A HISTORY OF
MEXICAN ART

SET 6

COLONIAL ART
OF THE 16TH CENTURY

BY
ROBERT C. MACLAURIN
AND
KATHARINE B. MACLAURIN

BUDEK FILMS AND SLIDES
73 PELHAM STREET
NEWPORT, R.I. 02840
(401) 846-6580
INTRODUCTION

Colonial art in Mexico was a fusion of Spanish and Indian characteristics. Buildings were generally planned by Spaniards or Creoles, but executed by native builders, who added a flavor of their own. The Indian touch is seen occasionally in pre-Conquest motifs as such, but consists more often in a distinctive interpretation of European designs and religious symbols. The Indian was naturally unfamiliar with European architectural styles, and often his first acquaintance with decorative motifs was in two-dimensional drawings. Not surprisingly, his rendition of these designs in stone or stucco were frequently rather quaint and un-European. In addition, he had only recently been introduced to Christianity, with its great body of alien symbols, concepts, and stories; these, too, he interpreted and depicted in an original manner.

Mexican buildings were usually rather low and solid, to resist earthquakes. Differences in architectural styles are accordingly seen chiefly in decorative details. Many churches exhibit a variety of styles, as buildings were frequently reworked in later periods according to current styles. Gothic characteristics are found in many colonial buildings: vaulted ceilings, round windows, flattened arches, ribbed domes, and buttresses. The severe exteriors of early fortress-churches were often embellished in the Plateresque style, in which the delicate motifs of the silverworker were translated into stone and stucco to decorate windows and portals. Mudéjar, or Moorish characteristics are frequently seen in the fanciful curves and ruffled mouldings of arched doorways.

In the austere Herreriano style, decorative details were made in very low relief and kept to a minimum. Perhaps as a reaction to the cold simplicity of this style, the Baroque and Churriguereesque styles came into fashion: façades were extended vertically for greater dignity and heaped with a profusion of niches, pilasters, pediments, scrolls, and cornices.
Early colonial churches and missions were often built along the lines of moated castles with crenellated walls and guardhouses. The Indian population did not always take kindly to conversion, and missionaries of the Augustinian, Dominican, and Franciscan orders took no chances with the natives. The Augustinian church at Acollan, built around 1521, forms part of one of these fortress-like complexes, and is equipped with small barred windows and battlements.
The grimness of the exterior is softened by ornamental work on the façade in the Plateresque style.

The term Plateresque is derived from the Spanish word plata, meaning silver, and is used to describe ornamental stone or stucco-work resembling the chased work done on silver plate, with many of the motifs used by Renaissance jewelers: delicate rosettes, floral garlands, sea shells, etc.
The door at Acollan is flanked by pairs of candelabra-like columns, wound with sculptured garlands. Between each pair of columns is a statue, supported by a corbelled base and topped by a baldachin in the Gothic manner. Flying angels fill the spaces above the rosetted archway; above is a garlanded frieze. A projecting cornice marks off the lower story, but the vertical lines of the columns are continued by smaller columns and campaniform figures. In the center, below the window, is a smaller grouping with two statues under canopies flanking a third in a shell niche. The window is ornamented by two candelabrum columns, vertical rows of rosettes, and deliberately traced S-scrolls alongside the bases of the columns.

3. Huejotzingo, Church. From 1523. Façade.
The Franciscan convent at Huejotzingo is a good example of early colonial architecture. Like Acollan, it had a rather grim façade and a crenellated top. The sides of the façade project forward at an angle in an imaginative manner.
Like Acollan, Huejotzingo Church is sparingly enlivened with decorative detail. The doorway has a flattened arch, a Gothic feature, the rippling curves of which are repeated in the stonework above, giving the archway a Mudéjar flavor. The word Mudéjar, Arabic for Moor, was originally used by the Spaniards to designate a converted Moor who stayed on in Spain; later its meaning was extended to cover an art style with Moorish characteristics in its treatment of brick, wood, and tile. The ornate curves and angles of the Mudéjar arch became very popular in Mexico and appeared with many variations. Medallions decorate the surface above the doorway. Two long, thin columns extend the height of the first story, their finials reaching slightly above the projecting cornice. The arched window is enclosed by a rectangular frame and flanked by crests.

