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ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEXICO

by

Elsa Barberena B.

The National University of Mexico commemorated on the 30th of November 1967 the first one hundred years of the National Library of Mexico. The Minister of Public Education, Lic. Agustín Yáñez, representing the President of the Republic; the Director of the National University, Javier Barros Sierra; the poet Rubén Bonifaz Nuño; the Director of the National Library of Mexico, Lic. Ernesto de la Torre Villar, and other personalities were present. It was a ceremony similar to the solemn inauguration on April 2nd, 1884, when the President, General Manuel González, accompanied by members of his Cabinet, was received with due honors in the vast and elegant reading room. The inauguration was made possible by Benito Juárez's presidential decree of the 30th of November 1867 which created the National Library. The poet Guillermo Prieto, ambassadors from England, the United States, France and Italy, artists, writers and newspapermen were among the audience.

All these people were gathered to commemorate the struggles of the past which had brought about the creation of this permanent deposit of all human knowledge as José María Vigil, Director of the Library, 1880-1909, points out — the most precious legacy of past generations that must be transmitted by the present generation to enrich the future civilization in order to continue the infinite chain that forms the solidarity of human knowledge.

There were four attempts to create the National Library. In 1833 Dr. José María Luis Mora during Valentín Gómez Farías regime was the first to conceive the idea of establishing a National Library in the City of Mexico with Manuel Eduardo de Gorostiza, a distinguished dramatist, as Director. In 1846 there was a second attempt, and the decree published on December 1st, 1846, states that "the Capital of the Republic urgently needed the establishment of a library which would honor its culture." The proposition of Judge José Fernando

Ramírez of exchanging his property and his library for a librarian appointment to organize the National Library was not taken into consideration. Ignacio Comonfort, while substitute President of the Republic, issued a new decree on November 30th, 1856, trying once more to create the National Library. Judge José Fernando Ramírez was appointed Director in 1857. The collection of the Library was organized, but there was no building for it. The number of volumes gathered in the University and which formed the National Library were as follows:

From Santo Domingo convent	6,871 volumes
From La Profesa	5,020 volumes
From La Merced	3,071 volumes
From San Pablo	1,702 volumes
From San Agustín	6,744 volumes
From San Francisco	16,417 volumes
From San Diego	8,273 volumes
From San Fernando	9,500 volumes
From El Carmen convents	18,111 volumes
From Porta Coeli	1,431 volumes
From Aranzazu	1,190 volumes
From the Department of Fomento	832 volumes
From the Department of Foreign Relations	435 volumes
From the Department of Justice	715 volumes
From the University	10,652 volumes
Total	90,964 volumes

(The monastic orders were suppressed by the Republic and their belongings had been confiscated by the government in 1833.)

After these attempts, a decree was given by President Benito Juárez creating the National Library. The Secretary of Justice and Public Instruction, Judge Antonio Martínez de Castro, appointed José María Lafragua as Director, Dr. José María Benítez as Librarian, and selected the ancient church of San Agustín for the Library site.

The building was not suitable because of the lack of good light and ventilation and its being exceedingly cold during the winter.

The old church of Augustinian monks (1541) had the form of a Latin cross. There were twelve chapels and two transepts at each side of the central arch. The central nave including the choir was 64 meters long and 12.21 meters wide. The height of the keystone of the arches was 24.14 meters. The vault which covered the cross was cannon shaped by six arches. On the transept there was a cupola 35.22 meters high and 13.40 meters wide without considering the lantern. The style

of the church was the one originated in Lombardy between the end of the VI century and the beginning of the VII, a model of it being the famous church of Pavia, which was rebuilt during the Renaissance. The church then had the severity and classical beauty which were appropriate for a library theoretically if not so much practically.

