

MEXICO CITY'S SMALL MUSEUMS

Private homes, personal collections, national heritage

by Jill Vexler



At last count there were 17 million people and 55 museums in Mexico City. If you happen to visit one of the major museums—the superb National Museum of Anthropology, for example—on a national holiday, you would be forgiven for thinking that all 17 million residents were right there beside you, and that Mexico was the most indefatigably culture-loving nation on earth.

Mexicans, in fact, do care profoundly about their culture—hence the won-
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The late Frida Kahlo in the sitting room of the museum that bears her name.

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derful array of museums and exhibitions that enrich the capital city. But among its smaller institutions are museums at which exhibits are enhanced by a wonderful calm, a sense of privacy, and an intimacy that can be an enormous relief in a grossly overcrowded city.

The small museums offered here give an idea of how varied, enlightening, and fun it can be to explore these unfamiliar corners of Mexico City. The museums were chosen for their individuality; for example, one for the beauty of its architecture, another for the unusual content of its collection. Two others, in addition to mounting excellent exhibitions, are perfect points of departure for exploring charming old neighborhoods. *Vamos!*

FRIDA KAHLO MUSEUM

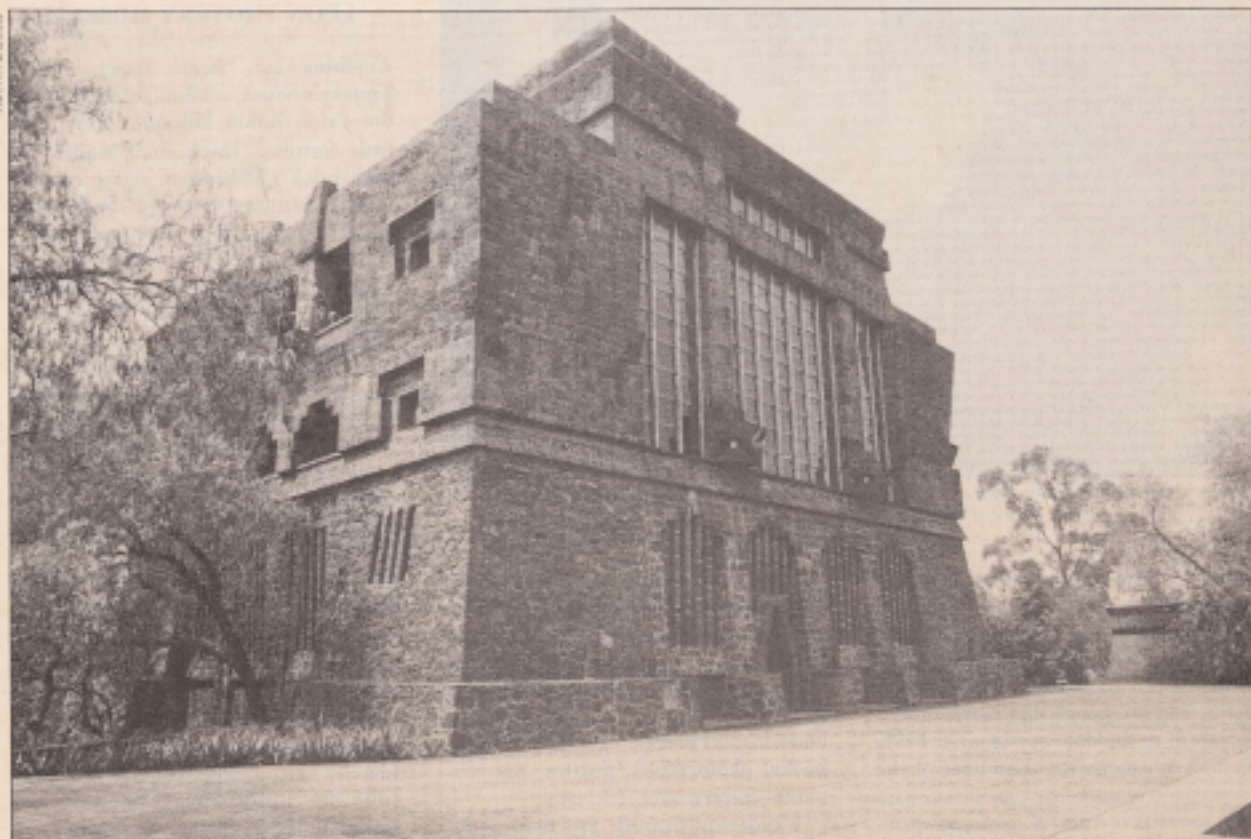
This house in the old colonial neighborhood of Coyoacán could be just another tantalizing turn-of-the-century structure in one of the most beautiful

