

The San Diego Fort Museum

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Entrance to the San Diego Fort Museum.

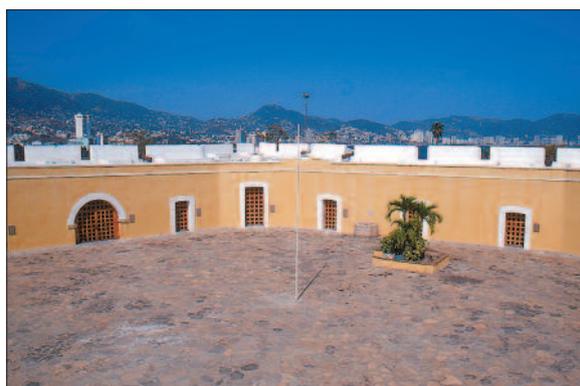
Manuel Zavala Alonso



Blue Chinese porcelain jar.



Chapel angel.



Central patio.

Manuel Zavala Alonso

The San Diego Fort in Acapulco, together with the San Juan de Ulúa, the Ciudad del Carmen and the Bacalar Forts and Campeche's fortified system, is part of the historic complex of forts built in colonial times to defend Mexico's most important ports from constant attacks by pirates. All the other ports faced Europe; Acapulco was the only port facing the East.

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Unless otherwise specified, photos courtesy of Acapulco's History Museum, the San Diego Fort.

The building's design is unique; the most advanced architectural concepts of its time were used in erecting it, turning it into a masterpiece of military engineering. Its pentagonal lay-out makes it defensible from all sides, and it is surrounded by a dry ditch. It was capable of housing 2,000 men with a year's supply of provisions and munitions thanks to an efficient system of collecting, concentrating and preserving rainwater, and its numerous vaulted rooms placed around the central patio. The entire complex covers 9,000 square meters. After fulfilling its role as the guardian of Acapulco



The museography was designed and adapted to the structure.

and the Manila Galleon, it was the battlefield for the armies that at different times in Mexican history fought for freedom.

Today, the fort discharges a noble purpose: it has become a museum that is the pride of Acapulco, making it possible to recover the port's history. Most of the building, which was a shambles, has been restored, and 10 rooms have been opened to the public displaying magnificent collections using museography especially designed and adapted to the structure.

THE MUSEUM

The San Diego Fort, a history museum that belongs to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), is also a site museum, since it is housed by a historic monument, incorporating the place's very history in its museographic discourse, very often with collections found *in situ*, as is the case of the room that shows how food was stored and cooked in the fort.

The 10 exhibition rooms explain Acapulco's different historical periods and matters related to the life of the port. A visit begins with the room dedicated to the first settlers and ends with Mexico's independence. The displays are part of the INAH's collection, enriched with donations and loans from other museums and private collectors. One room is also dedicated to temporary expositions. All the rooms look out onto a large central plaza.

To build on the potential of Acapulco's most important historic monument, work has been

done to turn the museum into a center for both research and dissemination of information.

Since the history of Acapulco is to a great extent the history of commerce between Mexico and the East, two enormous areas rich in products appreciated the world over, its most important asset has been the surprising diversity in cultures that came into contact with each other. Acapulco was the entryway for the great Asian civilizations, China and India. But it was also the port of entry for an immense variety of products and influences from peoples of different languages and religions that came here in galleons full of goods from Manila thanks to the trans-Pacific route.

We should not forget the importance of the ships that sailed south along the coast that would unite peoples along the long navigation routes that reached as far as South America. It was not unheard of for Peruvians to attend the Nao Fairs. Acapulco represents, then, the meeting point for several continents, races and peoples, and home to the famous China Nao and its fairs.

A PORT FACING EAST

Colonial Acapulco was a cosmopolitan, multilingual society that was much more ethnically diverse than any other colony of the Spanish Indies. The galleon was its only source of information; it brought political news, letters from family and friends and news of events in the colonies.



Wood and iron coffer with porcelain.



[1]

This explains why the port celebrated the arrival of the ships. Fanfares were played with the sailing of each galleon, reflecting not only how important it was for Acapulco society, but also becoming a ritual to motivate those who would live through the trip. The Italian Juan Francisco Gemelli Carreri, who traveled literally around the world wrote, “One could say that there is no longer, more dangerous crossing than the one from the Philippines to America. It is enough to destroy a man of steel, let alone one of flesh and blood.” Crew and passengers faced seven months of terrible storms, disease and hunger, with the permanent risk of dying on the high seas. Before leaving, to help ensure a safe journey, masses were said, confessions heard, communion given, the ship was blessed by the archbishop, and, after an elaborate procession through the town, the image of the virgin and the patron saint were taken on board amidst cannon salvos and great commotion.

