A HISTORY OF MEXICAN ART

COLONIAL ART OF THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

BY ROBERT C. MACLAURIN AND KATHARINE B. MACLAURIN

BUDEK FILMS & SLIDES
73 Pelham St.
Newport, RI 02840
INTRODUCTION

The Baroque and Churriguere-esque styles were in vogue during the 17th and 18th centuries. Buildings continued to be rectangular and rather low, as a precaution against earthquake damage; the oval and circular plans of the European Baroque were not practicable. However, the Baroque interest in manipulating space and mass, light and shadow, was shown in decorative detail and frequently in the arrangement of the façade as a whole. Towers were often set at an angle, or the façade was broken into a number of planes that curve inward or outward from the portal. Many European motifs were used, such as the dome, the scroll and volute, the broken pediment, rustication, and clustered columns. The decorative use of tiles was a distinctive feature of the Mexican Baroque, as was the fashion of dividing columns and pilasters into segments and giving each segment a different decorative treatment. Façades were often extended vertically for an effect of greater height and dignity. Ornamentation was frequently limited to the façade, the adjoining wall space providing an effective contrast by its plainness.

In the ultra-Baroque style known as Churriguere-esque, decorative treatment became increasingly lavish, and new motifs were introduced, such as the lambrequin, the twisted column, the vase or urn, and the inverted obelisk. The vertical aspect was stressed by the use of motifs tapering downwards, sometimes combined, in extreme examples, to give the effect of a stalactitic mass.
1. Mexico City, Metropolitan Cathedral.  
1563–1667 and later.  
Exterior from southwest.

The Metropolitan Cathedral stands on the north side of the Zócalo, a vast plaza on the main Aztec temple complex. On the order of Cortés, all the pagan temples were destroyed and their stones used to fill in canals and to build colonial structures. It is believed that the cathedral foundation consists entirely of sculptured Aztec blocks.

The cathedral, designed by Claudio de Arciniega, is a majestic structure of basalt and gray sandstone. Its construction stretched over several centuries, and the building is a harmonious blend of many styles. The back door is done in the severe style known as Herreriano, while the façade, decorated with a number of classical motifs, is predominantly Baroque, with a series of massive volutes protruding from the cornice, and twisted columns in pairs above the two smaller entrances.

2. Mexico City, Metropolitan Cathedral.  
Detail of East Tower from southwest.

Early plans for the cathedral probably included four towers, one for each corner, but of these only two were built, completed in 1793. The imposing bell-shaped tops are the work of José Damián Ortiz de Castro, a native of Coatepec, Veracruz. The towers were constructed to accommodate a number of bells of various sizes. Church bells played an important part in colonial life. Heard over great distances, the bells were rung not only to mark the hour and summon the faithful to worship, but also to announce disasters – such as fires, earthquakes, or the approach of an enemy – and joyful events such as a victory or a fiesta. Bells were made of precious metals, often containing a good deal of silver or even gold; they were named and usually dated, and the community took pride in the beauty and clarity of their tones. The largest bell in the Cathedral of Mexico is called Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe). Weighing over 12,000 pounds, the bell was cast in Tacubaya by a Castilian in 1782.

3. Mexico City, Metropolitan Cathedral.  
Interior. Nave looking toward Altar.

The interior is divided into three aisles. The nave and transepts are covered with intersecting barrel vaulting, while the side aisles are roofed with groined vaults giving the effect of shallow domes. The arcading of the nave is somewhat severe but Baroque in the scale of the tall ribbed pilasters stretching from the floor to the base of the vaulting.

The church is furnished in an exotic blend of the styles which flourished during the colonial period. There are paintings attributed to Murillo and Zurbarán, statues carved by Indians, and ecclesiastical trappings from the East. The famous Altar de los Reyes (Altar of the Kings) by Jerónimo de Balbás of Seville, dating from the 18th century, shows the Churrigueresque style at its height and contrasts with the somber simplicity of some of the chapels lining the side aisles.

4. Mexico City, Metropolitan Cathedral.  
View into Dome.

Above the crossing of nave and transept is an octagonal dome, pierced by a rectangular window on each side and a circular one at the top. The rectangular windows are framed by classical pilasters, while the circular opening has a curly Baroque ruffle. The ceiling is decorated with frescoes.

