



# Chihuahua's Colonial Missions An Invaluable Patrimony

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When people talk about Mexico's colonial, artistic and cultural patrimony, states like Puebla, Querétaro, Michoacán, Jalisco or, more to the north, Zacatecas usually come to mind. You could mention all the states of the republic and the last name might very well be Chihuahua since it has always been classified as poor in historical patrimony. This does not

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take into account, however, the fact that the colonial legacy there was formed under less favorable circumstances: a vast stretch of desert to the north; broad central plains bordered diagonally on the southwest by the Western Sierra Madre, known as the Tarahumara Mountains, that take time and patience to reach; an extreme climate with temperatures from minus cero degrees to 46 degrees Centigrade; and little water. It was far from the capital of New Spain, far from artistic centers and skilled workmen; this meant that master sculptors, painters and architects living in the beautiful, creative cities of

Central Mexico hesitated to exchange their comforts for cold, sober towns where just getting food took twice the effort. These factors, among others, make the Chihuahua colonial legacy invaluable and incomparable.

During colonial times, Franciscan, Jesuit, Dominican and diocesan priests were sent to the North —what is now the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico— to spread the Gospel to the local population by building churches and creating societies around them. This was a way to expand Spanish domination, which was developing as mines and lands conducive to these settlements were discovered. This system of conquest —to call it that— was the mission. Although the founding ordinances were the same throughout New Spain, differences in the settlement and the development of trades are noteworthy, depending on the order the missionaries belonged to and the specific characteristics of the ethnic group converted. For example, Tomás de Guadalajara and José Tardá wrote in their 1675 report about how difficult it was for the Raramuri, or Tarahumara, to congregate in

towns: “We tried to limit them to one site and a church, although they are disseminated along seven or eight leagues.”<sup>1</sup> This description continues to be valid 300 years later. The missions were organized into what were called *partidos*, or districts, each with a *cabecera*, or main church, and between three and five *visitas*, or dependent churches.

Chihuahua’s mission system began to be built after the discovery of two mines: the Santa Bárbara Mine, found in 1567 in the southwestern part of the state, from where a few decades later Juan de Oñate would leave to found New Mexico; and the Chínipas Mine, whose main vein was discovered in 1589 by explorers crossing the Sinaloa mountains as they left Culiacán. The first missions were established by the followers of Saint Francis of Assisi in the Santa Bárbara region; they created important settlements of colonists in the San Bartolomé Valley (or Allende Valley) and San José del Parral. The Franciscans founded missions on the plains and inland all along the royal highway that led to

Maribel Portela

reveals to us a world she is a part of,  
the world of gatherers of dreams and objects.





Santa Fe; the Company of Jesus built others on the Western Sierra Madre, divided into three regions: the Lower or Old Tarahumara, the High or New Tarahumara and Chínipas, which was actually part of the Sinaloa and Sonora Province. The first Jesuit settlement in San Pablo de Tepehuanes (Balleza) dates from 1607. Although innumerable Tarahumara, Tepehuan, Pima and Guarojío rebellions destroyed the fruits of their labor, sometimes postponing the establishment of missions for between 10 and 20 years after they arrived to a site, it can be said that, starting with San Pablo, they set up missions and contacts throughout the mountain foothills, all the way to the well-known Babícora and later into the interior. Other “black-robed ones” came through the Sonora mountains to work in the Chínipas region.

Over a period of 160 years, the Jesuits founded more than 100 missions throughout this region, until they were expelled in 1767 after becoming a veritable threat for the Spanish Crown’s economy and organization given their effective self-sufficient system and the fact that they obeyed only the Pope and not the king. Most of their missions were taken over by the Franciscans from the College of Guadalupe in

Zacatecas or the Texas missions, and others were secularized by the archbishop of Durango.

Even with all the difficulties that this region presented to the missionaries, 168 missions were eventually founded in what is today Chihuahua, the largest number in a single state, be it in Mexico or what is now the United States. Many of these missions are now county seats; others remained small towns and hamlets inhabited by indigenous or mestizos, and, in some cases, both together sharing a single church. The mission continues to be the main meeting place where religious and social traditions are upheld, such as during Easter Week, when the *matachines* dance or when the *sirime*, or governor, calls the people together, or like on Sunday when, even without a priest, the mestizos or Tarahumaras go in and out of the church, congregating finally in the atrium. This means that the missions not only have historic and artistic importance, but are also a living cultural patrimony.

Their architecture is appropriate to the climate and the materials available in the region; for example, on the plains and in the foothills, the constructions are made of adobe; in the mountains, they are made of stone with roofs



covered in shingles or carved out, canoe-shaped tree trunks, now replaced by metal sheeting; and in the canyons, it is common to find walls and vaults made of fired brick because of the abundance of red clay. In the missions built near mines, or those that were designated district headquarters, the construction system is more complex, with richly decorated walls, altar pieces, sculptures and paintings. However, all of them have works that have been done by either skilled, guild artisans or workmen that can be classified in different categories according to their visual characteristics and the techniques used in their manufacture: from those that imitate Spanish art to the simplest work for which the artist's only aim was the creation of an image to worship and not its aesthetic quality.

Unfortunately, for many decades the missions were threatened by the lack of security measures, which fostered pilfering, the lack of awareness of the value of the historic, cultural and artistic patrimony, a lack of communication among government institutions, priests and communities. All of this caused inappropriate action to be taken, even if with the best intentions. For this reason, in January 2001, Chihuahua businessmen created the Chihuahua Colonial

Missions Civic Association to further an integral project called "A Mission for Chihuahua: Its Colonial Missions" with the continual, active collaboration of the state government, the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the Catholic Church, local communities, educational institutions and national and international associations such as the Smithsonian Institution and the Mexico-North Research and Education Network.

The project's objective is to create security, promote research and disseminate information about the missions, as well as to restore and preserve both the buildings and other patrimony of these colonial churches. The main interest is to give the communities the tools and know-how they need through practical workshops. The idea is to reclaim traditional building techniques, teach an appreciation and respect for this patrimony and offer a new economic alternative by fostering rural tourism routes.

Part of the integral project is made up of two specific research and conservation projects. The first is "Imaginería de Las Californias" (Sculpture of the Californias), sponsored by the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education; its aim is to determine the origin of

the colonial sculptures found in the missions of the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico through chemical and technical analysis of the materials they are made of, to establish the similarities and differences with the visual classification done of the sculptures in Chihuahua. This study will contribute valuable information about anonymous viceregal sculpture and artistic techniques in the colonial period, as well as significant data about the development of the mission system in this entire region.

The second project is "A Mission for Chihuahua: The Santa María de Cuevas Mission." Two hours away from the city of Chihuahua, this mission has a beautiful, multicolored tongue and groove ceiling dating from 1700; unique in northern Mexico, it has eight Marian symbols in the center surrounded by a wealth of mirror-like sprays of flowers, as well as a figurative mural. Thanks to a grant from the J. Paul Getty Foundation, a year from now another study will be

carried out to determine the painting's state of conservation and analyze the materials it is made of as well as archaeological samples to establish restoration criteria and processes. This project also received a grant for preventive work from Mexico's National Council of the Arts Fund for the Restoration of Monuments and Art Works.

The establishment of Chihuahua's mission system took great effort on the part of missionaries and indigenous peoples of the region; undoubtedly, the same effort will be required to preserve it. For this to happen, we all need to be aware that our cultural patrimony is not only a testimony of the past, but also a factor for present and future development.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Luis González Rodríguez, *Tarahumara. La sierra y el hombre* (Chihuahua, Chihuahua: Editorial Camino, 1994).

#### FURTHER READING