The undulating arch springs from the simulacrum capital of a pilaster. Interlocking unevenly with the ridges of the capital is a sculptured frieze with patterns reminiscent of Pre-Conquest motifs.

5. Huejotzingo. Church.
The plainness of the interior walls indicates the early date of the church, although the doorways are ornamented. The church has beautiful rib-vaulting and an impressive retable. The Indians excelled in wood carving, and some of the most spectacular colonial creations consist of retables, pulpit, and organs, fancifully carved, painted and gilt.

The Gothic vaulting is in an intricate, stalactite pattern; the use of gilt adds a touch of splendor. The multiplicity of ribs is characteristic of the Late Gothic style. Spain lagged behind France and Italy in architectural developments, with the result that the Gothic style was still current in Spain when the Italian Renaissance was at its height.

The doorway has a depressed arch, a Gothic feature, and a rather florid frame patterned with rosettes enclosed by entwining tendrils.
Below the horizontal frieze of rosettes, the surface is undecorated. Colonial decorators often divided the surface arbitrarily, giving different treatment to the lower portion around a doorway.

The round archways leading to the cloister are ornamented with different motifs, interlocking strands on the left and geometric patterns on the right. The arches are of unequal width, and the lack of symmetry is enhanced by the fact that the central column is taller and wider than either of the side ones.

The central column is broken up into a number of sections and embellished with sculptured patterns. The mid-section is carved to resemble braiding or weaving. Textile patterns were often translated first into pottery and later into decorative architectural motifs.

Monastic establishments generally included a De Profundis room, a library, a dining room, and sleeping cells; these rooms opened off an arcaded gallery which enclosed a central patio. The arches at Huejotzingo are rounded and rather plain. The patio contains a miniature orchard of 300-year-old orange trees which still produce, although their fruit is too sour to eat. Missions generally included sufficient land to allow the cultivation of fruits and vegetables for the inmates.

The remains of 16th century black and white frescoes with Latin inscriptions are still to be seen at Huejotzingo. Many of the early missionaries of New Spain taught painting to groups of natives, one friar establishing a School of Arts and Crafts in the 1530's, and the Spanish artists who painted most of the 16th-century frescoes were frequently assisted by their Indian pupils. The doorway below the painting is sculptured in the form of a Mudéjar arch.

The walls of the refectory are covered with frescoes. The figures of saints are enclosed by arcading, with a scalloped motif above each pair to give the illusion of a shell-arched niche. Most painting of this period seems to have been based upon contemporary engravings, and artists often used no more than three colors: black, red, and yellow. This must have seemed a harsh restriction to native assistants, accustomed to the brilliant hues of their temples and palaces.

From west, 1550.
Tiny square chapels, called posas were often built at the entrances of large churchyards. These were stopping places for religious processions in the enclosed atrium; the name posa supposedly derives from the Spanish, referring to a place where the Sacrament rested, - se posaba. Religious processions still stop at such outdoor chapels and shrines, where prayers are said and benedictions given, although Mass is not celebrated. This posa stands against the atrium wall, a sturdy, compact little structure with a pointed roof. The Franciscan cord is used as a decorative motif along the archway and above; this became a popular motif and was subsequently used for its ornamental value rather than for its religious significance. A crudely sculptured crown ornaments the upper portion; the Crown of Thorns, Queen of Heaven, appealed to the mind of the Indian craftsman and was used in later colonial buildings with great flair and imagination.

