



Photos courtesy of the Old San Iklifonso College

▲ The Esesarte Pharmacy, presently at the Museum of Mexican Medicine, UNAM.

# The Unknown Worlds Of the University

In its 450 years of educational endeavors, the National Autonomous University of Mexico has gathered extraordinary artistic, scientific and historic collections. Part of this vast patrimony is currently being shown in the Old College of San Ildefonso in the exhibition “Marvels and Curiosities. Unknown Worlds of the University.”

This exhibit is also a broad, representative history of the university, implying the selection of almost 2,000 pieces shown together for the first time; some are under the care of 24 university bodies (schools, institutes, coordinating offices and museums), while others belong to more than 20 cultural institutions and private collectors from Mexico and Spain.

The arrangement of the objects and collections in different rooms evokes the original atmosphere of the *gabinetes* of old, spaces reserved for study, for the sciences and the arts. The

idea of reproducing them shows an interest in comparing: what was important was observing the evolution of a genre or establishing the variety and wealth of some products and instruments.

A careful selection of books and objects remit us to the origins of the university: the founding act of the Royal University in 1551; the oldest manuscripts in the National Library; some of the first Mexican printed work associated with university life; and a manuscript from the University of Salamanca.

The exhibit recreates the study-library of a scholar of the Royal University of Mexico during the Viceroyalty. In those days spaces for research held objects related to collecting and scientific curiosity, so the pre-Hispanic pieces, the tortoise shells, the loose papers and the books all make up an authentic private study, a small museum fed with things useful to teach-

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▲ Butterfly collection, UNAM Institute of Biology. The oldest in the country.



▲ *Venus de Medici*, graphite on paper, Felipe González, 1797, ENAP-UNAM.



Corner of the Great Study of Natural History. ▶

ing that, with time, would become part of the university and national patrimony.

Studies of old —full of orderly arranged objects— showed the progress achieved up to that point. What could not be collected was reproduced in albums and paintings that complemented the great mosaic of nature. Thus, students and public both were able to admire species and extinct specimens. Direct light, as well as dust and insects, were a grave danger to collections; therefore these rooms were left in shadow —just as the one reproduced in this exposition—, in accordance with the silence and respect expected of their visitors.

The exhibit also simulates the atmosphere and charm of the popular natural history studies in other times. To that effect, some vertical cabinets and closets were reclaimed; authentic insect cabinets; delicate glass jellyfish; wax and plaster models of fruit; and documents and drawings of botanical expeditions.

Just as with the studies dedicated to art, the idea was to use up all the space, invading the walls to have the greatest possible number of objects in view. The arrangement of the pieces repeated old practices and beliefs, such as putting a crocodile skin high up or on the ceiling, a medieval custom based on the idea that the animal was a monster that could frighten away the Devil himself.

The founding of the first herbarium in New Spain's capital is also commemorated in the exposition. On commission from the king, Spanish doctor Martín de Sessé (1751-1808) headed up a botanical expedition to New Spain, in 1786, with the aim of obtaining natural products with medicinal or industrial application and forming a botanical garden in the viceregal capital. It was inaugurated in 1788, at the same time that a course in botany began to be taught as part of the medical studies in the Royal University.

To pay tribute to the arts, the monumental space that held the Jesuit San Ildefonso



▲ *F. Ioan Dvns. Scoti. Quaestiones quarti voluminis scripti oxoniensis super sententias...* Savatore Bartolocio, 1580, printed on Venice paper, 17.4 x 12.4 x 5.8 cm National Library, reserved fund/UNAM.



◀ *Interior of the University of Mexico (Cloister of the Royal Pontificate University of Mexico)*, Pedro Gualdi, ca. 1842, 90 x 114 cm (oil on canvas).

College chapel was transformed into a picture gallery of pieces from the Old Academy of San Carlos. The curators have recreated the walls literally covered with oil paintings that hung in the highest part of the room, leaning slightly for a supposedly better view for the visitor. The smaller works were not necessarily hung on the lower part of the walls and no identifying plaques were placed next to each piece as is done today. To make good use of the space, the paintings were hung so close together that they almost touched. In addition to the paintings, there are sculptures, medals, engravings, dies, embossed prints and sketches, arranged in the fashion of the academy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

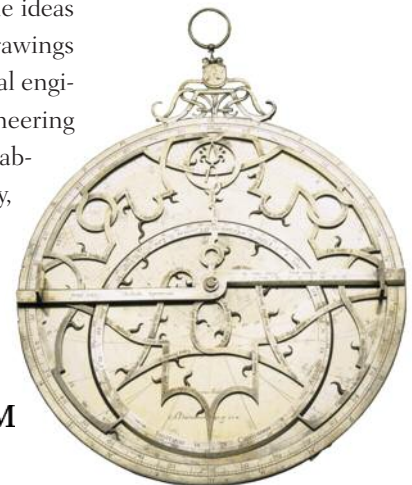
The university's map collections take center stage in one room. They deal with a time in which knowledge of boundaries was very important for discovering and populating New Spain.

The teaching of medicine is represented with publications from this field. A collec-

tion of wax models, anatomic studies and medical instruments is on display, and the Esesarte Pharmacy, established in the city of Oaxaca toward the second half of the nineteenth century, is recreated.

The exhibition reaches the period after 1867 when the positivist current of education was put into practice, inspired in the ideas of Auguste Comte. Displays show drawings related to courses given in mechanical engineering; apparatuses from the Engineering School's current Topography Study, Laboratory of Mineralogy and Chemistry, Mining and Metallurgy Laboratory; and astronomical apparatuses from the late nineteenth century. In those days San Ildefonso was home to the National Preparatory School and a centerpiece of the reform program. **NMM**

Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso  
Justo Sierra 16  
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The exhibit lasts until March 30, 2003.



▲ *Astrolabe*, Gemma Frisius and Gualtero Arsenio, 1554, embossed brass, Belgium, 40 cm in diameter.