Hermana Dosal



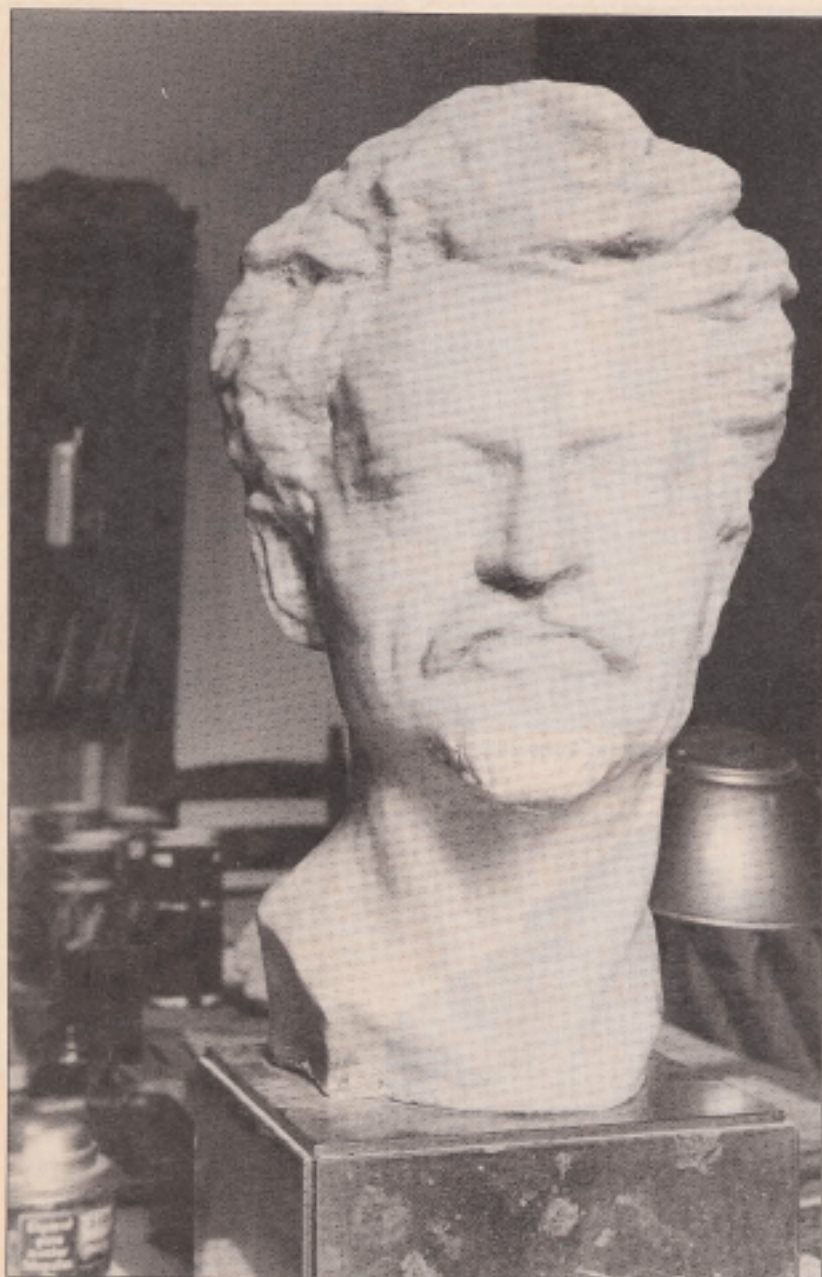
A pre-Columbian artifact at Anahuacalli.

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Diego Rivera's black lava pyramid houses his collection at Anahuacalli.

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A bust of Leon Trotsky, who lived in exile in a house in Mexico City until his assassination in 1940, is now in the Leon Trotsky Museum.

areas of Mexico City, but if you look carefully, you'll find the museum's name spelled out in colored mosaic stones above the entrance.

Inside is a wonderful small garden, a patio, and the house that surrounds it. Adjacent to the doorway is artist Frida Kahlo's wheelchair, a reminder of the

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accident that maimed her for life while still a young woman. Many of the rooms are laid out like informal galleries of Kahlo's work—surrealistic paintings and self-portraits. There is also her fascinating personal collection of archaeological pieces, ex-voto paintings, books, photographs, textiles, pre-Hispanic jewelry, and folk art.