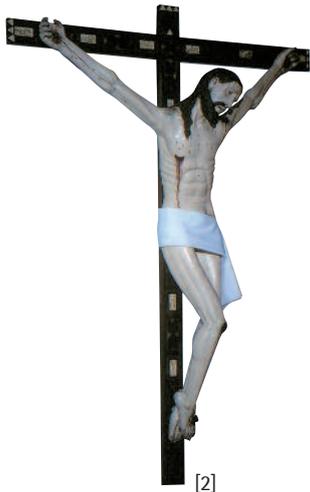
Days before sighting the shores of the Americas, travelers sought out “signs” and when they appeared, they took it for granted that the coast was near. After coming into sight of land, they followed the coast south to the port of Navidad, where anyone ill disembarked. At that point a messenger was sent to the viceroy with a letter from the galleon commander. This sparked a series of preparations for the ship’s arrival at Acapulco days later. The cathedral and the churches rang their bells; novenas were celebrated in thanks; the merchants and royal officials went to the port to arrange for the galleon’s

arrival. A little later, the commercial fair would begin.

With the dispatch of the messenger from the port of Navidad to Mexico City announcing the arrival of the Nao, the capital’s inhabitants also began to move. Mexico City merchants started on the road to the port and Acapulco’s inhabitants prepared the reception.

Acapulco’s most important characteristic is that it was a safe port, with deep waters to anchor the galleons. So, the warm water bay witnessed the arrival of innumerable galleons weighed down with goods from Asia.

Two very different worlds met year after year at the trade fair in Acapulco, which offered up goods from Asia’s far-off exotic countries that could satisfy the demanding taste of New Spain’s elite. For the two or three months that the China Nao stayed in port, the town’s activity reached a fever pitch. The population doubled or tripled. From the interior of New Spain arrived administrative personnel, merchants in search of Asian porcelains, silks, furniture and spices, missionaries preparing to travel to Asia to spread the Gospel, regiments of troops sent as reinforcements to the Philippine garrisons, criminals condemned to forced labor in the far-off archipelago, and stevedores and laborers needed to move the goods purchased. The Manila galleon also brought its own people, mostly merchants who wanted to sell their wares, and a crew that needed to ready the ship for its return voyage. In addition, a third group of merchants and crew from Peru



[2]

[1] Eighteenth-century porcelain jar decorated with Chinese figures.

[2] Eighteenth-century crucifix hung in the chapel.



Philippine robe.



Room 13. Chapel of the Purísima Concepción.



Catan.

often made the trip seeking Asian goods that they could not find anywhere else.

In some cases, whether because the organizers could not come to an agreement or due to external factors like war or the weather, the fair was not held in Acapulco, and the galleon's merchandise was transported to the capital city to be sold. The ritual of the fair lasted approximately a month.

The merchandise purchased was transported to Mexico City to be delivered to New Spain's wealthy. The journey to the capital was long and arduous. Along the route went herders, muleteers and porters who carried large China jars and dinner services, among other Asian products, through Chilpancingo, Taxco, Cuernavaca and San Agustín de las Cuevas, located just before the entry into Mexico City. The shipments that would be sent to Spain continued through Puebla and from there to Veracruz, to be loaded on the fleet that would travel to Cádiz in the following months. The rest stayed in Mexico City.

Every kind of good, both from Europe and from China, could be found in Mexico City's *Parián* market: a diversity of porcelain and fine *talavera* ware from China and Japan, crystal from Venice, rock crystal, trinkets made from ivory, silver and other metals, and crystal toys from China.

Pirates and shipwrecks sometimes delayed or even prevented the galleon's arrival in Acapulco. When this happened, Chinese products would become scarce, increasing the demand for them the following year. In the 1780s, also,

Philippine merchants were hard put to deal with English inroads into the Pacific.

After three centuries of relations, clearly, Chinese porcelain, silk and furniture shipped to New Spain were very widespread, leaving their mark on a society that appreciated them and incorporated them into its daily life. In fact, one of the most important viceregal orders was produced and acquired in Macao: the lattice-work for the choir of Mexico City's cathedral, shipped from Manila to Acapulco in 1724.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, constant clashes with the English and the growing climate in favor of independence weakened trans-Pacific trade. This, together with the impact of the new European porcelain factories, made the Spanish crown finally cancel the Philippine galleon's trade with New Spain in 1813. The military clashes not only made it impossible to hold the last fair, but even forced the Manila merchants to spend a long winter in Acapulco.

The idea of the port facing East is one of the crosscutting themes around which the museum's vocation is defined because of both its historic importance and timeliness. This theme orients a series of activities and exhibits that show the inhabitants of Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico and the world the significance the port has had as an entryway for Asian influences in Mexico and its importance today because of the privileged position it holds vis-à-vis the nations of the Pacific Basin. **MM**

MUSEO FUERTE DE SAN DIEGO
 CALLE HORNITOS Y MORELOS
 COL. CENTRO, C.P. 39300
 ACAPULCO, GUERRERO
 OPEN TUESDAYS TO SUNDAYS
 FROM 9:30 A.M. TO 6:30 P.M.
 ADMITTANCE: \$33 MEXICAN PESOS

OTHER FACILITIES
 THE MUSEUM HAS A SHOP, AN AUDITORIUM,
 A DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES
 AND A ROOM FOR TEMPORARY EXHIBITS.



[3]



[4]

[3] Box with shell inlays.

[4] Detail of alabaster carvings in the chapel.