

MARIO YAÍR T.S.



SECRET MEXICO CITY



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

CASINO METROPOLITANO UPPER FLOOR

8

A miniature Versailles, open on rare occasions

Tacuba 15

Centro Histórico

Open only during the *Feria del Libro de Ocasión* (Second-Hand Book Fair, whose venue may change; various dates between February and March)

Metro: Allende



Although the ground floor of the Casino Metropolitano houses a museum, the upper floor, topped by a spectacular Art Nouveau cupola, is rarely open to the public. The doors are open only occasionally, for art exhibitions or special events, and since 2013 for the Second-Hand Book Fair – the ideal time to check out the building.

The hall at the top of the staircase is decorated with friezes of infants dancing to flutes and violins, or enjoying a feast. The rear section is very plain because it lost much of its ornamentation in 1925, when the site was converted into a gymnasium. The magnificent coffered ceiling is still there, however.

On one side is the *Salón de los Espejos* (Hall of Mirrors), a sumptuously decorated space also known as ‘Pequeño Versailles’ in reference to the Palace of Versailles (France). But perhaps the most beautiful room is the one overlooking the balcony, which can be glimpsed through the glass of the foyer doors. Its lavish decoration includes scarcely discernible tapestries, one depicting a couple painting in a garden, another with young men seducing courtesans. Although not all the furniture is original, it has been chosen to fit in with the period – proof of the good taste of those who restored the splendour of this multi-purpose building, which in addition to the gym has been home to the Aladdin Cinema, the Spanish Republican Centre, a casino and a billiards hall.

Annual guided tour of the Hebrew past of Casino Metropolitano (including two secret rooms)

Once a year, during the Second-Hand Book Fair at Casino Metropolitano, the *Synagoga Historica Justo Sierra* (Justo Sierra Historical Synagogue, at number 71 of the street of that name), in partnership with booksellers, organises a guided tour to discover the building’s Hebrew past.

According to researcher Mónica Unikel-Fasja, in 1925 the casino became a leisure centre for Yiddish-speaking Jews. Ceremonies, festivals and gymnastic classes were held here at the time, and the Hall of Mirrors was a library with books in Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanish, English, Russian and Polish.

These tours are the only chance to see around the whole building, including two secret rooms whose ceilings are covered with frescoes of flying cherubs. There’s also a *Morisco* (Spanish Muslim) living room in the fashion of the 19th century, with complex *ataurique* (stylised plant-themed) designs on the ceiling and walls.

CAPILLA DE LA BIBLIOTECA LERDO DE TEJADA

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The Sistine Chapel of Revolutions

República del Salvador 49

Centro Histórico

(+52) 9158 9837 / 9158 9833

Monday to Friday 9am–5.30pm

For events and exhibitions, see cultural agenda of Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP – Ministry of Finance and Public Credit)

hacienda.gob.mx/cultura/museo_virtual_biblioteca_lerdo/index.htm

Admission free



The former chapel of San Felipe Neri houses the spectacular SHCP library, featuring a huge mural by Russian-Mexican painter Vladimir Rusakov, better known as Vlady.

He and his father, essayist Victor Serge, fled the Stalinist regime and arrived in Mexico in 1941, accompanied by French intellectuals Claude Lévi-Strauss and André Breton.

In 1972, President Luis Echeverría attempted to give a new impetus to Mexican muralism by commissioning work for the Palacio Nacional. Instead, Vlady suggested painting the interior of the Lerdo de Tejada library. Echeverría agreed, and gave him carte blanche for the entire space to depict the various revolutions throughout history. Vlady named his fresco *La Revolución y sus elementos*, affectionately referring to it as ‘The Sistine Chapel of Revolutions’. The work was carried out between 1974 and 1982.

Part of the mural is inside the library chapel and the gallery, which are closed most of the time. To visit, just ask permission at the visitors’ desk or security.

The chapel that was never used

The chapel of San Felipe Neri encountered many difficulties and was never used for worship. The Marquise de Villa del Villar and Don Pedro Romero de Terreros, whose houses still stand nearby, were opposed to the construction. When it was completed, the congregation preferred La Profesa church, and the chapel was abandoned.