Several plans were presented. Vicente Heredia and Eleuterio Méndez's plan was accepted. Their job was to transform a church into a library. The work of fitting it up covered more than fifteen years. From the artistic point of view the plan was perfect, but it was not so from the functional one. In the interior, the arms of the Latin cross were closed with walls that continue the nave with similar arches to the ones of the chapels; a false vault was needed. The arches of the chapels were converted into bookshelves; the altar piece was removed, and in the wall a window was opened to give more light; a wooden floor was substituted. The statues of saints were replaced by statues of Valmiki, Confucius, Isaiah, Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, St. Paul, Origen, Dante, Ruiz de Alarcón, Copernicus, Descartes, Cuvier and Humboldt. Outside, new façades were constructed to the North and to the West showing relationship to the original frontal façade — a magnificent example of the Mexican baroque with the figure of Saint Augustine in relief. The bell towers disappeared; the atrium was converted into a garden; the arches of this atrium were substituted by an iron fence with columns upon which several statues of Mexican personalities were placed: Manuel Carpio, popular poet, Manuel Eduardo de Gorostiza, the dramatic author, Francisco Manuel Sánchez de Tagle, the inspired poet, Francisco Javier Clavijero, the classic historian, Hernando Tezozomoc, the ancient Indian chronicler, José Fernando Ramírez, the erudite bibliographer, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, the historiographer from Texcoco, Lucas Alamán, literateur, Friar Manuel Crisóstomo Nájera, the eminent philologist, José Bernardo Couto, humanist, Netzalhualcoyotl, the Indian poet, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, the distinguished writer on jurisprudence, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, the famous antiquarian, José Antonio Alzate, the learned priest, José Joaquín Pesado, the poet, Leopoldo Río de la Loza, the illustrious chemist, José María Lafragua and Joaquín Cardoso, literateurs and directors of the Library, Friar Manuel de Navarrete, the distinguished writer, and José Mariano Veytia, the historian. These illustrious personages have been witnesses of the interest and dedication of the Directors of the National Library.

In chronological order the following Mexican intellectuals have been Head Librarians: José María Lafragua in 1867; Joaquín Cardoso in 1875; and José María Vigil in 1880.



Biblioteca Nacional de México

Photograph by Marilú Pease

Mr. Vigil adopted the book classification based on Namur in his work "Draft of a New Bibliographic System of Human Knowledge;" he founded the Evening Library dedicated to the workers in the adjacent building — the chapel of the Third Order of St. Augustine; he believed in a pacific evolution based on the inspiration of the sciences; he created the official bulletin of the Library; he left eleven printed volumes in folio containing the cataloging of the day and night libraries.

Mr. Vigil also created the Mexican Bibliographical Institute that began its activities in the National Library on July 1, 1899. This Institute was founded in order to compile a General Bibliography of Mexico including all the works written by Mexicans, wherever printed, and those of foreign authors printed in the Republic.

Francisco Sosa, the successor of José María Vigil, was appointed on March 1st, 1909. During Mr. Sosa's incumbency and on the occasion of the centenary of the proclamation of Mexican independence, his Majesty, William II, Emperor of Germany, sent as a gift to our country a magnificent marble statue of Baron Alexander von Humboldt which was placed in the Library grounds. Rogelio Fernández Güell during his four months as Director of the Library, October 27, 1912 — February 28, 1913, established the Department of Periodicals. The distinguished poet, Luis G. Urbina, was the successor of Mr. Fernández Güell and organizer of the Department of Bibles and their Commentators. He was succeeded by Luis Manuel Rojas for three months as Acting Director until another noted writer, Martín Luis Guzmán, became Head Librarian.

Between March 20 and August, 1915, when Lic. Genaro Palacios Moreno was in charge, the Library passed through its most difficult period because of the unstable political situation in Mexico. In October 1915, Mr. Rojas again became the Director and founded the National School of Librarians and Archivists, which inaugurated its courses on June 24, 1916. The Namur cataloging system was discarded in favor of the Melvil Dewey and index cards were substituted for the catalogs in the form of printed books. A new set of regulations governing the various services offered to the public by the National Library was published by the successor of Mr. Rojas, Ciro B. Ceballos. The following Director, Dr. Agustín Figueroa, founded *Biblos*, the official publication of the National Library of Mexico, publishing in each issue the biography and the portrait of some distinguished Mexican writers. Juan B. Iguiniz, subdirector since 1917, was in charge of the Library in 1919. He bought an extremely valuable collection of manuscripts of the Franciscan missions in northern Mexico. In 1920 Agustín R. Ortiz

was appointed, succeeded by the organizer of an interesting series of lectures, Vicente Garrido Alfaro. The exhibition at the Book Fair in November 1924 was organized by the successor of Mr. Alfaro, Dr. Manuel Mestre Ghigliazza. Joaquín Méndez Rivas, appointed on May 8, 1926, organized the Baxter exposition entitled "Colonial Architecture in Mexico," and other expositions on Sahagún, on the Romanticists, and on the Juárez archives. He secured from the Library of Congress at Washington the gift to the National Library of Mexico of a copy of its great card catalog. Esperanza Velásquez Bringas was the successor of Mr. Méndez Rivas.