Founded in 1524, the church was later reworked in the Churrigueresque style. Churrigueresque, with its cheerful vigor and flamboyance, became extraordinarily popular in the 18th century. It remained a decorative rather than a structural style, however; a façade such as this did not express the basic construction of the building. The pilasters are sculptured to resemble stacks of pedestals, crowns, and vases, and vase-like sculptures surmount the niches. The doorway has a fluted neo-Mudéjar arch, its ruffles echoed in the extravagant outline of the high espadaña.

MEXICO VI
The open chapel was a feature of the pioneering
days of Spanish missionaries in Mexico.
The first part of the church to be built, it
served for instruction of the masses and religi-ous
ceremonies during the construction of
the rest of the church, and was used after-
wards in cases of overflow attendance on
Sundays and holy days. Sometimes an open
chapel took the form of a niche-like recess;
sometimes it was a large hall-like building.
In Cuernavaca, the chapel is placed within an
arcade adjoining the cathedral. The arches
are round-headed and very simple.

Detail of Vaulting.
The chapel is rib-vaulted in a Gothic star
pattern.

24. Cuernavaca. Cathedral. Vaulting in
Narthex.
The narthex of the cathedral has a peculiar
form of Gothic vaulting, the ribs arranged in
the shape of a wheel with the spokes contin-
uating beyond the rim. In the center of the wheel
is a rectangular crest.

Façade from west.
Cuernavaca, about an hour's drive from Mexico
City and blessed with a delightful climate,
was an appropriate location for a country
palace. Remains of the old carriage road built
under colonial rulers can still be seen near
the modern road.
The Cortés Palace is enclosed by thick stone
walls with crenellations. Part of the graceful
façade of the palace is seen here between the
walls, with two stories of arcading and a
central belfry. The arcading resembles the
early Florentine work of Brunelleschi. The
walls in the upper rear gallery have been
decorated with murals by Diego Rivera, a
prominent artist of modern Mexico.

From northwest.
Watch towers just above the corners of the en-
closure walls, but the military effect of these
and the crenellations is belied by the many
large windows in the walls and towers. This
was more of a pleasure palace than a fortified
castle.

The Cathedral of Oaxaca was founded in 1535,
subsequently enlarged and altered as were
most colonial structures, badly damaged by
earthquakes toward the end of the 17th cen-
tury, and finally rebuilt and reconsecrated in
1738. Standing on the main plaza, it continues
to be the center of community life: here tents
have been erected in the foreground for a fair
or market.
The elaborate façade contrasts strongly with the
basic simplicity of line in the exterior.
The main entrance, hidden here by a tent, is
flanked by niches with statues, and the space
above the doorway is filled by sculptured
panels in high relief. In the upper stories, a
large central relief is flanked by ornate col-
umns and statues in niches and, on a recessed
plane, smaller reliefs. A Baroque feature is
seen in the irregularity of line: the overhang-
ing cornices alternate with project and recede,
and above each lateral doorway on the ground
floor the frame dips in a V to make room for
an oval window. The use of coupled columns
is another Baroque characteristic, and the
very plain wall on the right provides a Bar-
roque contrast of surfaces.

Sections of the pilasters and doorways are
richly embellished with intricate sculptural
patterns suggesting flowers and vegetation.
The reliefs are sculptured with the fluid ease
of a baker decorating a fancy cake.

The cathedral is built of a local stone with a
soft green tint, and colored tiles cover the
roof and domes.
The slender coupled columns of the belfry
are embellished with deeply grooved spirals,
a decorative motif that was to be widely used
in buildings of the 18th-century Mexican
Rococo.

The Casa de Montejo, built seven years after
the founding of Mérida, was ordered by Fran-
cisco de Montejo for his conquistador father.
Today the British vice-consulate, the building
stands on the main plaza, at an angle from the
cathedral. Like the latter, it is built with stones from ruined Maya structures. The design was a Spanish one, but the builders and master mason were Indians, and the building exhibits a peculiar combination of styles. In the doorway, for instance, the lower story is Plateresque, with fluted columns, paneled jamb, and portrait medallions, whereas the upper story has a Gothic flavor, with two atlantean halberdiers standing on human heads, symbolizing the subjugation of the natives. The four large grilled windows are decorated in monumental fashion with massive pediments supported by human busts on long, tapering pedestals.