In 1875, Porfirio Macedo opened the Teatro Arbreu – the first theatre to be lit by hydrogen lamps – in the chapel. Anna Pavlova and Enrico Caruso performed there. Blakamán, a magician-hypnotist from Peru, is said to have left a crocodile in the basement after presenting a wild animal show. The staff found it dead and made belts and wallets from its skin. The last artist to perform at the theatre was an illusionist called Cleopatra.

‘Governor Juan José Baz’s Collection of Prostitutes’

While the library’s archives include newspapers from the 18th century to the present day, the collection of books is still more impressive, with works by Vitruvius, Newton, Athanasius Kircher and Carlos de Singüenza y Góngora.

There is even a photograph album entitled *Collección de prostitutas del gobernador Juan José Baz*, based on a 19th century census of prostitutes.

On presentation of an ID you can consult this heritage, but for the oldest works further authorisation is required.

MURALS OF THE SUPREMA CORTE³⁷ DE JUSTICIA DE LA NACIÓN (SCJN)

A heartfelt plea for justice inside the Supreme Court

Pino Suárez 2

Colonia Centro

(+52) 4113 1100, Ext. 5810, 5811, 5820

scjn.gob.mx

Information on guided tours by email: visitas@mail.scjn.gob.mx

Monday to Thursday 9am–5pm, Friday 9am–4pm

Admission free (ID required)

Site visit includes free audio guide

Metro: Zócalo



The SCJN (Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation) is generally thought to be closed to the public. But visitors are in fact welcome and a free audio guide is available. Guided tours and admissions to the plenary sessions of the SCJN are also organised. It's worth a visit to see such features as the so-called *escalera de los ministros* (staircase of the ministers) with its spectacular mural *La historia de la Justicia en México* (The History of Justice in Mexico) by Rafael Cauduro.

The mural, which has seven panels, illustrates seven new sins and crimes associated with the judicial system: corruption, torture to obtain a statement, homicide, rape, kidnapping, incarceration and repression. On the upper windows are a series of 'angels', who turn out to be riot police intimidating people. The chillingly hyper-realistic style, brutally denounces the excesses in this vision of Mexico.

The mural project was approved by ministers in 2006 ... surprisingly, because the discussion of such matters was taboo in Mexico until the year 2000, when the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI – Institutional Revolutionary Party) lost the elections after 70 uninterrupted years in power.

The guided tours, along with social statements like this mural, are just a tiny indication of the slow change that has begun within the complex machinery of justice.



There is another impressive hyper-realist mural (dating from 2010) on the third floor of the SCJN: *Caminos de palabras y silencios, de hombres y mujeres, de recuerdos y de olvidos* (Paths of Words and Silences, of Men and Women, of Memories and Forgetfulness) by Santiago Carbonell. Look out for the huge faces representing the tough personality of the north of the country and the mystery of the south.

As well as the Carbonell and Cauduro murals, the SCJN has four by José Clemente Orozco. At various points around the premises you can also see works by George Biddle, Héctor Cruz, Carlos Bracho, Ernesto Tamariz, Luis Nishizawa, Ismael Ramos and Leopoldo Flores. You just have to search through the labyrinthine corridors to find them.

OPTICAL ILLUSION IN PLAZA RUFINO TAMAYO

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Deceptive perspective

*Avenida Insurgentes Sur, between Copilco and San Jerónimo on Eje 10 Sur
Metrobus: Dr Gálvez*



Plaza Rufino Tamayo, named after the famous painter from Oaxaca, was built in 1990. The architects, Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabludovsky, have created a striking optical illusion that plays on perspective. You can see it from a bridge, on a slope facing the plaza: just look towards the fountain and its seven arches, which give the plaza a deceptive depth.

On the base of the fountain is a mosaic reproduction of a Tamayo watercolour initially painted as a backdrop for a London ballet company. This painting maintains the illusion because it follows the lines of the architecture.

In 1991, the plaza won an International Honorary Mention at the IXth Pan-American Architecture Biennial in Quito (Ecuador), even though it hadn't been planned for the occasion.

According to the Biennial catalogue, the plaza has four distinct features: the foliage-covered embankment, a background in perfect harmony with the magnificent Panteón de Atizapán woods just behind; the pergola, which provides a winding walk of light and shade leading to a little fountain; the series of square garden bench/planters, filled with flowering plants; and the monumental fountain with seven independent arches that create the optical illusion.

