

The National Museum Of the Viceroyalty

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Photos courtesy of the National Museum of the Viceroyalty

The San Francisco Javier Church's facade is one of the most impressive representatives of the baroque style in Mexico.



Churrigueresque-baroque facade of the seventeenth century San Francisco Javier Church. Tepotzotlán, State of Mexico.

The first thing visitors see at the National Museum of the Viceroyalty, located in Tepotzotlán, in the State of Mexico, is the facade of one of Mexico's most impressive baroque churches, the San Francisco Javier Church, built by Ildefonso de Iniestra Bejarano in the mid-eighteenth century. Usually, its rich ornamentation sparks the visitor's interest, and he or she feels compelled to enter the museum and discover its other treasures.

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Previous page: San Francisco Javier sculpture. Detail of the main altarpiece of the San Francisco Javier Church. Tepotzotlán.

When entering the museum, you face a small, very sober door; this is the access to the vestibule and the old concierge's hall of what was from 1606 to 1767 (the year the Company of Jesus was expelled from all Spanish dominions) the novices' college. Here New Spain's aspiring Jesuit priests were trained. The building also held a college of indigenous languages where the Jesuits themselves studied in order to participate in evangelizing the northern part of New Spain. In addition it operated as a school for indigenous children, the sons of *caciques* (strongmen or chiefs), whom the Jesuits taught Spanish, the Catholic creed and different arts, like music. The Jesuits' music students reached



Patio of the Orange Trees, used for rest and recreation by the novices.

From this patio, the novices also had access to the large orchard and garden where they grew fruit and vegetables.

such a degree of technical prowess that the indigenous children's choir of Tepetzotlán was renowned during the viceroyalty.

Further along is the Cistern or Reservoir Cloister, imposing in its size and the harmony of the vault covering it. A large patio at the center has two cisterns or wells that today still hold rainwater gathered through conduits in the walls. Even today, we still have no documents explaining the use the Jesuits made of the different rooms and spaces in this building. However, the analysis and comparison of some Jesuit writings like *Ratio Studiorum*, the lives of the novices today, as well as the analysis of the architectural spaces and the paintings

on the walls allow us to infer that the school for indigenous children operated in the cloister and, usually, only the Jesuits and the children would have had access to it.

In the cloister was the apothecary's room, which still preserves the original seventeenth-century mural depicting scenes of the lives of doctor-saints Cosme and Damián. One of the most important activities the Jesuits who lived in the Tepetzotlán college carried out was medical attention for the town's sick.

At the bottom of the cloister, a large seventeenth-century carved stone doorway leads to the inner sanctum of the fathers and the novices.

Right after that, on the left is a gate incrustated with rare woods that is the access to the novices' chapel, also known as the Domestic Chapel. On its vault, you can still see the mannerist-style plaster work fashioned in the early seventeenth century by unknown artists, depicting the crests of the religious orders that arrived in the sixteenth century to contribute to the evangelization of New Spain: Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Jesuits, and Carmelites.

Continuing along the passageway, we discover different rooms that the Jesuits seem to have used as offices, storerooms and hospital rooms, since

several of them have murals of the Passion of Christ. Another carved stone doorway marks the entrance to the novices' cloister. When you enter the high cloister —known today as the Orange Tree Cloister— you see that the architectural proportions are much smaller than in the previous spaces. In addition to having a great deal of light, this cloister is much cozier than the Cistern Cloister. These differences make sense if we remember that this area was for the novices to live and study in, and that they entered the seminary when still adolescents.

The students' library is also in this area. After the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, the college was abandoned for almost 100 years and most of the library's original contents seem to have been taken to others like the one at the Royal Papal University of Mexico. Today, the library has almost 4,000 volumes, in Spanish, Latin, Greek and French, dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, from several Jesuit colleges and some Dominican monasteries, as well as a general stock of unknown origin. The books deal mainly with religious topics, since that is what the members of the orders needed to consult.

The oil paintings that decorate the full and semi-circular arches in this cloister were done by Juan Rodríguez Juárez in the early years of the eighteenth century, and depict scenes in the life of the Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus.