The dome was often used in colonial churches, even on relatively small and unimportant ones.

5. Mexico City, Metropolitan Cathedral.  
West Aisle from south.

Here the groined vaulting is seen above a side aisle. This type of domical vaulting is frequently found in colonial structures.

Like the nave, the aisles are lined with ribbed, two-storied pilasters of the Doric order. A touch of Baroque splendor is lent by the sculptures and curving balconies.


In plan, the Puebla Cathedral resembles the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City, and it is possible that Claudio de Arciniega was connected with its design. It, too, was originally intended to have four towers, but only two were built, one dating from 1678 and the other completed a century later. The façade,
which dates from about 1664, is coldly academic, but later additions to the building enriched it with Baroque characteristics such as finials and protruding scrolls. The dome, a sliver of which is seen here, is covered with tiles. Puebla was the center of the tile industry.

   Exterior from northwest.
   The decorative use of tiles was an Oriental fashion acquired by Spain from the Moors and transplanted by the Spaniards to Mexico. Tile work became especially popular in the Mexican Baroque, and the jewel-like effects of tiles glittering in the sun are often seen in buildings dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. Tiles were frequently used to set off portions of a structure such as a dome or tower; here, however, they cover the entire wall surface of the building.
   The flat roof line is enlivened by finials, and a rippling stone projection gives the effect of pendant garlands. The pilasters decorating the corners of the second story taper toward the bottom in the form of an estipite (inverted obelisk), a favorite motif of the Mexican Churrigueresque.

   Exterior from northwest, detail.
   The squat, rectangular building is transformed by the lacy patterns of blue and white tiles.
   Blue was a favorite color for tiles (the Spanish word for tile, azulejo, contains the word for blue), but other colors were used as well, in keeping with the Indian love of color.

   Interior. Court.
   Originally the town house of the Count of the Valle de Orizaba, the House of Tiles now includes a department store and a Sanborn's Restaurant in the main patio. Tilework, lacy stone mouldings, and delicately carved columns decorate the interior. The pointed tops of the second-floor windows have a faint Moorish flavor, reminiscent of pointed arches and entrances in Muslim architecture.

    Rebuilt 1602 and 1739.
    The church is domed, with two towers flank-
The statuary and reliefs, which are in surprisingly good condition, are very expressive. The relief seen here surmounts the portal. Above are the delicately carved fantasies of the cornice and the bases of the columns on the second tier. These column-bases are carved with the suggestion of a grimacing mask, Pre-Columbian in spirit.

1694–1870. West Façade.
The National Palace, lying the east side of the Zócalo, stands on the site of Montezuma’s palace. The first edition, built by Cortés, was so badly damaged in the Indian riots of 1692 that it had to be almost completely rebuilt. In its present form the building dates chiefly from 1694, although numerous additions were made under Maximilian in 1870, and the third story was added in 1927.
The palace is built in a restrained colonial Baroque style. The exterior is faced with tezontle, a red volcanic stone which was frequently used in colonial buildings to contrast with and set off elaborate stone- and stucco work.

West Façade. Main Portal.
The central portal is impressively ornamented with sculptured crests. A bell is suspended from a shell shaped niche, and the curving gable above has a profusion of sculpture enclosing an oval medallion.
Each of the three main entrances leads to a lofty patio, or court.

Main Court from east.
The main court has three stories of arcading. Cornices and flat pilasters provide sparing decoration, the vertical lines of the pilasters being continued upward by finials.

Rebuilt 1720. From northeast.
The Municipal Palace, on the south side of the Zócalo, occupies the site of the palace of the Aztec commander-in-chief. Built shortly after the Conquest, like the National Palace, it too was damaged by rebellious Indian mobs in 1692 and was rebuilt in 1720. A third floor was added in 1909, along with some exterior decoration in the colonial style. The building now houses the offices of the Federal District.

Arcade, north side.
An arcaded gallery encloses the ground floor. The inner walls of the gallery are decorated with tile representations of state shields. The grilled windows are crowned by ornately curving tops and framed by rusticated pilasters ending in a coil at the bottom. Below each window is a lambrequin set against a carved fringe, both popular Churrigueresque motifs.