At the plaza's opening ceremony, water cascaded over the mosaics and ran down through the seven arches to a mirror of water in the centre, creating the illusion that it was flowing along a horizontal surface. The plants bore yellow, orange, red and mauve flowers – the colours Tamayo always used in his paintings. Lack of maintenance has led to the disappearance of the water feature, not to mention the flowers.



HAND-CRANKED CAR

13

A life-size piece of nostalgia

Junction of Guadalajara and Veracruz

Colonia Condesa

Metro: Chapultepec



A car parked at the junction of Guadalajara and Veracruz, fitted with a huge key, looks like one of those old metal wind-up toys.

If you look through the window, you'll see that the driver and the car fittings are actually made from brass. The steering wheel is labelled *Chevrolet D.F. y Condesa*, indicating that the car belongs to the hotel of that name, on the same corner.

The 1949 Chevrolet is a work by Mexican visual artist Betsabé Romero, who made it for the Hotel Condesa in 2005. At the time, Agustín Lara's song *Veracruz* rang out when the key was turned.

In 2009, when the car was shown at the *A Vuelta de Rueda* (At Snail's Pace) exhibition, it was nicknamed 'el carrito de cuerda' ('the hand-cranked car') but unfortunately the song no longer played.

The exhibition involved the artistic transformation of various cars, each on a different theme: history, religion, migration, the environment, etc.

This *carrito* alludes to cars seen as playthings by humans, and recalls the time when they became fashionable in Colonia Condesa, in the 1940s. Romero took six months to complete his work, which he called *Memoria de hojalata* (Tin Memory), like a life-size piece of nostalgia.



NEARBY

Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca

(+52) 5286 8339 / 5211 4999

fapecft.org.mx

fapec@fapecft.org.mx

The magnificent and imposing residence at 104 Guadalajara is home to the Plutarco Elías Calles and Fernando Torreblanca Archives Trust. Built in 1922, it was the home of Hortensia Elías Calles (daughter of former President Plutarco Elías Calles: see p. 21) and her husband, Fernando Torreblanca. In 1986, Hortensia donated the archives that told the story of her controversial father, together with the house, as a valuable historical testament. Visitors are only received by appointment after writing to explain why they would like to visit.

MONUMENT TO DRAINAGE PIPES ⑩

Commemorating the hydro engineers

*Junction of Avenida Luis Espinoza with Benito Juárez
Colonia Solidaridad, Delegación Gustavo A. Madero
RTP bus: route 103; Metro: La Raza – Ampliación Malacates*



To the north of the city, on land between the Tenayo and Chiquihuite mountains owned by the Centro de Estudios Tecnológicos Industrial y de Servicios (Centre for Technical, Industrial and Service Studies / CETIS), strange concrete towers support large metal plates gleaming against the sky. Although the site is off-limits to visitors, the towers can be seen in the distance.

When CETIS opened in 1998, the towers – the highest 30 metres and the lowest 13 metres – were already known as La Lumbreira (The Drainage Pipe). Before CETIS, the site was an outpost of the Deep Drainage System (see box), used for repairing water tankers. The employees founded a museum with descriptions and photographs of Mexico's hydro-engineering system. Sculptor Ángeles Gurría won a competition to design a commemorative monument, which was built between 1974 and 1975. The museum closed in 1997 and the building was handed over to CETIS, which has kept the monument.



What are 'lumbreras'?

Lumbreras are a series of gigantic water pipes built around Mexico City, designed to drain away and recover rainwater to prevent flooding. They can lower the water level by as much as 45 metres. One of these pipes is just across the street.

MODEL OF LA VILLA

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Monte Tepeyac in miniature, as it was in 1949

Plaza de las Américas 1
Ofrenda de las Flores shopping centre
Villa de Guadalupe
Daily 9am–6pm
Metro: La Villa



To the right of the sculptural group *La Ofrenda* in Villa de Guadalupe, at the end, is an arcaded shopping centre. At the rear of one of the shops is a door with a sign inviting you to come in and see *la maqueta* (the model).

Inside, you're confronted with a spectacular model that faithfully reproduces Monte Tepeyac and its surroundings as they were in 1949.

