LA ACADEMIA DE SAN CARLOS:
HISTORY OF A LIVING INSTITUTION

Label 1

The Academy's Foundation and Transformations

The history of the San Carlos Academy cannot be chronologically told. Generations of artists, professors, and students have passed through its classrooms and halls, leaving a legacy in Mexico's visual culture through their artistic works. The Academy was established more than two centuries ago, and speaking of its existence involves addressing a complex narrative, marked by social, political, and aesthetic changes that have transformed—and continue to transform—this institution.

In 1778, by royal decree of King Charles III of Spain, the engraver Jerónimo Antonio Gil arrived in New Spain with the task of directing the Mint and training young locals in the art of engraving. However, a more ambitious objective was also pursued: the establishment of a true academy of arts, like those that were emerging in Europe. The institution thus underwent three distinct stages in its development: initially, as an engraving school from 1778 to 1781; then, as the Provincial School of Fine Arts from 1781 to 1783; and, finally, in 1784, it was formally established as the Royal Academy of the Three Noble Arts of San Carlos of New Spain, with its first headquarters in the Mint (Real Casa de Moneda).

In the 19th century, the Academy experienced a period of significant challenges. During the Mexican War of Independence, it maintained its activities in an austere manner, but eventually closed due to a lack of financial resources. It was not until 1843, under the government of Antonio López de Santa Anna, that the Academy was reopened thanks to funds from the Mexican Lottery, which enabled it to acquire this current building and hire prominent European professors. With each new government—whether republican, imperial, or reformist—the Academy's name, budget, and working course were subject to change. Nevertheless, this never impeded it from maintaining its primary mission: to train artists and foster national artistic production.

In the 20th century, the Academy faced new challenges: from the academic ideals of the Porfiriato to the innovative proposals of modern and contemporary art. Each phase left visible marks on the institution's structure, teaching body, pedagogical approach, and relationship with society.

Today, as part of the Faculty of Arts and Design of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the Academy of San Carlos continues to serve as a place for exhibitions, workshops, and cultural projects. Its building, located in the heart of the Historic Center, is not just a relic: it is a living space where art continues to be created, thought about, and taught.

More than a monument, the Academy stands as evidence of the transformative power of art and its ability to resist, adapt, and remain engaged with the present.

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Label 2

The Study of the Classical Body

Upon entering the main courtyard of the Former Academy of San Carlos, the Greco-Roman and Renaissance sculptures reproduced in plaster stand out. These pieces were part of the original academic project to establish sculpture galleries, following a European model. The objective was to offer a rigorous teaching of drawing based on the study of the classical body in a context where the neoclassical style predominated.

Thanks to Manuel Tolsá, then director of Architecture, the first shipment of casts arrived from the port of Cádiz, Spain, in 1791. The 76 boxes that arrived contained Greco-Roman sculptures, including the renowned *Laocoön and His Sons* group, one of the oldest pieces of the Academy's collection.

Manuel Vilar, head of the drawing classes, drove the second shipment from Rome. This included representative works by Myron, Polyclitus, and other neoclassical sculptors like Bertel Thorvaldsen and Pietro Tenerani. Notable pieces such as the *Faun, Diadumenus, Demosthenes*, and *Mercury* arrived in Veracruz in 1856. Some arrived fragmented, as in the case of the Faun; however, this did not impede its restoration or diminish its formative value.

The third shipment, managed between 1903 and 1909 by Fidencio Nava under the direction of Antonio Rivas Mercado, enriched the Academy's collection at the beginning of the 20th century. The shipment was entrusted to Elie Sadaune, moldmaker of the School of Fine Arts in Paris (Beaux-Arts de Paris). Copies of iconic works such as the *Doryphoros* and the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* arrived, as well as Renaissance sculptures by Michelangelo: *Day, Night, Dawn, Dusk, Moses,* and the statues of Giuliano de' Medici and Lorenzo de' Medici.

Thanks to these efforts, the Academy consolidated an exceptional sculptural collection that, to this day, supports its pedagogical vocation and allows visitors to appreciate the formative legacy of classical art in Mexico.

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Label 3

Arts and Design Graduate Library

This space, which currently houses the Arts and Design Graduate Library, was previously occupied by the Pedro Patiño Ixtolinque Gallery. The gallery is named after the prominent New Spanish sculptor who was both a student and a professor at this institution. This gallery is an extension built between the original building, the former Love of God Hospital, and the School for Indigenous Girls, which later became the National School of Architecture. The enclosure still preserves elements of that time, such as Corinthian columns, a wooden ceiling, ornamental reliefs and sculptures, including a replica of the Venus de Milo and Donatello's statue of Saint George.