Detail of Entrance on north side.
The doorway, fitted with a handsome grille, has a flat arch with an inverted peak. Above the arch is a floral relief, while along the sides of the doorway flat panels suggest pilasters set on bases decorated with fringe and lambrequins.

Detail of Windows on east side.
Like the windows in the arcaded gallery, these have a rusticated frame, curving at the top and finished off in a spiral at the bottom of each side. Sculptured lambrequins and fringe hang below. Pilasters continue from the tops of the window frames to the cornice.

Mexico City is dotted with fine old colonial mansions. Many are now used for commercial purposes, but their façades remain unaltered. This imposing façade has long windows with rusticated stone frames, an espadaña enclosing a crest, and finials along the roof line. Above the main entrance is an ornate relief.

Façade.
The church of Santo Domingo was founded in 1526 as the central headquarters of the Dominican Order in New Spain. The present
structure, dating from 1737, was the finest church in town at the time of its construction. With its stately tower, expressive carvings, and rounded espadañ̄a, Santo Domingo is a good example of the colonial Baroque.

The vaulted interior is lit by windows in the clerestory and octagonal dome. The nave is arceded, with pilasters continuing above the arches to the cornice at the base of the vaulting. Statues on tapering bases ornament the arcading. In the retable, Baroque clusters of columns support classical pediments.

The pilasters on the façade are divided into segments and magnificently carved, with floral patterns on the lower portions and undulating ribs above. These carvings exhibit a Baroque play of light and shadow, but have at the same time peculiarly Mexican flavor and vitality.
The statue between the pilasters stands on a corbeled base sculptured to taper to a point. The inverted cone and obelisk were typical Churrigueresque motifs.

The church of the Third Order was erected by the Franciscans on a large tract surrounded by crenellated walls. This protected area contained other churches and mission buildings as well as flower beds and vegetable gardens tended by Indians.
Completed around the first third of the 18th century, the church was constructed chiefly by Indians. The building is made of a golden-yellow stone, and the flat surfaces are covered with a flowing embossed pattern. The flat pilasters ornamenting the façade stand on high bases and taper at the foot in the form of estipites.

The church is crowned by an octagonal dome. The interior of the dome is modestly ornamented by two moldings, one above the windows and one below, with tapering projections above and below each window.

The simplicity of the interior of the church sets off the magnificent altarpiece, dated 1735. As the altar was the most important part of the church, special care was lavished on it, and in this example the Indian craftsmen allowed their creative imaginations full play. Statues stand in variously shaped niches, some with round tops, some with flat arches, and some with broken pediments. The central niche in the second story is decorated with carved drapery, a favorite Churrigueresque device. The pilasters are divided into elaborately carved segments and tapered in the form of estipites.

A detail reveals the richness and variety of motifs used. The scroll and the volute, typical of the Baroque, occur frequently, embellishing niches and cornices. The human head is another popular motif. Heads decorate the cornices; two are tucked into the folds of the carved drapery; and heads, putti, and busts ending in scrolls ornament the tapering pilasters. Colonial craftsmen often made decorative use of human bodies and faces in places which European artists would have considered inappropriate.

The side entrance of the church, overlooking the garden, has a niche-like porch and a shell-arched portal, a feature often found in colonial buildings. The sides of the porch extend outward at an angle. Above the arched doorway is a figure of the Virgin in a shallow niche, flanked by large panels in relief. The flat pilasters are carved with a leafy pattern.

In this elaborately carved façade, salomonic or twisted columns are used to ornament the niches. The twisted column came into fashion around the mid-17th century in Spanish America. The earliest examples are found in wooden carvings, but the motif was soon used in stonework as well. Twisted columns were often divided into variously ornamented sections and frequently decked with grapes or tropical fruit.
The niches are scalloped and surmounted by carvings, some resembling birds with wings spread. Carved lambrequins hang below the niches. The central window on the second story is framed by pilasters spreading outward at the bottom to create the illusion of a projecting gable or dormer.


The interior of the church has a pagan magnificence produced by an enthusiastic use of gilt. The altar, with its Baroque undulations, culminates in an onion-like dome surmounted by a statue of the Lord with glory literally streaming from Him. A dramatically projecting cornice marks the roof line, with finials drawing the eye upward. The entire interior is decked with gilt garlands and tracery.


