

Coyoacán

The Cultural Heart of Mexico City

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Photos by Dante Barrera

Santa Catarina Plaza.

No one in Mexico City doubts that Coyoacán is one of its main cultural centers. It boasts a historical, cultural and artistic patrimony that is one of the most important in all Latin America. As recently as 50 years ago, Coyoacán still looked like a provincial village with its enormous viceregal parish church, its sidewalks paved with black volcanic stone, settled amidst cornfields, orchards and old colonial country houses, the ideal refuge for the intellect and the arts. In the 1940s Dolores del Río and Emilio Fernández, among other



The House of Malinche.

great figures of Mexican film, walked its streets; Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Salvador Novo begat many of the scandals of their time in the midst of a conservative, religious society, that had a hard time understanding why it had to put up with Leon Trotsky living there.

Coyoacán was bursting with contradictions: the opulence of its mansions con-

trasted with the simplicity of its poorer neighborhoods, and the social classes, portrayed with irony and candor in Mexican film, took on very different forms, a philosophy and a way of living homogeneous only during the patron saints days fiestas and the biggest fiesta of them all, September 15, Independence Day.

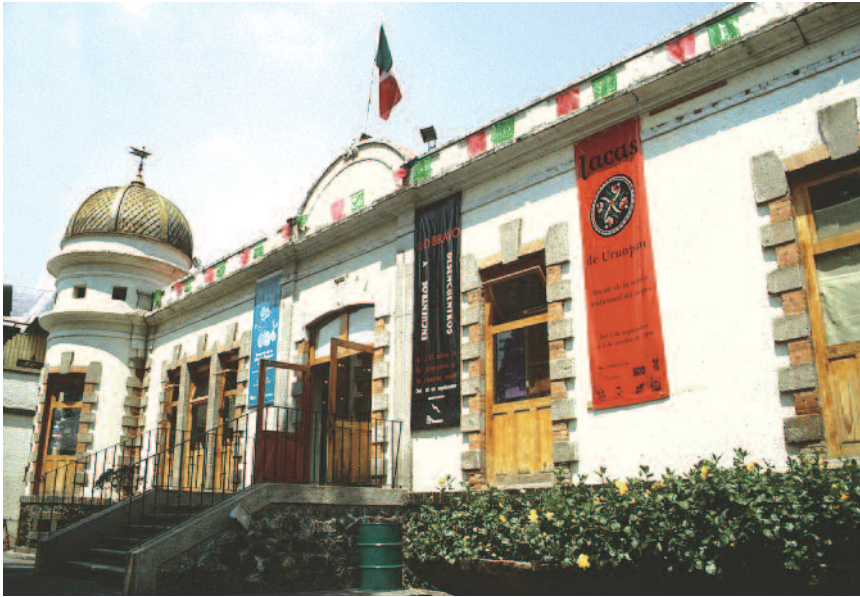
The *pedregales*, or stony crags, an area to the south of Coyoacán, the source of raw materials for four centuries of Mexican architecture, finally surrendered around 1950 to the building of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) campus. This changed life considerably in Coyoacán, which was soon populated by academics and scientists from other

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parts of the city and even abroad, thus substantially raising the demand for the cultural goods that had been developing simultaneously. Since then, the university has been one of the most important axes

Two other national museums, the Museum of Foreign Interventions and the National Watercolor Museum, also have their own documentation centers. The Museum of Foreign Interventions also

situated in one of the annexes to the Leon Trotsky House Museum; the library and recording collection of the UNAM National School of Music; and the UNAM Institute of Bibliographical Studies.



The National Folk Cultures Museum.



The Blue Circle Gallery's patio.

of Coyoacán's social, economic, demographic and, of course, cultural development. Today, for example, the area has more than 100 bookstores, many specializing in technical and scientific books, and at least 20 public libraries, some as important as the National Library itself, the National Publications Library and the University City Central Library, which together boast four million tomes, one of the most important collections in the world.

Recently, the Center for Information and Documentation on Folk Cultures opened there, an annex to the National Folk Cultures Museum, itself founded in 1982 by the federal government, just off Coyoacán's central plaza. This space has been key to the promotion, dignification and recovery of Mexican culture.

has a library focusing mainly on Mexican foreign policy. This museum is located on the same site as the National Manuel del Castillo Negrete Conservation, Restoration and Museography School, in the historic ex-monastery of Churubusco.

The National Watercolor Museum, moved from the more centrally located Roma neighborhood to Santa Catarina de Coyoacán after the 1985 earthquake destroyed its original building, has a large library that Alfredo Guati Rojo, its founder and lifelong director, has put at the service of the community. It also has a magnificent international collection of watercolors which makes it the foremost of its kind in the world.

