



The History of the National Museum of Art in Mexico City



MUSEO NACIONAL DE ARTE
MÉXICO





THE HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART IN MEXICO CITY

By the beginning of the 20 Century, Mexico had set out to modernize itself after almost a hundred years of political and social vicissitudes. The government of General Porfirio Díaz was pointing to peace and progress as the path that led towards the modernity so coveted by the liberal faction. Díaz' long dictatorship enabled him to rebuild the city, breaking with the old Viceregal past and projecting the image of a modern capital in the manner of European metropolises. Government buildings, above all, bore witness to the progress achieved, in accordance with the much touted byword of “less politics and more administration”.

One of the most outstanding exemplars of official architecture in Porfirio Díaz day's was the palace that now houses the National Museum of Art, which was originally designed to house the Ministry of Communications and Public Works, in a show of political stability and economic wellbeing. Set up on the 13th of May, 1891, the said ministry was responsible for national communications –including the postal service and telegraph services, railways, highways, causeways, bridges, canals and seaways– on the understanding that these activities would help connect the center of the country with ports, mining zones and the northern frontier. It was also responsible for carrying out the works, and constructing the buildings, that the new society required.



The land chosen for the project belonged to an old Jesuit seminary that later housed the San Andrés Hospital until the latter was demolished in 1905. The architect in charge of the project was Silvio Contri (1856-1933), an Italian who had arrived in Mexico at the age of 36, attracted by the campaign aimed at encouraging foreign investment and encouraging the assimilation of the European modernist canon into Mexican art.

The palace is in the eclectic style characterized Mexican architecture in the period of Porfirio Díaz, blending features from the Italian-renaissance and from French-classicism. The main facade is in the manner of Louis XIV, with the pronounced recesses and projections which emphasize its height, while the planes and horizontal features of the rear part are Italianate in style.



Contri surrounded himself with a host of specialists, such as the cabinetmaker, Mariano Coppedè (1839-1920), whose Florence-based firm took care of all the decorative details, including the paintings on the soffits, to give the building a palatial look befitting a government ministry and endow the office areas with a more austere dignity.

Both Mexican and foreign firms were in charge of the building and decoration: Milliken Bros. of New York was responsible for the metal framework and the structural materials, while Pignone of Florence supplied the ornamental wrought ironwork; Mexico's Palacio de Hierro supplied the furniture and cabinet work, Arthur Frantzen took care of the lighting and heating, and Officini Meccaniche Stigler of Milan supplied the elevators (of which one is still conserved).



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The architect panned the three floors in order to emulate renaissance palaces. The first level was mainly taken up by the lobby and the flights of stairs, while the second was given over the offices. The reception room, whis is one of the most luxurious parts of the building, is located in the center, adjoining the main facade.



The palace housed the Ministry until the latter was moved in 1954 to Narvarte district of Mexico City, leaving the almost abandoned building in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior. In 1973, it became the home of the National Archive, until the latter was transferred to the erst-while Lecumberri prison in 1982, at which point it was assigned to the Ministry of Education to be used as a national museum of art.

By Presidential Decree, the old Palace of Communications and Public Works was transformed into a National Museum inaugurated on the 23rd of July, 1982. Along these almost 40 years of functions, the museum has acquired-through donations, acquisitions and government instructions-almost 8 thousand artworks with the presence of viceregal, academic and modern masters such as Baltasar de Echave Orio, Luis and José Juárez, Cristóbal de Villalpando, Juan Correa, Miguel Cabrera, José María Velasco, Luis Coto y Maldonado, Casimiro Castro, Leandro Izaguirre, José María Jara, Saturnino Herrán, Joaquín Clausell, Gerardo Murillo, Dr. Atl, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo and José Clemente Orozco, among others.



Through almost 40 years of cultural presence in Mexico and beyond its borders, the National Museum of Art has hosted more than a hundred temporary exhibitions and promoted an intense Project of touring shows in the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia. Amongst the remarkable projects can be mentioned: José Clemente Orozco. 1883-1983 (1983); Hommage to María Izquierdo (1991); Frida Kahlo, the seductive camera (1992); Art déco (1997); Pinxit in Mexico (1999); The Symbolist Mirror (2004); Lights from Spain. Treasures from the Hispanic Society of America (2007); James Ensor (2008); Surrealism (2012); ¡Puro mexicano! (2014); Ideal Territory. José María Velasco (2015); Dr. Atl. Water, Land and Wind (2019); XX en el XXI. The Modern Collection of the National Museum of Art (2019), Jaime Plensa (2020) and Symbol and Kingdom. Three great viceregal collections (2021).

Emblematic educational and academic programs give a most profound reviews of the collections, joining each temporary and touring exhibitions inside and outside the museum.



The National Museum of Art explores the richness of its artworks from the 16 through the 20 centuries that now makes up the most emblematic art collection in the country.



