

Benito Juárez A Living Memory

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Photos by Mauricio Degollado

The Seated Statue at the National Palace.



The Juárez Semicircle in the Alameda Park.

One of Mexican history's most outstanding figures, whose image has remained alive down through the years, is Benito Juárez: a Zapotec Indian, born in a small town in the mountains of Oaxaca, one of the country's poorest states, who learned to speak Spanish at the age of 12 and became president during one of the nation's most conflictive periods. Juárez, one of the most lucid Liberal minds of his century, faced off Mexico's Conservatives, who, with the support of the French empire, put an Austrian emperor on the throne in Mexico.

After a bloody three-year struggle that forced him to flee throughout Mexico's vast territory, the group headed up by Juárez finally managed to defeat the foreign monarch and reestablish the republic, which exists to this day. Juárez was in office for five years until a heart attack took his life in his rooms in the National Palace. A moving account of the doctor who treated him describes the fortitude with which he lived out his last days, accepting stoically, for example, the treatment that consisted of pouring boiling water on his chest in the hope of stopping the progress of the condition.

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His death, however, did not obliterate his legacy of honesty, rectitude and courage. His life was austere, his thoughts consistent with his actions. Together with outstanding fellow Liberals, he passed the Reform Laws, which, among other transcendental measures, confiscated countless goods from the Catholic Church, with its enormous economic and political power. One example is that they owned more than half the real estate in Mexico City: in addition to churches and large monasteries and convents, they owned a myriad of houses that they rented out, and in the countryside, they possessed haciendas and ranches. This enormous wealth allowed them to be the city's main money lenders, a service they sometimes even extended to the government. Juárez decided that the monasteries, convents and rental houses should be divided up and sold to private citizens. Many of the convents and monasteries were torn down to build houses; this changed the face of mid-nineteenth century Mexico City, replacing the severity of the high walls surrounding the immense monasteries with houses with balconies facing the street decorated with wrought-iron curlicues and carvings in stone and plaster. But, the external austerity of the monasteries bore little resemblance to their luxurious interiors: many

of them were famous for the paintings by the best artists that adorned their walls, the gold-covered altars, the candelabras, the gold and silver goblets and shrines, the jewels gracing the images and their splendid libraries.

Another transcendental measure was making education and services like marriage and the certification of deaths secular: Juárez founded the civil registrar's office and created norms for the functioning of cemeteries. Along with all of this, freedom of religion was decreed. As might be imagined, such radical actions encountered a great deal of opposition, but with the support of the vast majority, Mexico started out on its road toward modernity.

With the death of Benito Juárez, his presence in Mexico City increased; the city made him its own, and it is here that his remains lie. In addition to countless streets, avenues and a borough named after him, the city pays homage to him in monuments like the one on the street also named after him that borders the Alameda Park in what is now called the Historic Center, which when he was alive comprised almost the entire city. The most

important monuments in the Historic Center are a bust in the National Palace, the Homage Space, the monument in the Alameda Park called the Juárez Semicircle and his tomb in the San Fernando Cemetery.

THE SEATED STATUE AND THE HALL OF HONOR

Using the metal from the cannons used by General Miguel Miramón in the battles of Silao and Calpulalpan, Porfirio Díaz had a statue of a seated Don Benito made which was dedicated March 21, 1891 to celebrate the anniversary of his birth. The bronze sculpture depicting half the subject's body was placed near the north entrance of the National Palace, close to the rooms where Juárez and his family had lived during the last years of his presidency. The Hall of Honor was built in those very rooms, reproducing the library, living room, bedroom and other rooms where historic objects, jewels and mementos are displayed, in addition to a



The Juárez Mausoleum in the San Fernando Cemetery.



showcase containing his death mask. The space is very interesting: it shows the simplicity of his lifestyle despite living in the monumental building constructed atop the palace of Aztec Emperor Moctezuma, who lived in great splendor, and home to the viceroys who governed for three centuries during Spanish domination and several Mexican presidents after independence. Juárez and his family's rooms differ little from those of any relatively comfortable family; they eschewed luxury and ostentation with authentic republican austerity. The hall was inaugurated July 18, 1957 by Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, then president of Mexico.