Built by the Jesuits, who arrived in Oaxaca in 1576, the church was later given to the Nuns of the Immaculate Conception and renamed after the expulsion of the Jesuit order. The church stands on a platform, which gives it dignity and increases the effect of monumentality. The portal protrudes, in a novel design, the two sides receding to connect with the towers. The decoration is rather sparing, perhaps owing more to the strained conditions of the Jesuit Order at the time than to artistic preference. High pedestals support applied Plateresque columns resembling candelabra. Along the receding curve of the façade a stepped moulding, ending in a flourish, gives the effect of a gable.

32. Oaxaca. La Concepción. Detail of Façade. A projecting cornice follows the curve of the façade. An oval crest is framed by the pilasters. To the left of the blind window above is a plain pilaster tapering at the base in the form of an inverted obelisk; this was later to become a very popular Churrigueresque motif. On the right is the curved base of the stepped moulding, ending in a rosette.

Two broad towers squeeze against a narrow façade, providing a strong vertical accent. The very plain treatment of the lower tower walls creates a Baroque contrast with the elegantly arcaded and domed belfries, and with the reliefs and pilasters of the portal.

The exterior of Mérida Cathedral has the simplicity and austerity characteristic of the Beterrano style. The isolation of the Yucatán Peninsula (long believed to be an island) prevented the area from keeping pace economically with the mainland, and stimuli were lacking for a reworking in the Baroque style such as many other early churches received. The cathedral was constructed of the squarish stones from Maya ruins. It had only one tower originally, in the fashion of early colonial churches; the left tower was added in 1713. In an architectural quirk, the two highest stories of the towers are placed at the outer edge of the bases. The central entrance is framed by pairs of pilasters enclosing niches, and all three doorways are crowned by low, unbroken pediments scarcely noticeable in the vast, unbroken surface of the exterior. The one striking feature is the central arch, resting on two piers which frame the portal, and enclosing a heraldic medallion, which bore the arms of Castile and León.

The façade of San Francisco exemplifies the ultra-Baroque style called Churriguera after its founder, a Spanish architect named Jose Churriguera. The style was characterized by abundant and dramatic use of medallions, carved drapery, candelabra, vases, obelisks, scrolls, and religious and mythological statues. Most of these elements can be seen in this lavishly decorated façade. A Baroque interest in odd shapes is displayed in the scalloped window above the portal.

36. Dzibichaltún. Chapel built on old Main Plaza. 1593.
The very simple little chapel stands amidst the shapeless ruins of Dzibichaltún, a site in Yucatán occupied from prehistoric times up till the colonial period. The chapel illustrates the lapse in time between Yucatán and the mainland; although built at the end of the 16th
century, it has more in common with the fortress-churches of the second quarter of the century, with its turrets, tiny windows, and lack of ornament. The chapel stands out from the pre-Conquest buildings because of its arched construction. Pre-Columbian architecture either never discovered or never valued the true arch, contenting themselves with the clumsy corbeled arch. The possibilities opened up by the use of the true arch were not explored until the arrival of the Spaniards.

37. Former Corpus Christi Church.
Mexico City, National Museum of Popular Arts and Industries.
The building shows classical influence. The central portion above the portal is crowned by an unbroken pediment, as are the two lateral windows on the second story. Flat, plain pilasters frame each section. The one Baroque extravagance is seen in the sculptures above the portal: a large medallion enclosed by a simulated arched niche and flanked by pairs of smaller medallions framed by scrolls and ornamental forms.

38. Mexico City, La Profesa. From 1595.
Façade and Towers.
La Profesa, later reworked in the Baroque style, is an impressive church with twin towers. The upper stories of the towers are elaborately treated with cornices, ribbed domes, and striped courses of stone, while the lower portions are left plain to provide a contrast.