Also located in Coyoacán are the Rafael Galván Library of the Institute for the Right to Exile and Public Freedoms,

But not only are books sold and collected here; Many nationally known writers also live in Coyoacán, like Fernando Benítez, Luis Everaert —the chronicler of Coyoacán— Germán Dehesa, Rafael Ramírez Heredia, David Martín del Campo and Jaime Labastida. Important publishing houses have their headquarters here, among them Siglo XXI Editores, founded to promote research and publishing in the social sciences, philosophy and the humanities; Editorial Clío, that prints mainly historical and anecdotal texts, particularly about recent Mexican history; and Ediciones Paulinas, specialized in religious works.

In the area around Río Churubusco, or the Churubusco River —today channeled into pipelines and covered by a main thoroughfare—, the federal govern-

ment set up the National Cinematheque in 1968 to preserve Mexican films which flooded the world market after World War II. Its location was not haphazard: the cinematheque was built right next door to the Azteca Churubusco Studios, opened in 1945. Together with Latin American Film Studios, founded in 1934 in San Pablo Tepetlapa, and Cuauhtémoc Studios, later replaced by Studios America opened in 1945 in the Coapa countryside, they made Coyoacán the center for full length feature film production in the golden age of Mexican cinema.

Fire broke out in the cinematheque in March 1982, and it was moved to the nearby town of Xoco. However, the land where the Azteca Churubusco Studios stood was used to build the National Center for the Arts, an enormous complex that houses the University of the Arts and documentation and informational centers for music, theater, dance and the visual arts.

Two other institutions enrich the life of Coyoacán with their presence: the UNAM National School of Music and the Higher School of Music of the National Institute of Fine Arts. Other schools also make cultural contributions, like the Autonomous Metropolitan University Xochimilco campus, located in the ward of Coyoacán, and the cultural extension program of the National Polytechnic School, with its campuses in Culhuacán, in the eastern part of the ward.

The UNAM Cultural Dissemination Office has played an important role in making aspects of universal culture available to Mexicans and in projecting our own artistic and cultural proposals worldwide. Under its aegis are the UNAM University Cultural Center, with its concert



The National Watercolor Museum.

halls and first rate fora, the University Museum of Contemporary Art and the theater, dance, music and visual arts programs that promote artistic creation among the university's almost 300,000 students, teachers and administrative workers.

Besides writers, Coyoacán has been home to visual artists like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who are part of a tradition that some historians date back to

pre-Hispanic times, when dance and music filled the religious fiestas of the *tepanecas coyohuacas*, or the Tepanec residents of Coyoacán. Rufino Tamayo also lived there at one time, and today artists like Raúl Anguiano, Diego Rosales, Geles Cabrera, Arturo García Bustos and Vicente Rojo make their homes there.

The visual arts are displayed in many different kinds of venues: private homes,



Leon Trotsky's study...



and grave.



The National Center for the Arts' office tower has become a landmark in Mexico City.



The Theater of the Arts in the National Center for the Arts.

galleries, plazas and on the street. Galleries also often house other forms of art. For example, Isabel Beteta has come to the fore with her Workshops Cultural Center, which also presents dance performances. Raúl Grifaldo keeps oil painting alive next to the San Juan Bautista atrium, while Alexis Covacevich graces a corner of Francisco Sosa Street with his gallery, the Blue Circle. Rina García Lazo, from her seventeenth-century Red House, also makes her contribution to these efforts at dissemination of art. The Coyoacán Gallery, managed by Olivia Mejía, is an example of good taste in the La Conchita neighborhood, and the San Angel Gallery shows good art in the El Rosedal area.

Coyoacán is synonymous with good theater: Salvador Novo became an important forebear of today's vigorous theater tradition when he founded La Capilla in the Colonia del Carmen neighborhood. Today, there are 34 theaters and fora in Coyoacán, some experimental and others commercial. The University Cultural Center has the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón Theater and the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Forum; the National Center for the Arts has its Theater of the Arts, the Antonio López Mancera Forum and the Salvador Novo and Raúl Flores Canelo Theaters; a few steps from Coyoacán's central plaza is the Dramatic Arts Center and the General Society of Mexican Writers' Rodolfo Usigli Theater is located in the San Mateo Churubusco neighborhood.

Living in Coyoacán means enjoying its historic and cultural resources; it means taking a delicious walk on which you can capture the creative spirit of its residents of yesterday and today. Coyoacán is alive in its culture and gets prouder and prouder of it every day. **NMM**