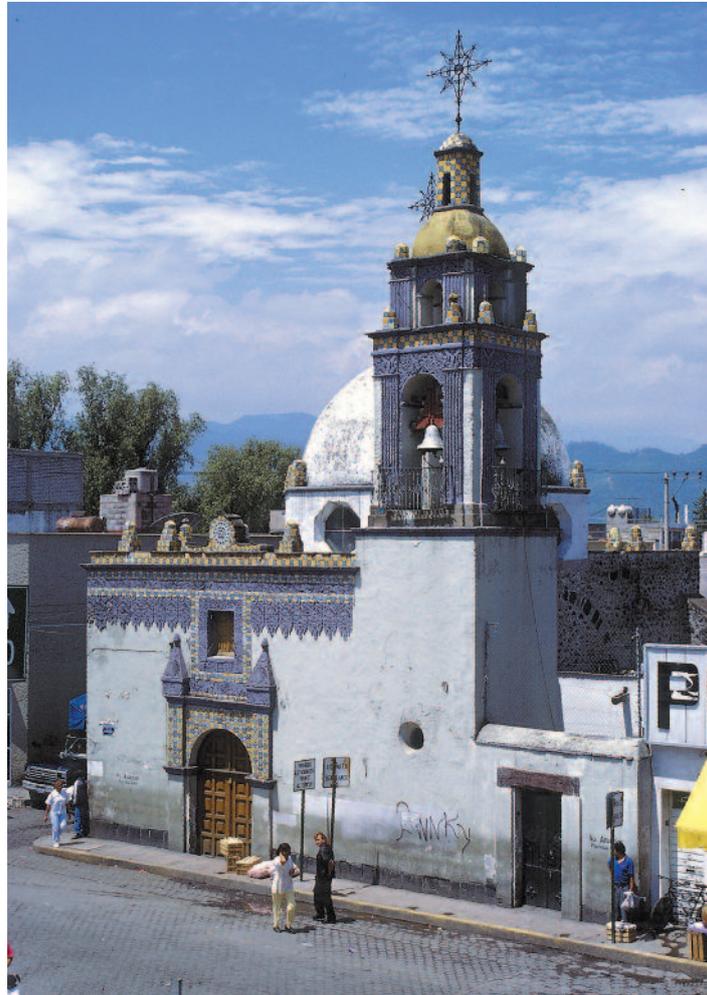


Xochimilco's Colonial Religious Architecture

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Unless otherwise specified photos by Daniel Munguía

The El Rosario Chapel in downtown Xochimilco.

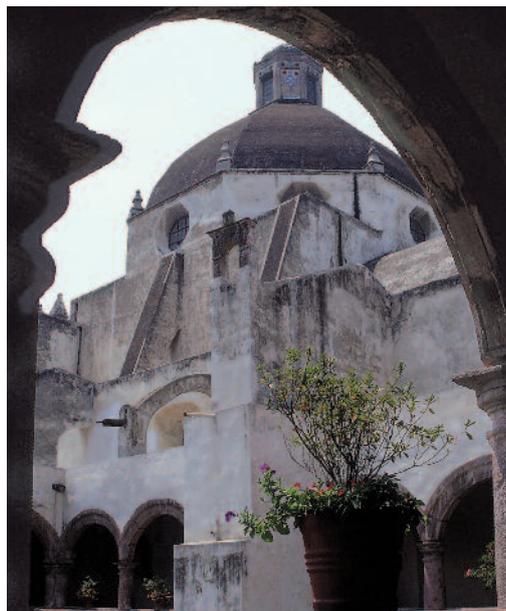
The genius of any people is manifested in a myriad of ways through its cultural heritage, which also expresses the mysterious continuity uniting everything it has produced in the past and all it will produce in the future.

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Translated by Andrea Martínez.

Mexico's vast tangible and intangible cultural treasures can be found in its every corner. Xochimilco is an example of this wealth that on December 10, 1987, the UNESCO declared a World Heritage Treasure. This honor was bestowed in recognition of the creative spirit of its people, able to settle in an inhospitable habitat. On large islands along a lake, they built urban and rural



The Chapel of Saint John the Baptist Tlatenchi, located in one of the most beautiful squares of Xochimilco.