The library and the Academy share their origin, which dates to 1781, when the engraver Jerónimo Antonio Gil proposed establishing an art school in New Spain. After viceregal approval, the Academy opened its doors in 1785, and, from the beginning, the bibliographic collection was conceived as an essential pedagogical tool for artistic educational training.

Once the Academy was formally installed in what used to be the Love of God Hospital, the first book inventory was made. The result was 49 volumes brought from Spain. During the 19th century, the book collection grew and was reorganized; however, it had to be relocated on more than one occasion because the Academy building suffered structural damage caused by earthquakes. Between 1859 and 1862, the architect Javier Cavallari remodeled the building, incorporating adequate spaces to conserve the collection.

In addition to the relocations, the library had to divide its collection between the National School of Architecture and the Central School of Plastic Arts. In 1967, part of the collection was transferred to the National Library, where it is currently preserved as the Academy of San Carlos Collection. With the opening of the Xochimilco campus in 1979, a new bibliographic collection was incorporated. In 1996, the Special Collection was created and is safeguarded by the Department for Research, Dissemination, and Collection Cataloguing.

The library was finally relocated to this gallery at the beginning of the 21st century. The current space is 320 m2 and houses more than 18,500 titles specializing in contemporary art and design. The collection responds to the lines of research and curricula of the Graduate Program in Arts and Design of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. It encompasses a wide range of subjects including digital art, animation, artist's books, art pedagogy, editorial design, bioart, sound art, performance, letterpress, and so on.

Today, this library persists in the mission it began over two centuries ago: to provide access to artistic knowledge and to consolidate its position as a reference for the training of new generations of artists, designers, and researchers.

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Label 4

The Historical Galleries of the Academy

A significant architectural and cultural contribution to the Academy of San Carlos was the galleries. These were conceived in the 19th century to exhibit the students' artworks as well as the valuable Academy's art collection, which was considered at the time the most important in the Americas.

The final design of the galleries was established between 1858 and 1869 as the result of an ambitious architectural project in which three renowned professors of the Academy were involved: Javier Cavallari, Manuel Vilar, and Pelegrín Clavé.

The first gallery is called the Pelegrín Clavé Gallery. The ceiling is decorated with portraits painted by Ramón Sagredo of prominent figures of universal art and culture. The second one is the José Obregón Gallery —also known as the Centennial Gallery due to its inauguration during the celebration of the Academy's 100th anniversary. It exhibits portraits by Obregón of the main protectors of this institution, from King Charles III of Spain to Javier Echeverría.

The two galleries are part of a broader exhibition circuit that includes the Green Room, the Pink Room, and the Blue Room, and that has historically consolidated the Academy's exhibition program.

Given the importance of these galleries, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM) has decided to perpetuate the original mission of these spaces: to exhibit the work of the academic and student community of the Faculty of Arts and Design through the activities of the San Carlos Cultural Center. This decision fosters a dialogue between past and present, providing young artists with a space for experimentation and artistic freedom —both key pillars in their education and in the enrichment of the cultural life in Mexico.

Today, the galleries continue to host exhibitions open to the public that cover a wide range of artistic expressions, from the traditional to the contemporary.

These galleries are currently undergoing restoration as part of the maintenance required for a historic building that has been active for more than one century. Restoration work is essential to preserve their historical legacy and ensure that they will continue to serve as living spaces for art, as they have done for over a century.

Label 5
The Dome

Román Lascuráin first proposed the idea of covering the courtyard with an iron and glass structure in 1896, during his tenure as director of the Academy of San Carlos. His intention was to turn that space into a museum and protect the sculptures that were deteriorating in storage; there were so many that they exceeded the available space. Although the project was not carried out at that time, it was taken up again in 1903 by Antonio Rivas Mercado when he became director of the Academy.

Rivas Mercado designed the dome in the Art Nouveau style, which was characterized by using wavy lines, asymmetry and inspiration from nature, as well as using new construction materials such as iron, cement, and glass. Initially, the design included two domes: one for the main courtyard and one for the smaller Architecture courtyard. However, it was decided to cover only the main one.

On August 17, 1904, Rivas Mercado submitted the project request to the Secretary of Justice and Public Instruction. It was not until April 15, 1910, that the construction of the dome was entrusted to the L. Lapeyrere company in Paris. The dome had to be commissioned from abroad, as there were no steel mills in Mexico with the technical capacity to build the structure. In 1907, Rivas Mercado had first requested the work from the Monterrey Iron and Steel Foundry, but they declined, arguing that the foundry did not have the necessary machinery to manufacture the skylight.

The dome was expected to be ready in less than three months, in time to be assembled just before the celebration of the centennial of Mexican Independence. This was not possible because some parts of the dome did not arrive in Mexico until January 19, 1912, when Rivas Mercado was no longer director of the Academy. The next director, Manuel Gorozpe, then hired architects Manuel and Carlos Ituarte to assemble the structure in the main courtyard.