Wandering through the house provides a glimpse of the domestic life that surrounded her and her husband,

muralist Diego Rivera. One gets a strong sense of it especially in Kahlo's wonderfully traditional Mexican kitchen. Lined with tiles in a thousand patterns, ollas (cooking pots) of graduated sizes, and a very unusual wall decoration (miniature ceramic vessels that spell out "Diego" and "Frida"), it's worth a visit in itself.

The simple, warm dining room and the layout of the house—indoors and open-air at the same time—perfectly illustrate this uniquely Mexican integration of folk art, design, color, and nature.

Don't miss the collection of votive paintings on the wall of the stairwell leading to the second floor. These are delightful small, naive works on tin or wood done by humble people as offerings to a saint who has answered a prayer.

Since it's a small house, the visit may not last very long, but by stepping into the quiet garden and home, one gets an idea of what life behind those high walls might be like. (247 Londres, Coyoacán; 544-5999.)

LEON TROTSKY MUSEUM

Anything but "home sweet home," Trotsky's house, a 10-minute walk from the Frida Kahlo Museum, is a stark little fortress. Thick stone walls with high brick watchtowers at the corners were constructed to protect the Russian exile from Joseph Stalin's vengeance. With the help of Diego Rivera, Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico and lived in this prisonlike house from 1937 until he was assassinated in 1940 by a Spanish-born "confidant" named Ramon Mercader, believed to be an agent of Stalin.

Trotsky is buried in the garden, under a tombstone designed by Juan O'Gorman, the Mexican artist also responsible for the magnificent mosaics that cover the library at the National University of Mexico. The interior of the house is almost monastic. What furniture exists is simple and unadorned. Trotsky's books, desk, eyeglasses, and family photographs lie about. But one is constantly reminded of impending danger: The windows are heavily barred, steel doors give access from one little room to another, and bullet holes in Trotsky's study are a grim reminder of an earlier, unsuccessful attempt on his life.

A visit to Trotsky's house gives a good idea of how the Russian political philosopher spent his last years in exile. (15 Viena; Coyoacán; 544-4482.)

MUSEUM OF POPULAR CULTURES

This new museum is not only worth seeing, but it is also a pleasure to get to, especially if one has a driver. Ask to go by way of one of the nicest cobblestone streets in Mexico City, Francisco Sosa. Here is something of the Mexico that Cortés planned in the 16th century, although with plenty of modern intrusion.

Francisco Sosa leads right to the main square and cathedral of Coyoacán. The Museum of Popular Cultures is behind the cathedral. Entrance is through a turn-of-the-century turreted house, now one of the museum's main buildings. Immediately inside, one is confronted by an African-looking adobe structure with a thatched top. It's a Mexican corn storage bin called a *cuiscomate*, made in only a few areas

today, and representative of the unusual collections found here, one of the most innovative and dynamic museums in Mexico.

The exhibitions are very original but always about what we may take for granted in everyday life. There may be, for example, a presentation on *piñatas*—who makes them, uses them, when, how, and other details that few think to ask. This is a special museum by and for the Mexican people—the working man and woman, fisherman, artisan, cobbler, cook—the whole fabric of contemporary culture. (289 Hidalgo; Coyoacán; 544-8848.)

THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

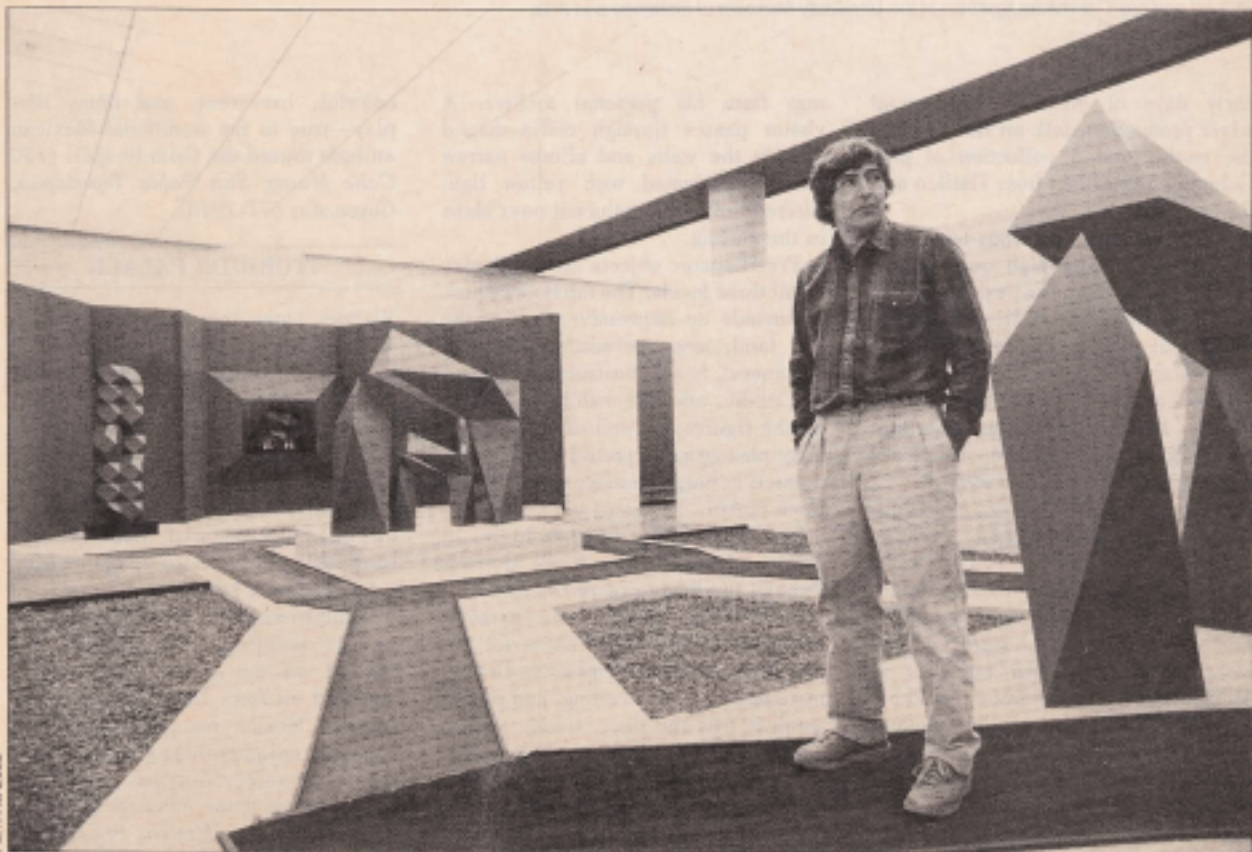
Although many visitors to Mexico City include a trip to the National University at the far southern end of the city, few stop by the university's fine museum, which serves as one of the principal training grounds for the country's future museum professionals. Visitors who peer for hours at Juan O'Gorman's



The bunkerlike facade of the Leon Trotsky Museum reflects the heavy protection under which the Russian exile lived out his last days.

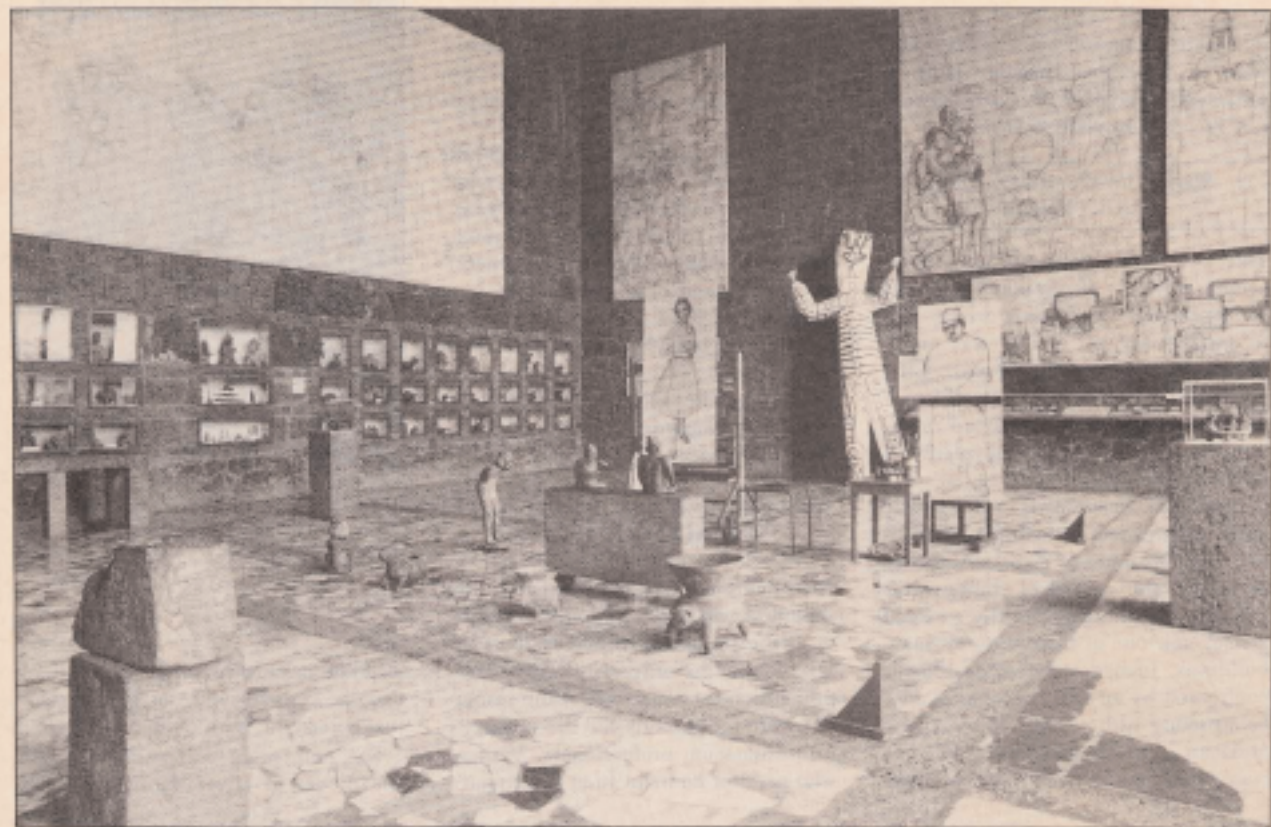
striking mosaic-covered library don't usually know to look for the museum just across the lawn on the south side.

