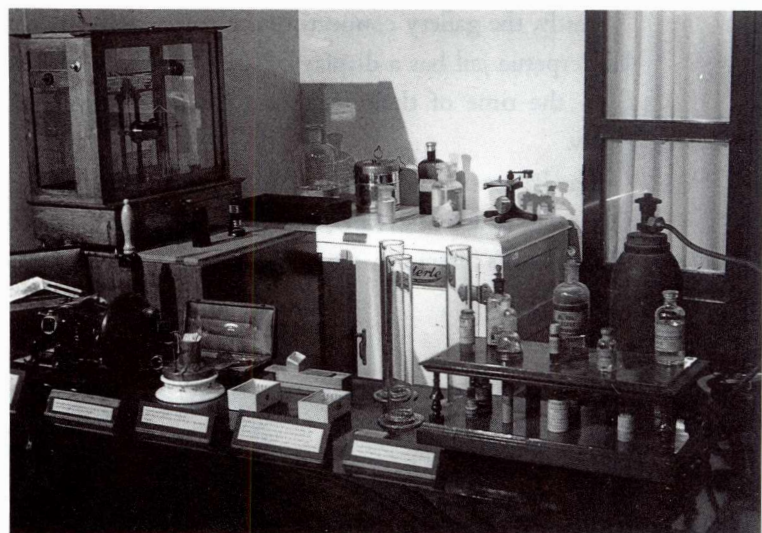
A window for the public, the museum offers a view —as yet incomplete though it is— of Mexican medicine. Its pre-Hispanic origins are ordered in such a way as to take the visitor from the surroundings to a symbolic structuring of reality in the period: what it meant to live, fall ill and die for our ancestors, all the while taking into account the central ideas of indigenous thought. Medicinal plants, then, a bridge through time, link the vestiges of cultures which have disappeared with those of today in relation to both the treatment and cure of different ailments.

Since it also deals with the colonial period, it is the best testimony to the mix of ideas, knowledge and procedures in Mexico; to charitable foundations; to the transformation of European models for medical training and care; to devastating epidemics; to the gradual and painful formation of the new nationality.

The new science of medicine was born with the nineteenth century. An enthusiastic group of professors at the Establishment of Medical Sciences took upon itself the responsibility of modernizing Mexican medicine. The discipline began to Frenchify and venture into the new realm



Nobel Prize winner Ramón y Cajal's desk in the Tomás Perrin Room.



Mid-twentieth century histology lab.


of positivism, creating a national public health project and developing the National Medical, Bacteriology and Anatomy-Pathology Institutes, as well as a series of modern hospitals headed up by the General Hospital and the La Castañeda Asylum.

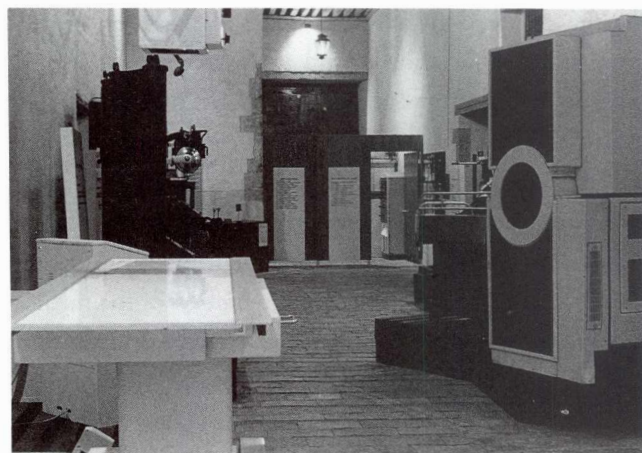
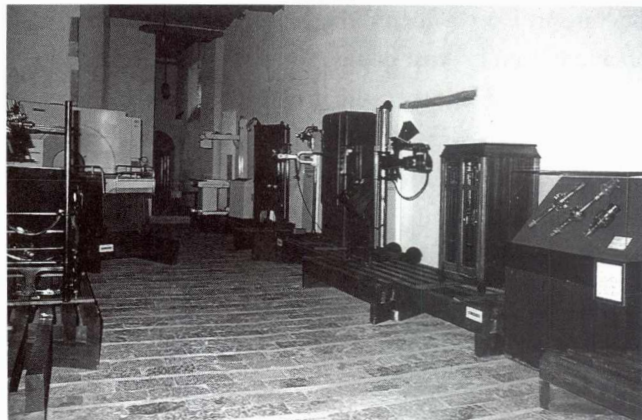
The museum’s specialized rooms cover particular aspects of Mexican medicine over the last 100 years. One of them exhibits the furniture of the “Esessarte” apothecary shop, in existence in Oaxaca at the end of the last century. It includes a few glass jars with the National Medical Institute emblem. Another room exhibits a great many

excellently preserved wax figures manufactured in France which show different skin diseases and disorders.