The severe façade of the Cortés Hotel is enlivened by Baroque ornamentation above the main entrance, rising above the roof line in a pointed espadaña: the statue is framed by mouldings set in the fanciful curves and undulations of the Baroque. The contrast between the florid lines of the portal and the plainness of the rest of the façade is typical of many colonial buildings.


The Sagrario adjoins the Metropolitan Cathedral but is independent of it, having been established in 1768 to serve the surrounding parish. The church is one of the finest examples of Mexican Churrigueresque. It has elaborate façades on the south and east; the east façade, shown here, is in the shape of an inverted V, and the white stone of the portal makes a pleasant contrast with the side walls of deep rose. The portal section, extending beyond the roof in an espadaña, is lavishly carved with garlands, medallions, statues, finials, and pilasters.


The niche over the entrance is framed by two columns whose middle portions are shaped like oms and topped by a scroll-like pediment. A fancifully shaped moulding encloses the niche, and above this is a section of a round pediment with coffering designs which are repeated along the moulding below. Garlands, human heads, and scrolls decorate the pilasters above, which alternate with lambrequins.

The architect of the church was Lorenzo Rodriguez, a Spaniard, while the chief sculptor was a Pedro Patino Ixtolinque, whose name suggests Indian parentage.


The church of San Cristóbal in faraway Yucatán has another example of the shell portal. Here the lines of the shell radiate from the center of the base line, while in the Chapel of the Third Order the shell is centered from above.

The building replaced an earlier chapel, and one of the bells in the right tower, dated 1591, probably belonged to the previous structure. The rather austere façade is topped by a quaint espadaña and twin towers.


The portal is rather simply ornamented in stucco, with two pilasters rising from urn bases (a Churrigueresque device) and joined above by a moulding. The pilasters and the space above the arch are decorated with tropical fruits and flowers in low relief. The shell motif of the portal is repeated in the openwork of the doors.


Chapultepec Castle was preceded by an Aztec fort and the summer palace of Montezuma II, who lodged his harem there and provided the grounds with a swimming bath, gardens, aviary, and hunting lodge. In the 1870s the Spanish Viceroy obtained permission from the Crown to build a summer house on the site, the earlier buildings having fallen into ruin. This summer house, built in the style of a fortress, was later rebuilt and used for a military college and finally renovated and re-decorated in a Tuscan style to serve as the imperial residence of Maximilian and Carlota.

The west wing faces a garden and tiled swimming pool. The round-topped windows of the lower story are ornamented with a lambrequin-like moulding at the base. The rectangular upper windows have gridded balconies supported by volutes and are outlined by a simple moulding. The portal is rusticated, with a relief above the window.
    Tower in Upper Court of East Wing.

The east wing is U-shaped, its upper story partially enclosing a secluded court. A tower stands in the center of the court, its circular upper stories set on a rectangular base. The decoration is simple and airy. Very flat pilasters adorn the doorways and corners of the ground floor and alternate with windows on the third story. The ground floor is topped by a triglyph frieze and a low balustrade with finials at the corners; a similar balustrade crowns the top story. Statues stand on pedestals in untrimmed niches, and a relief resembling a stylized curtain ornaments the space above each doorway.

    Colonnade Around Upper Court of East Wing.

A colonnaded gallery runs along the upper court. The columns, set on high bases, are of the Doric order. The floor is tiled in black and white. Opening off this gallery were the private apartments of the Imperial couple, sumptuously furnished by Carlota.

40. Mexico City. Chapultepec Castle.
    'Lady with a Fan,' 18th century.
    National Museum of History.

The castle now houses a National Museum of History, with displays of paintings, period furniture, and costumes. This anonymous 18th-century portrait of a 'Lady with a Fan' indicates the extent of Spanish influence in this period. Dressed in lace and heavy brocade, with a dark beauty spot enhancing the whiteness of her skin and a fan clasped loosely in her languid hand, this lady is all Spanish nobility. Women never figured in pre-Columbian art, except as depictions of goddesses, and even if they had been portrayed, they would have borne scant resemblance to this lady.

THE END

Copyright, 1966, by
Herbert E. Budek Films and Slides
Printed in the U.S.A.