The dome of Saint Bernard of Siena church.

structures, many of which date back to the sixteenth century, outlining regular-shaped neighborhoods around the convent.

Most of Xochimilco's churches were built during the colonial period. Friar Agustín de Ventancurt writes in a chronicle, "15 hermitages are distributed around the city: the Ascension of Our Lady of Colhuacatecinco, Saint John the Baptist Tlatenchi, Saint Mark Tlaltepétalpan, Saint John the Evangelist Tzomolco, Saint Anthony Molotla, Saint Peter of Tlalnahuac, the Name of Jesus of Xaltocan, La Candelaria of Xaltocan, Saint Margaret Nepantlatlaca, Belen of Acampa, Analco Sacred Cross, Saint Christopher Xallan, Saint Francis Caltonco, Saint Steven Tecpapan and Saint Diego Tlacospan."

The hermitage of Saint Peter of Tlalnahuac is presumably the oldest in the area, dating back to 1530. It was built on that spot by order of Hernán Cortés, a devout follower of this saint. In April 1521, after crossing a great ditch, it was there that Cortés first encountered the Xochimilcas. After falling from his horse, he hit his head and almost died at the hands of the brave local inhabitants, the Xochimilcas. He was saved by Cristóbal de Olea and an unknown soldier who had helped him before and would later dis-



Saint Peter of Tlalnahuac Hermitage dates back to 1530.

Mexico's cultural treasures can be found in its every corner, expressions of the mysterious continuity between the past and the present.



The cloister next to the Saint Bernard of Siena Church.



The neighborhoods were built around a chapel or central church.



Saint Peter of Tlalnahuc was built by order of Hernán Cortés.

Xochimilco's colonial churches stand out both for their architectural beauty and because they house magnificent works of religious art.

appear. Cortés believed that he had been protected and saved by Saint Peter the Apostle.

The nave of the hermitage, erected on a rectangular base, is divided into three square areas, differentiated by two main arches holding up a pair of small, semi-circular domes and a vault. The facade is made of quarried stone and red, uneven *tezontle* volcanic rock which contain some pre-Hispanic petroglyphs embedded in the walls. Simple religious rituals and the need for quick cultural assimilation were determining factors in the layout and construction techniques for building this chapel.

Xochimilco's churches stand out either for their architectural beauty or because they house magnificent works of religious art. Among them, the Saint Bernard of Siena church and ex-convent are particularly important, a true gem housing the hemisphere's most important renaissance altar piece.

Other chapels are known both for the saints they honor and their location, such as the case of La Asunción Colhuacatzingo. The original building dates back to the sixteenth century. The current one, a reconstruction of the first, was restored during the first 25 years of the eighteenth century. It has a single nave built



Elsie Montiel

in the form of a Latin cross and a belfry with four antique bells. Imbedded in the walls are stone designs dating from pre-Hispanic times.

The chapel of Saint John the Baptist Tlatchenchi is located in one of the most beautiful small squares of Xochimilco. Watching over it is an old *ahuehuete* conifer, almost 1,000 years old. This ancient tree is a natural sanctuary for the hundreds of herons that arrive every year.

The floor plan is rectangular and the chapel has a vault, a dome supported by a circular drum and a *linternilla*. It also has a belfry, separated from the rest of the building and three slender buttresses, making this a remarkable construction. Like most of Xochimilco's chapels, its appearance today is the result of restoration efforts carried out in the eighteenth century. This Catholic chapel was built upon a pre-Hispanic circular foundation dedicated, perhaps, to Ehécatl Quetzalcóatl, god of the wind.

The El Rosario neighborhood has a small chapel of singular beauty, the only one of its kind in the region. The facade is a masterful combination of mortar and tiles, the latter also covering the tower and dome. The floor plan is rectangular and, inside, it is decorated with tiles which act as a dust guard for the neoclassical altar piece representing the Virgin of El Rosario. It has two vaults, a dome held up by an octagonal drum and a belfry. The drum and belfry are topped with eighteenth-century wrought iron crosses. The chapel was constructed at the request of a brotherhood of the Virgin of El Rosario, made up of Spaniards.



Most religious buildings in Xochimilco date from the sixteenth century but were restored later.