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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO VISUAL PROGRAM

SET 256

MEXICO: POPULAR PAINTING - As Photographic Background

It is a custom in many cities of Latin America to have a special place for tourists and visitors to have a souvenir photographs taken. One of these places in Mexico City is in the square across from the Shrine of Guadalupe. Here a group of photographers called "ambulantes" (a word in Spanish that means to move from place to place) gather and set up their portable backdrops. Visitors come from all parts of Mexico to worship at the basilica and pay homage to the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

As backgrounds for the souvenir photos, the "ambulantes" set up large naive paintings that depict aspects of the legend of the vision of Guadalupe and other local legends.

According to the story, a humble Indian named Juan Diego, one of the few Indians to have accepted Christianity at that time, was on his way to Mass one chilly morning in December, 1531. As he crossed the barren hill known as Tepeyac, he was stopped by a blinding light and unearthly music. Appearing to him in that radiant circle of light was the Virgin. She urged Juan Diego to ask his bishop to have a shrine erected on the place where she was standing, so she might protect the Indians with her love. He related the vision to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, who skeptically asked for proof. Juan Diego, frightened by his experience, avoided Tepeyac for a few days, but on December 12, late for Mass, he again took the short cut through the hill. Once more, the Virgin appeared. This time she instructed him to gather roses from the frosty, stony ground and take them to the bishop as proof of her request. The devout Indian did as she asked, bundling up flowers in his cloak. He went immediately to the home of the bishop, where he was granted an audience. Opening his cloak, he let the roses tumble to the feet of the cleric, but it was not the blooms that amazed him, it was the image of the Virgin that was somehow stamped on the cloak. She was surrounded by one hundred rays of sunlight, standing on the crescent of the moon with her star studded gown held at her feet by a small angel.

Bishop Zumárraga, after some investigation, ordered the church built as requested. To this day experts are unable to say what medium was used to produce the image nor are they able to answer how it was done. No one has been able to explain why the tunic, itself, has not long since deteriorated.

The original chapel was replaced in 1976 by an ultra-modern structure that was designed to provide a dramatic setting for Juan Diego's cloak. It hangs in a gold frame over the white marble altar.

The "ambulantes" then, by means of their charming backdrops and photographs emphasize and perpetuate the already existing atmosphere of awe that reigns in the Aztec land of Tepeyac.

Photographs by Angel Hurtado

Text by Nicole Ober



SET 256

MEXICO: POPULAR PAINTING - A Photographic Background

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- 256 A The Square next to the left wing of the Sanctuary, where the photographers "ambulantes" set up their outdoor studios.
- 256 B The photographers provide their customers with the typical "sarapes" and "sombreros".
- 256 C A photographer at work, processing the print in his traveling dark room - under the black sleeve of the camera.
- 256 D The background for the photograph is this lovely naive painting: The Virgin of Guadalupe appears surrounded by different aspects from the legend; Juan Diego holding his cloak with the image of the Virgin, the miraculous flowers that appeared in the midst of barren rocks. Over the head of the Virgin is the pennant reading, "Recuerdo de la Villa" which translates to read in English, "Souvenir of the City".
- 256 E Detail of the same painting, 256 D.
- 256 F Detail showing the church.
- 256 G In another painting used as a backdrop for the photographs, the artist has used pre-columbian motifs in place of the Christian symbols. Included are the Aztec calendar (a large circular sundial to the right), the head of the god, Tlaloc, jutting out of the stepped structure to the left, and in the background a pyramid.
- 256 H Detail of the same painting, 256 G.
The Virgin is surrounded by the seals of other Latin American countries.
- 256 I Detail of 256 G.
Coming out of the clouds, the angel, with his arms outstretched, He is holding the edges of the robes. The colors of his wings, made of several sizes of feathers, were taken later to be the colors of the Mexican flag.
- 256 J Detail of one of the canvas backdrops, showing the roses that appeared miraculously, rendered with all the charm of the primitive painters.