A plaque explains that the model was designed by engineer Manuel Calderón Leonardo Lemus in 1949, hence the innumerable contemporary details. Comparing the model to the present day, some changes are obvious: a public park on the site of today's Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe; a neocolonial market in the plaza where the Carrillón Guadalupano (the huge stone cross with bells that ring every hour) stands today; houses and entire neighbourhoods built on the steps leading to the shrine, and so on. You can also see the market stalls near the old basilica and the fountains and sculptures that were demolished to make way for Plaza de las Américas.

The model is so detailed that each individual tombstone in La Villa cemetery is shown at the top of the hill. Tiny trucks run through the streets that are now reserved for pilgrims on foot. The little houses that used to stand around Capilla del Pocito can now only be seen in the model.

Alongside this delightful miniature world are glass cases containing popular reproductions of the *Virgen Morena* (Brown Virgin, in her darker-skinned Mexican incarnation) made from seashells, wax, wood, carved stone, paper, seeds, palm leaves, and even a hologram.

Although the history of *la maqueta* is unknown, it was fortunately completed just three years before the Plaza de las Américas was built, when the hill and its surroundings became a shrine and lost its village atmosphere.

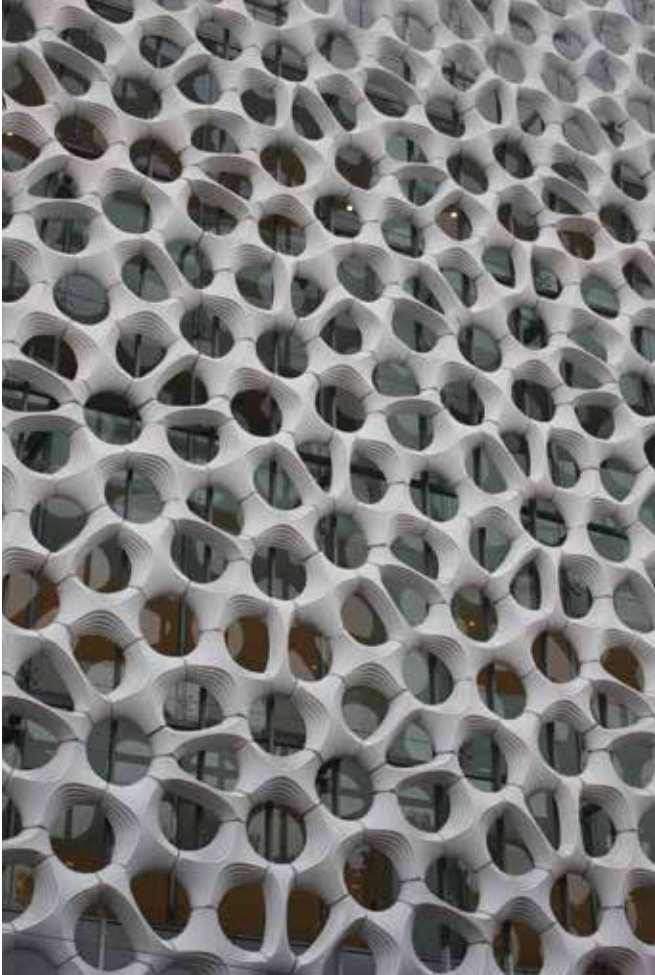
The shopping centre where the model is located was built in 1984 by the Tepeyac Trust. Past presidents and historical figures are depicted on the columns, along with anecdotes about their connection with Our Lady of Guadalupe. These include the moment when Agustín de Iturbide (Augustine of Mexico) passed the baton of the Imperial Order of Guadalupe to the Virgin, the official pilgrimage of President Ignacio Comonfort, and the day when President Ruiz Cortines gave a crown to the Virgin.

FAÇADE OF HOSPITAL MIGUEL GEA

15

The world's first building faced with a material that absorbs city smog

*Calzada de Tlalpan 4800
Colonia Sección XVI
Metrobus: El Caminero*



At first glance, the enormous white coral-like design on the façade of Miguel Gea González Hospital seems to be simply decorative. Actually it's a smart filter that converts smog into other chemical components. This is the first site in the world to be equipped with this system, which was installed in 2012.