THE SEMICIRCLE

It was Porfirio Díaz, the general who held power for 30 years, who finally accepted the idea proposed since Juárez's death: building a mausoleum in his honor. Díaz intended to inaugurate it during the festivities of the centennial of independence. In 1905, the national commission to commemorate the centennial of the birth of the Oaxacan founding father was created.

Among other activities, this commission called for a contest to decide what design would be used for the monument; the jury was made up of archi-

itects Nicolás Mariscal and Antonio Rivas Mercado and the engineer Manuel Velázquez de León. They picked a project presented by architect Guillermo de Heredia.

The concrete foundations began to be laid in November 1909; a few months later, the 1,620 marble blocks that make up the elegant monument had already been laid, under the supervision of the engineer Ignacio León de la Barra. The total cost was 229,438 pesos. The architecture was executed in Italy by Zoccagno, the sculpture by Lazzaroni, demonstrating once again Porfirio Díaz's preference for Italian architects and artists (Suffice it to recall Adamo Boari, who designed the Fine Arts and Postal Palaces, and Silvio Contri, who did the Palace of Communications).

The Semicircle is built in the neoclassical style, with seats on the inside of the great Carrara marble half-circle. It has 12 doric columns and a great pedestal at the center, flanked by two lions. The sculpture shows a seated Juárez being crowned by an angel, and a third allegorical figure holds the sword of justice and a torch. As planned, it was inaugurated by Porfirio Díaz in 1910 as part of the festivities for the centennial of Mexico's independence.

The mausoleum was erected in the place in the Alameda Park that had previously been occupied by the Moorish pavilion that had been Mex-



The Hall of Honor at the National Palace.



ico's exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. After being moved, the pavilion became a symbol for the elegant Santa María de la Ribera neighborhood.

THE MAUSOLEUM AT THE SAN FERNANDO CEMETERY

When Don Benito died and after his funeral, the discussion began about where his remains should lie permanently; this debate lasted several years. There were those who thought that it would be best to take them to his native Oaxaca, but it was finally decided that he should rest in the cemetery that had belonged to the San Fernando Monastery. Originally, the idea was to turn it into what we now know as the Rotunda of the Illustrious in the Dolores Cemetery, where the remains of Doña Margarita Maza de Juárez and the children who preceded him in death already lay.

From that time on, the cemetery became a secular cemetery, although it maintained the name of San Fernando. On the eighth anniversary of the death of Juárez, who had already been called "the man with the greatest merits in the Americas," the brothers Juan and Manuel Islas were commissioned to design the monument. They designed a classical

platform in white Carrara marble with 16 columns holding up a roof and a statue of Don Benito on top of a female figure representing the Mexican homeland.

The mausoleum is protected by a simple fence, and on its cornice is the phrase that he made famous the world over as a statesman when Mexico achieved its victory over the French: "Respect for the rights of others is peace." Paradoxically, in the same cemetery is buried Tomás Mejía, a Conservative general, who was shot in 1867 together with Maximilian of Habsburg. Benito Juárez had been to visit his remains when they were being embalmed in the San Andrés Hospital in the building now occupied by the National Art Museum on Manuel Tolsá Plaza.

Today, on the occasion of the bicentennial of his birth, just like when he made his triumphant entrance into Mexico City in 1867, the capital is celebrating Benito Juárez. It is cleaning its monuments, organizing lectures and tributes, publishing and republishing books about his life. However, it would be more important if the fundamental principles of his liberal ideology —honesty, commitment, austerity and a profound love for Mexico— were turned into an effective model for government officials and citizens who often emulate his words but never his deeds. ■■■



Historic books and documents displayed in the Hall of Honor.