On July 9, 1929, the Federal Government granted autonomy to the National University, and on July 26 of the same year the National Library came under the control of the University.

Another poet, Enrique Fernández Ledesma, became Director and organizer of radio programs on Bibliography and Criticism, establishing as well an exchange with all the countries and installing the Library of Periodicals in the choir of the church. During his time the American ambassador, Dwight W. Morrow, gave financial support to the Library because of his interest in popular education. Mr. Fernández Ledesma was succeeded by Professor Aurelio Manrique, whose main interest was to receive the publications which Mexican publishers are required to furnish as a deposit demand by law. Professor Manrique completed the Periodicals file and placed special interest in receiving all those published in the country. Under Lic. José Vasconcelos the periodicals section, which began in what had been the choir of the church and later on removed to the Chapel of the Third Order of St. Augustine, was transferred to the former Church of St. Paul and St. Peter in the street of El Carmen. The **Hemeroteca Nacional** (Periodicals National Library) established the Iconographic Museum of Mexico that will be the national depository for pictures and paintings graphically representing different aspects of Mexican life.

In 1947 Vasconcelos resigned to become head of the Library of Mexico, which is a dependent of the Ministry of Public Education. Juan B. Iguiniz acted as auxiliary Director in 1948. In 1956 Dr. Manuel Alcalá, a literateur, became Director of the National Library. He organized the Reference Department in the adjacent Chapel of the Third Order of St. Augustine and he was responsible for the complete consolidation of the building. The interior of the Library was remodeled following the original Latin cross plan of the church; eight chapels contain book shelves and the other four contain the public catalog, the information desk and the wardrobe. The exterior remained the

some. During a brief period in 1965 Guillermo Hernández de Rojas was Director.

In 1965 the present Director, Lic. Ernesto de la Torre Villar, began to develop his plans for the National Library. The tradition of the past of the Library continues in its present surroundings. Lic. de la Torre Villar has created the prize "José María Vigil" in honor of the Director of the Library in 1880. The prize has been awarded and will be awarded to librarians and bibliographers with an outstanding performance in their services to the country. The Mexican Bibliographical Institute continues its work closely related to the National Library because, as Mr. de la Torre Villar says — the Library must be involved not only in the conservation of knowledge but also in its diffusion. This Institute has been publishing bibliographical year books since 1958 and *Bibliografía Mexicana* since 1967. The Rare Book Collection together with the Manuscripts forms one of the richest bibliographical centres on the American continent. Lic. de la Torre Villar has given special attention to the Bible (Polyglot bibles, and among them the famous "Complutensian" which, printed in Alcalá de Henares — ancient Complutum — belonged to Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros) as well as to the Department for the Blind, which was created during Dr. Alcalá's incumbency.

The National Library contains 800,000 volumes: among them the "Book of Chronicles," also called the "Chronicle of Nuremberg," of the "Compendium of the Ages of the World"; "Tractatus de Censuris," written by Archbishop St. Antonine, published probably in 1471; and "Sermonario" of Roberto Caracciolo de Licio, printed in Venice on May 20th, 1472, as well as the libraries of José María Lafragua on Mexican history, Antonio Mier y Celis on literature, Guillermo Prieto on poetry, and others.

Among the manuscripts are the songs of the Náhuatl and Otomí languages, the compilation of Mexican preachings, documents about the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Kingdom of Spain, the collection of manuscripts of the Franciscan missions of Northern Mexico, and documents of José María Morelos and of Benito Juárez.

These volumes have been housed inside the walls of this ex-convent as well as in the Central Library of the National University. The splitting of the collection, in addition to the inconveniences of the building, demands for another building adjacent to the Library in order to continue with the tradition of the past but to give more efficient service in the present and for a future expansion. In this manner the Mexican people will be exposed to the knowledge of their ancestors in contemporary and functional surroundings in order to create the know-

ledge of the future. This knowledge, as Bonifacio Nuno, the poet, pointed out the 5th of November 1967, will bring an interior peace that will be communicated to the exterior as a contribution to mankind.

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