The permanent collections include fine pieces of silver dating from the



Sculptor Sebastian at his exhibit in the Museum of Popular Cultures.

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Folk art and pre-Columbian figurines at the University Museum of Sciences and Arts.

Hermosa Dosal

early days of Mexico's commercial silver production, folk art from around the world, and a collection of pre-Columbian figurines from Tlatilco and Remojadas.

There are also numerous temporary exhibitions of very high quality. Recently, there was an exhibition of superb photographs of Mexican foods, traditional masks, contemporary serigraphs, and the wonderful folk art and textile collection of the late Donald Cordry, who assembled an excellent array of Mexican design. (*National University of Mexico; 548-9953.*)

ANAHUACALLI

A massive black, lava-rock, pseudo-Aztec pyramid looms over the hills, humble dwellings, and sturdy pepper trees in the southern outskirts of Mexico City in the suburb of San Pablo Tepetlapán. This outrageous structure was built by Mexico's consummate painter, Diego Rivera, as a gift to the nation to house his collection of some 60,000 pre-Columbian artifacts and 3,500 drawings, sketches, and paint-

ings from his personal archive. A visitor passes through coffin-shaped slits in the walls and climbs narrow stairs illuminated with yellow light filtered through translucent onyx slabs in the ceiling.

Pre-Hispanic objects are on display on all three levels. The top floor, which commands an impressive view of the city (and, smog permitting, both its volcanoes), is a reconstruction of Rivera's studio, adorned with huge papier-mâché figures, as well as a charming large photographic portrait of the artist dressed in baggy trousers and a droopy linen jacket.

For those lucky enough to be in Mexico from the end of October through the beginning of December, a low building opposite the pyramid houses the spectacular altars for the Day of the Dead (November 2). Orange marigolds cover the ceiling, and purple sawdust fills the floor. Candy skulls, papier-mâché skeletons, special bone-shaped breads, pottery, candles, and *papel picado* (cutout paper) all play tongue-in-cheek homage to the dead. Far from morbid, it is a rampantly

colorful, irreverent, and funny display—true to the traditional Mexican attitude toward the Grim Reaper. (*150 Calle Museo; San Pablo Tepetlapán; Coyoacán; 677-2948.*)

ITURBIDE PALACE

Visitors enter this sumptuous 18th-century stone palace through huge carved wooden doors framed by an ultra-baroque 40-foot-high carved stone archway opening onto a majestic courtyard surrounded by three tiers of balconies. Colonial works of art and furniture fill this elegant edifice. A magnificently restored chapel is well worth the visit for those up to climbing a few flights of stairs.

Exhibitions here are as interesting as the building. The displays are located on the ground floor where works of art from 16th- through 19th-century Mexico are presented. The country's unique lithographs, carvings, religious figures, furniture, and porcelain have been the subjects of recent exhibitions. (*17 Madero St.; in the center of town.*) ■