39. Mexico City, La Profesa.
Closer view of Façade.
The central portion of the façade is embellished with pairs of columns enclosing statuary in niches. Giant piers, running from ground to roof, enclose the portal section; within this frame, the decoration is divided into stories by cornices which project and recede in accordance with the pilasters. The pilasters are segmented, each section receiving different decorative treatment.

40. Mexico City, La Profesa.
Sculpture on Façade.
This panel in high relief shows a Baroque fondness for the scroll motif, and the depth of the carving provides a Baroque contrast of light and shadow. The figures are very expressive, and the drama of the scene is intensified by the spikes of the saint's halo and the flame-like emanations from the figure on the right. The bodiless winged heads are an intriguing touch of fantasy and the supernatural.

THE END
The gateway to the church enclosure has an archway flanked by double pilasters with square panels of relief. The walls of the enclosure ripple upwards to meet the tall espadaña which, topped by a broken pediment, surmounts the gateway.

16. Umán Cathedral. 16th century.
From southwest.
The Cathedral of Umán, a small town in the Yucatán Peninsula, was never completed. The tiny turrets lend a martial air, contrasting with the elegance of the large Renaissance dome. The severity of the façade is relieved by the series of pointed Gothic arches at the entrance and by pilasters in low relief. Gothic buttresses line the sides of the nave. The transept has an espadaña, an ornamental extension of the façade.

17. Umán Cathedral. Interior, looking toward altar.
The use of flat pilasters and simple cornices is continued in the interior. Round-topped windows in the dome provide light, and the lower portion of the dome is tiled.
The cathedral was originally intended to rival that of Mérida, capital of Yucatán. Many of the important towns of the colonial period have become backwaters since. Umán was once important enough to merit a cathedral, but now it is a small, sleepy town, with children playing football in the dusty churchyard.

18. Tula. Augustinian Church. 16th century.
Interior, looking toward altar.
The Augustinian church at Tula is another of the early fortress-types. The interior is very plain, with rather lovely Gothic rib-vaulting and a decorative application of ribbed pilasters. A niche on the left is framed by a classical arch with a pediment, set on a high base.

San Salvador is a sturdy, rectangular little country church. Its doorway is flanked by columns with twisted patterns and high pointed caps, and its flat roof-line is surmounted in front by a curving espadaña.
An espadaña, derived from the Spanish word espadar, 'to spread the tail feathers,' is an ornamental extension of the façade above the roof line. Similar to the decorative gable used to mask peaked roofs in medieval European buildings, the espadaña was frequently employed in colonial architecture to provide a low, squat building with height and dignity. It was usually decorated to harmonize with the rest of the façade, and frequently held bells or statues. The example on this church, incongruously small and delicate in detail, has a diminutive arcade, topped by small turrets echoing the conical caps of the pilasters below.
The bell tower is probably a later addition. Construction of colonial churches often extended over a long period, due to earthquake damage or general delay, and one building often exhibits several architectural styles.

Exterior from court.
The colonial cathedral, embodying the authority both of the Church and of the Mother Country, stood in the main plaza of a town, the center of community life. An imposing and substantial structure, the cathedral was built of stone or brick, and often sat upon a stepped platform above the level of the plaza. A wide atrium, or open court, before the cathedral served as a stage for ceremonies and processions, with the façade of the building, often lavishly decorated, as a backdrop.
The cathedral at Cuernavaca, as an early example, has a rather plain façade, although it is topped by an espadaña, and the building is equipped with the crenellations typical of the fortress-church. Like other early cathedrals, it has only one tower; two were customary in later centuries.

The upper portion of the tower is elaborately decorated. The two stories below the belfry are separated by a cornice whose projections and recurrences reflect the grouping of pilasters. The arch in the center of each side is flanked by flat pilasters in pairs; between each pair of pilasters is a statue in a shell-arched niche. The pilasters are carved with Plateresque designs and topped by Corinthian capitals. Finials cap the upper edge of the cornice at the corners.