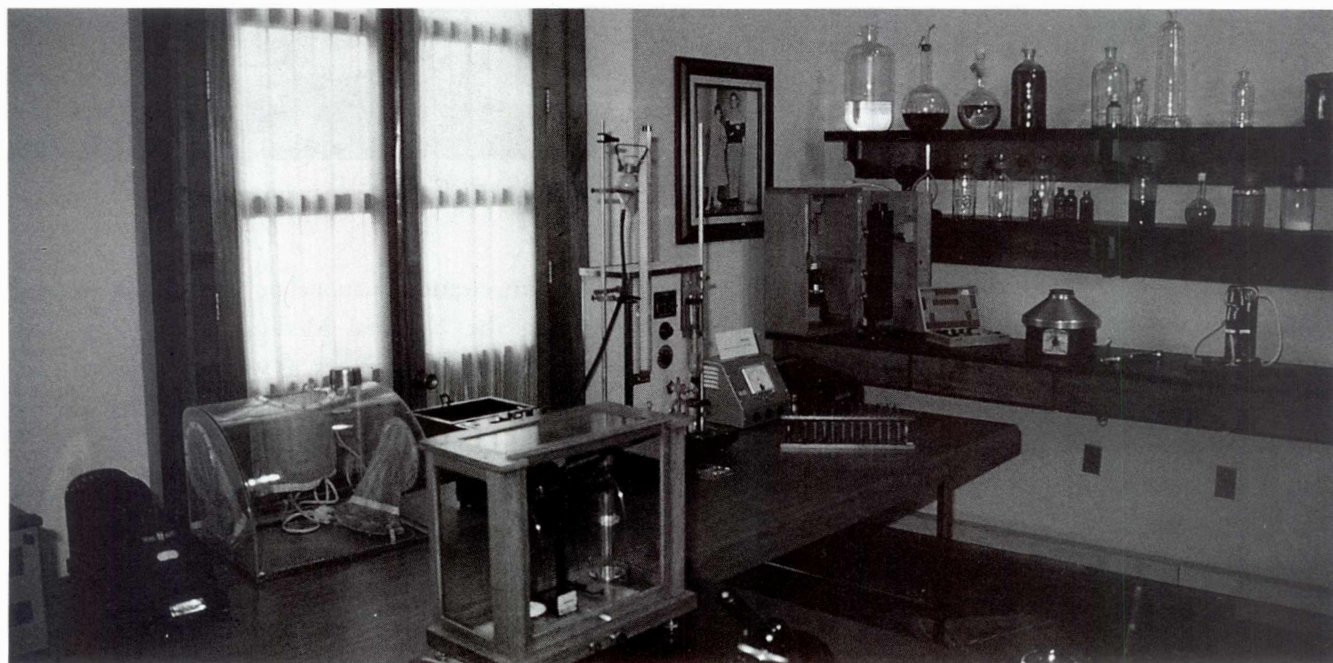
The philosophy of Mexican medicine makes itself felt in two recreated laboratories: one exhibits pieces from the beginning of the century and the other, the apparatuses with which Drs. Fernando Ocaraza and José Joaquín Izquierdo began modern experimental physiology. The museum also boasts the reproduction of a histology laboratory (for the study of tissues), based on the one worked in by Dr. Tomás G. Perrín at the UNAM Medical School in the 1930s. The room contains the desk that belonged to the eminent Spanish doctor and Nobel Prize winner for medicine, Santiago Ramón y Cajal. Another room presents the visitor with a recreation of a mid-twentieth century clinical laboratory, complete with the equipment of the period, from centrifuges to colorimeters.

Lastly, the gallery connecting the palace with the old La Perpetua jail has a display of X-ray machines dating from the time of their inception 100 years ago until today.

The Palace of the School of Medicine, its museum and the academic activities carried out there are good examples of the UNAM's interest in extending culture to the Mexican public. 



Two views of the display of X-ray machines dating back 100 years.



Apparatuses with which began modern experimental physiology in Mexico.