The material used, called 'Prosolve370e', is a type of ceramic coated with titanium dioxide that reacts to ultraviolet light: the blocks absorb nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compounds, and convert them into tiny amounts of water and carbon dioxide.

When Mexico City was declared the world's most polluted metropolis in 2005, a number of public policies were developed to deal with the problem. Since then, Mexico's position on the list has improved, albeit slowly.

As the hospital was opened in 1946 specifically for patients with advanced tuberculosis – a disease made worse by pollution – the coral-like material was installed here.

Although the process by which titanium dioxide works is questioned in the scientific world, it's part of a new direction in the fight against pollution.

The material was invented by the German company Elegant Embellishments and the façade consists of 500 separate blocks, covering a total area of 2,500 square metres. Currently, cells made from this same material have been installed on a smaller scale on buildings in Australia, the United Arab Emirates and Germany.

The structure covering the hospital can neutralise the pollution produced by 1,000 vehicles a day.

MILPA ALTA STATUES

32

Monuments to Death and to shamans who turn into animals

Avenida José López Portillo / Sur del Comercio

RTP bus: route 148 or 141 (destination San Antonio Tecómitl); Tasqueña metro exit



Some of the 13 works created in 2009 by Salvador Jaramillo for Milpa Alta – the *delegación* with the greatest number of indigenous peoples in the city – stand along a sculpture walk that bears witness to the mythical past of its original inhabitants.

In addition to the statues of the *Pulquero* (maker of *pulque*, a Mexican liquor), the *Nopalera*, a woman cooking *mole* (the ultimate *ranchero* dish) and historical figures such as Luz Jiménez (see below), the two most impressive pieces are those on Paseo López Portillo: *La Muerte* (Death) and *El Nahual* (Spirit).

La Muerte, half-woman, half-corpse, is shown seated, wearing a cloak and extending a welcome to the slope that leads to Tecómitl, one of the 12 indigenous villages of Milpa Alta, gateway to the famous Mixquic where there is an altar dedicated to Miclantecuhtli, Aztec god of the dead.

A little further along is *El Nahual* – according to indigenous beliefs, *nahualism* is the ability of some humans to turn into animals or natural elements, or to practise witchcraft. It's said that from birth everyone possesses the spirit of an animal responsible for protecting and guiding them throughout their life. These spirits generally manifest themselves in a dream or as an affinity with the guardian animal. Some Mesoamerican witch doctors and shamans could create such a strong link with their *nahuales* that they took on attributes such as a sparrowhawk's sight, a wolf's sense of smell or an ocelot's hearing. It's even said that some can take the form of an animal (therianthropy) for purposes that are not always benevolent.

Doña Luz Jiménez: local woman and artists' model

Doña Luz Jiménez, from Milpa Alta, was forced to flee after the massacre of her family on 15 October 1916. As a way out of poverty, she applied for a job vacancy at the Academia de Artes de San Carlos. When she asked what the job involved, she was told that all she had to do was to keep quiet, and so she became one of the first Mexican indigenous models. Painted by artists such as Siqueiros, Orozco, Tamayo, Rivera, Modotti, Fernando Leal and Jean Charlot, she fought prejudice by posing nude. As a Nahuatl speaker, she also collaborated with anthropologists and linguists such as Benjamin Lee Whorf and Stanley S. Newman, and told traditional stories for a book published by *indigenismo* (local culture) promoter Anita Brenner. Jiménez was knocked down and killed by a car in 1965, and is buried in the Iztapalapa district of the city.

MARIO YAÍR T.S.

SECRET

MEXICO CITY



The forgotten café where Fidel Castro and Che Guevara used to meet, a tribute to the city's ghosts, a mammoth in the metro, a cave transformed into a shrine, an underground parking lot with mosaics dating from 1930, a Baroque altarpiece made from papier mâché, a village based on the principles of Thomas More's Utopia, secret masterpieces of colonial art in rooms only open around two hours a week, the largest roof garden in Latin America, the photo on which the Oscar statuette is modelled, the first building in the world faced with a material that can trap urban smog, a road surface designed for praying as you walk ...

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, Mexico City is filled with hidden treasures revealed only to the residents and visitors who leave the beaten path.

An indispensable guide for those who thought they knew the city well or who would like to discover its many other facets.

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