Going down the stairs, we encounter the Patio of the Orange Trees, an area the novices used for rest and recreation. It has an open passageway and spaces with *pojos*, or seats in which the novices could rest and protect themselves from the rain. In addition, we know they had games like billiards and bowling. From this patio, they went into the refectory where they all ate while someone read fragments of the Gospel from the pulpit. The rigorous hierarchy of the Company of Jesus demanded that the novices ate at one time and the priests at another.

From this patio, the novices also had access to the large orchard and garden where they grew fruit and vegetables for consumption at the college. They could also pray and meditate in the small



Virgin of the Light. Lateral altarpiece (detail).



Main altarpiece with objects and liturgical vestments that are part of the museum's collection.

chapel at the bottom of the garden, known today as Montserrat Chapel, consecrated to a multi-colored, eighteenth-century stone relief image that the Jesuits baptized the Virgin of the Company.

Leaving the novices' cloister, we find the patio of the kitchens and the workshops. The college had to have its own places for making all the objects and tools it needed to function. Therefore, it certainly must have had a tailor's workshop, where one of the assistant brothers would have made the clothes that the fathers, novices and the few servants who worked in the college wore all year round. There must also have been spaces for carpentry, iron working and many other workshops.

A single kitchen was not enough, since, in addition to making food for the priests and novices, they also cooked for the sick of the town, particularly in times of plague, when the Jesuits took food to the houses of the stricken.

Returning up the stairs, you come once more to the passageway of the novices' chapel, in front of

which is another stairway that leads to the High Cistern Cloister reserved for the priests. The architecture once again is of large proportions like in the lower cloister; here, we have large rooms that the museum uses today to display some of the historic processes of New Spain's viceroyalty; specifically, sixteenth- to eighteenth-century art. Everything seems to indicate that in each of these large spaces, a single father lived with his library and private study.

The priests also enjoyed a space for their recreation and rest, which is why this high cloister has a look-out point, which serves the same function as the Patio of the Orange Trees that the novices used. To one side, we find a stairway that leads down to, first, the choir and the ante-choir of the San Francisco Javier Church. Then it leads to the lower Cistern Cloister, in whose rooms is the permanent exhibition "Colonial Mexico", which describes the social, political, economic and cultural processes of New Spain's viceroyalty. The

stairway continues down until it finally takes us to the inside of the San Francisco Javier Church, a gem of Mexico's eighteenth-century baroque.

Mexico has countless churches with gold-leafed, carved wooden altar pieces from the viceregal period, whose creation depended on the economic capabilities of the institution that commissioned them. For this reason, almost all the churches have altar pieces from different periods. In the mid-eighteenth century, when the Jesuits commissioned Miguel Cabrera and Higinio de Chávez to make the San Francisco Javier Church altar pieces and Ildefonso de Iniestra Bejarano to make the facade, the Mexican Province of the Company of Jesus was very powerful economically thanks to the production of *pulque* at its haciendas in central Mexico.

This economic power gave the artists who created this work the opportunity of making a spectacular space that includes every kind of artistic expression of the period, like painting, sculpture and architecture, and creates a great, integral baroque work. We would have to add the music, the incense and the rich vestments and liturgical ornaments used by the priests to the visual impact of the church itself in order to approach the aesthetic experience that eighteenth-century New Spain society must have had.

The National Museum of the Viceroyalty has used this magnificent setting to present different permanent expositions illustrating Mexico's viceregal period. The most important, "Colonial Mexico," in the low Cistern Cloister and part of the high Orange Tree Cloister, deals with the events prior to the 1521 conquest all the way to the social unrest that preceded the 1810 insurgent movement. Here, visitors can see the Zumárraga lap-cloth, embroidered in silk in the sixteenth century, or the San Pedro and San Pablo reliquary, made of gold-plated silver in the sixteenth century and considered one of the most outstanding of its kind in Mexico.

Two other exhibits describe the production of objects d'art during the viceroyalty: "Sixteenth-Century Monastery Workshops" and "Guilds of New Spain." Among the items displayed in these



Ornament topping the door in the Domestic Chapel.

exhibits are two oil paintings, beautiful examples of New Spain's baroque: the late seventeenth-century *Expulsion from Paradise*, by Juan Correa, and *The Annunciation of San Joaquín*, painted on wood by Juan Sánchez Salmerón in the early seventeenth century.

Other objects of note in museum displays include the collections of portraits of crowned nuns and ivory sculptures considered the most important of their kind in Mexico. **NM**

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